

Literary Criticism in the Epistolary Mode

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Abstract: This paper is an inquiry into the distinct potential of the epistolary voice in literary criticism. What can writers do in letters to address literary matters that other genres do not allow with the same ease and persuasive power? And if so, what is it that letters can do and how is it done? In this paper, I examine two early medieval Chinese texts about literature—an essay and a letter, both written by Cao Pi—and compare their rhetorical strategies in the light of epistolarity. I draw upon letters about literature by other writers, in particular, by Cao Zhi, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, John Keats, and Gertrud Kolmar. I propose that writers throughout history and across cultures were highly aware of the generic possibilities of the epistolary mode for the writing of literary criticism and purposely employed it in a variety of ways spanning the range from intimate family letter to openly fictional, published letter.

This paper is an inquiry into the distinct potential of the epistolary voice for the discussion of literary matters—an inquiry that was triggered by the strong presence of letters on literature and literary criticism across time and cultures. Is there anything writers can do in letters to address literary matters that other genres do not allow with the same ease and persuasive power? And if so, what is it that letters can do and how is it done? Trying to answer these questions, I will first take a close look at two early medieval Chinese texts about literature—an essay and a letter, both written by the poet and statesman Cao Pi (187–226) in the early third century—and compare rhetorical strategies of each in the light of epistolarity. To test and support my findings, I will then draw upon letters about literature by other authors, in particular, by Cao Pi’s brother Cao Zhi (192–232), by the Austrian writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929), by the English Romantic poet John Keats (1795–1821), and by the German-Jewish poet Gertrud Kolmar (1894–1943?). These letters were chosen for their diversity in several respects: they not only differ in epistolary form and content, but their authors are also of varying prominence in their respective literary traditions. I propose that writers throughout history and across cultures were highly aware of the generic possibilities of the epistolary mode for the writing of literary criticism and employed it in a variety of ways spanning the range from intimate family letter to openly fictional, published letter. The paper also serves as an appeal: letters are still in need of being fully recognized for what they are as literary texts and as a genre with distinct conventions.

Introduction: Genre in the West, Very Briefly

That genres differ in their potential is usually taken to be self-evident, both in China and the west. Western literary thought has produced a great diversity of approaches to genre, from ancient Greek typologies, such as Aristotle’s differentiation of epic, tragedy, and comedy in his *Poetics* in the

The Journal of Epistolary Studies, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 2019)

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fourth century BCE, to the still consequential, early nineteenth-century formulation of the three “natural forms” of literature—epic, dramatic, and lyric—set forth by Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832).¹ In the twentieth century, these and other traditional approaches have drawn criticism from all sides, although the ideas of neither Aristotle nor Goethe were quite as simplistic as critics sometimes seem to imply. Both authors were far from offering clean-cut generic categories and did certainly not suppose that there is anything more to genre than formal typology. In recent genre studies, text type and taxonomy have become less important criteria than the social function of texts, including their social performance and practice.² Scholars emphasize the openness and interrelatedness of genre categories and focus on “an understanding of genre that connects kinds of texts to kinds of social actions,” assuming that they “reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a critical role in meaning-making).”³ While discussions of genre had somewhat faded from discussions of literary thought toward the end of the twentieth century, they appear to be on the rise again, especially in film and new media studies, now often driven by questions of audience response and, ultimately, commercial considerations.

Cao Pi’s “Discourse on Literature”: Criticism, Genre, and Immortality

In China, one of the earliest examples of genre-awareness is Cao Pi’s 曹丕 “Discourse on Literature” (“Lun wen” 論文), a short text of less than six-hundred words (Fig. 1). The essay is one of the few surviving fragments from Cao Pi’s largely lost work *Normative Discourses* (*Dianlun* 典論). The “Discourse on Literature” was probably written in 217 or 218, when Cao Pi was heir apparent of a dynasty yet to be formally established. The “Discourse on Literature” is central to Chinese literary thought and has been discussed extensively, but since it will be the foil against which I will read Cao Pi’s letter, let me briefly summarize its structure and basic ideas.⁴

文人相輕，自古而然。傅毅之於班固，伯仲之間耳；而固小之，與弟超書曰：「武仲以能屬文為蘭臺令史，下筆不能自休。」夫人善於自見，而文非一體，鮮能備善。是以各以所長，相輕所短。里語曰：「家有弊帚，享之千金。」斯不自見之患也。今之文人，魯國孔融文舉、廣陵陳琳孔璋、山陽王粲仲宣、北海徐幹偉長、陳留阮瑀元瑜、汝南應瑒德璉、東平劉楨公幹：斯七子者，於學無所遺，於辭無所假，咸自以騁驥驟於千里，仰齊足而並馳。以此相服，亦良難矣。蓋君子審己以度人，故能免於斯累，而作論文。王粲長於辭賦；徐幹時有齊氣；然粲之匹也。如粲之初征、登樓、槐賦、征思，幹之玄猿、漏卮、圓扇、橘賦，雖張、蔡不過也。然於他文，未能稱是。琳、瑀之章表書記，今之雋也。應瑒和而不壯。劉楨壯而不密。孔融體氣高妙，有過人者，然不能持論，理不勝辭，以至乎雜以嘲戲，及其所善，揚、班儔也。常人貴遠賤近，向聲背實，又患闇於自見，謂己為賢。夫文本同而末異，蓋奏議宜雅，書論宜理，銘誄尚實，詩賦欲麗。此四科不同，故能之者偏也；唯通才能備其體。文以氣為主，氣之清濁有體，不可力強而致。譬諸音樂，曲度雖均，節奏同檢，至於引氣不齊，巧拙有素，雖在父兄，不能以移子弟。蓋文章，經國之大業，不朽之盛事。年壽有時而盡，榮樂止乎其身，二者必至之常期，未若文章之無窮。是以古之作者，寄身於翰墨，見意於篇籍，不假良史之辭，不託飛馳之勢，而聲名自傳於後。故西伯幽而演易，周旦顯而禮，不以隱約而弗務，不以康樂而加思。夫然，則古人賤尺璧而重寸陰，懼乎時之過已。而人多不強力；貧賤則懾於饑寒，富貴則流於逸樂，遂營目前之務，而遺千載之功。日月逝於上，體貌衰於下，忽然與萬物遷化，斯志士之大痛也。融等已逝，唯幹著論，成一家言。

Figure 1: Cao Pi, “Discourse on Literature”

The notorious first sentence of the essay, “writers belittle one another; this has been so since antiquity,” introduces a passage reflecting on psychological obstacles to impartial criticism: our lack of self-awareness leads us to overestimate our literary strengths while underestimating our weaknesses, and we go on to project this distortion of judgment on the works of other writers: “People are good at flaunting themselves. But there is more than one literary genre, and few are those writers who are good at them all. That is why everybody takes pride in their own fortes and uses them to belittle the weaknesses of others. As the saying goes: ‘If you have an old broom of your own, you love it like it is worth a thousand pieces of gold.’ This is an affliction caused by not knowing oneself.”

In the next passage, Cao Pi, a poet in his own right, sketches the literary scene of his day. He first identifies a group of poets, now known as the “Seven Masters of the Jian’an period”—authors whose work has been largely lost and who are mostly remembered today for their association with the Cao family.⁵ Cao Pi follows this with another reminder of the importance of self-awareness for the critic: “Only if the gentleman examines himself before judging others, may he avoid self-deception and can therefore critically discuss literature.” Cao Pi then turns to each of the Seven Masters, listing individual works they composed or genres for which they were famous or generally defining their literary and personal strengths and weaknesses. Chen Lin and Ruan Yu

are praised for their memorials and letters, in Cao Pi's opinion "currently the most outstanding." The following passage presents a brief catalogue of genres, framed by renewed reminders of the epistemological obstacles presented by the lack of self-awareness—a concern that is something of a leitmotif in Cao Pi's essay:

People usually prize the faraway but disdain the nearby. They look up to reputations but turn their back against reality. Afflicted with not knowing themselves, they consider themselves as worthies.

As for literature, its roots are the same, but its branches are different. Hence: presentations and appeals should be decorous, letters and discourses should be structured, in inscriptions and dirges one values truthfulness, in poems and rhapsodies one desires beauty.

Because these four classes are not the same, those who are skilled in one genre are prejudiced in favor of it. Only a universal talent can master all genres.⁶

Cao Pi's catalogue of "four classes," or eight genres, of literature is as important in Chinese literary history as Aristotle's three genres have been, although Cao Pi's list was obviously meant to be selective rather than comprehensive. Because of the different literary landscape in early China, there is hardly any overlap with traditional western genres: we see none of the three genres that are traditionally traced back to ancient Greek literary thought and only one of Goethe's three "natural forms" of literature—poetry, represented by poems and rhapsodies. If poetry as the preeminent genre of Chinese literature is covered well in Cao Pi's catalogue, prose appears to be unevenly represented by the genres. Given this selectiveness, it is all the more striking that three of Cao Pi's six prose genres are types of written communication. The two that are examples of official communication—presentations (*zou*) and appeals (*yi*)—fall into one group, for which decorousness or elegance (*ya*) is prescribed. Letters are grouped with discourses (*lun*, also translated as "essay," "treatise," and "disquisition") and are expected to be structured or well organized (*li*).⁷ This suggests that Cao Pi assumed that letters, *shu*, follow genre conventions that are different from written official communications, here represented by presentations and appeals. It also suggests that letters and discursive texts such as essays are closely associated—an observation that is familiar from western epistolary theory, as well.⁸

In the following section of the "Discourse on Literature," Cao Pi elaborates on the connection between an individual writer's innate *qi*, or vital breath, and his or her literary productions. The single most influential statement from the "Discourse on Literature" may be Cao Pi's declaration that "literature is dominated by vital breath, whose clarity or turbidity is of a certain form and cannot be brought about forcibly." In what follows, Cao Pi characterizes every writer's unique, individual endowment with *qi* by comparing it to the highly individual character of a musical performance.

The last quarter of the essay is concerned with the legitimization of literature, expressed in two spheres. One is political: here Cao Pi emphasizes the importance of literature for the state; the second is individual and possibly personal, and concerns the potential of literature as an antidote to the ephemerality of human life: "nothing compares with the inexhaustibility of literature." This leads Cao Pi to lament the relentless passing of time and to the admonition not "to neglect the occupation [that is, literature] that will last for a thousand years" over the pursuit of more immediate concerns.

Although we can only partly assess the rhetorical structure of this essay, since it may be an excerpt from a larger composition, the transmitted “Discourse on Literature” meets the ideal features of an essay as put forward by Cao Pi himself. It is reasonably well organized, which for the reader translates into lucidity. As we expect from an essay, the text is addressed to “posterity” rather than to a specific interlocutor. Although essays, despite their expository character, often operate with an autobiographical lens, in this case the author remains in the background throughout, with the one exception toward the end, when Cao Pi implicitly acknowledges his own mortality and thus sheds some of the aloofness that informed much of his essay up to this point.

Cao Pi’s “Further Letter to Wu Zhi”: Mortality, Friendship, and Criticism

Lamenting the ravages of time and the frailty of human life is crucial, too, in one of the letters that Cao Pi wrote to his old friend and advisor Wu Zhi 吳質 (177–230).⁹ This text, written in 218 and only two dozen characters shorter than the “Discourse on Literature,” shares other topics with the essay as well, in particular the assessment of almost the same group of contemporary writers, five of whom had perished just a year earlier during an epidemic. So how does Cao Pi’s letter differ from his essay? Are we seeing just iterations of the same concerns?

Two of the most pronounced features of a letter are its mode of address and the fact of its transmission. While essays speak to a large and usually undefined audience, letters typically address someone specific, and they are part of an exchange. In order to reach their spatially removed addressees, letters are transmitted by a third party. Several features are derived from this basic epistolary situation, some of them textual, others extralinguistic. Due to the time transmission takes, the most consequential of the extralinguistic features is the lag between writing a letter and responding to a letter. It creates a distinct, staggered type of communication that determines a number of textual characteristics. Another important extralinguistic feature is that letters are transmitted in envelopes, as we know from early medieval China, or in other formats that prevented a letter from being read freely. It accentuates the particular directedness and exclusiveness of epistolary communication, both of which are also expressed on the textual level.

The most significant textual features of a letter are based on its inherent dialogicity and self-referentiality. Dialogicity (or reciprocity) denotes a range of textual features that prove a writer’s sustained efforts to engage a specific, usually absent addressee, which in turn also increases the narrative presence of the writer. Self-referentiality describes a letter’s peculiar ability to draw attention to itself. Patrizia Violi writes of the letter’s illocutionary force as being bound up with its “capacity to refer to itself and to its own communicative function independently of any propositional content it may express.”¹⁰ Claudio Guillén makes a similar observation when he describes the letter as “writing proclaiming itself as writing in the process of correspondence.”¹¹ Both dialogicity and self-referentiality are expressed through manifold and recurring references to the time, place, and other circumstances of a letter’s writing and expected reading, including references to the letter’s materiality; to the addressee and his or her world; to the physical separation between writer and addressee; and to the time lag between writing, reading, and responding. These basic features of the epistolary mode apply to most “real” letters, but they also shape fictional or semi-fictional letters, that is, “imitation[s] of the letter by the letter.”¹²

Let us now take a closer look at Cao Pi's "Further Letter to Wu Zhi" (Fig. 2). Judging by its frame, it appears to be complete, since it has not only a proem and epilogue (here marked in red), but also a prescript and postscript, the outer margins of the epistolary frame enclosing the body of the letter (marked in green).

二月三日丕白。(Prescript)

歲月易得。別來行復四年。三年不見。東山猶歎其遠。況乃過之。思何可支。雖書疏往返。未足解其勞結。(Proem)

昔年疾疫。親故多離其災。徐、陳、應、劉。一時俱逝。痛可言邪。

昔日遊處。行則連輿。止則接席。何曾須臾相失。每至觴酌流行。絲竹并奏。酒酣耳熱。仰而賦詩。當此之時。忽然不自知樂也。謂百年已分。可長共相保。何圖數年之間。零落略盡。言之傷心。

頃撰其遺文。都為一集。觀其姓名。已為鬼錄。追思昔遊。猶在心目。而此諸子。化為冀壤。可復道哉。

觀古今文人。類不護細行。鮮能以名節自立。而偉長獨懷文抱質。恬惓寡欲。有箕山之志。可謂彬彬君子者矣。著中論二十餘篇。成一家之言。辭義典雅。足傳于後。此子為不朽矣。德棣常斐然有述作之意。其才學足以著書。美志不遂。良可痛惜。間者歷覽諸子之文。對之流淚。既痛逝者。行自念也。孔璋章表殊健。微為繁富。公幹有逸氣。但未遒耳。其五言詩之善者。妙絕時人。元瑜書記翩翩。致足樂也。仲宣續自善於辭賦。惜其體弱。不足起其文。至於所善。古人無以遠過。

昔伯牙絕絃於鍾期。仲尼覆醢於子路。痛知音之難遇。傷門人之莫逮。諸子但為未及古人。自一時之雋也。今之存者。已不逮矣。後生可畏。來者難誣。然恐吾與足下不及見也。

年行已長大。所懷萬端。時有所慮。至通夜不眠。志意何時復類昔日。已成老翁。但未白頭耳。光武言年三十餘。在兵中十歲。所更非一。吾德不及之。年與之齊矣。以犬羊之質。服虎豹之文。無眾星之明。假日月之光。動見瞻觀。何時易乎。恐永不復得為昔日遊也。少壯真當努力。年一過往。何可攀援。古人思炳燭夜遊。良有以也。

頃何以自娛。頗復有所述造不。東望於邑。裁書敘心。(Epilogue)

丕白。(Postscript)

Figure 2: Cao Pi, "Further Letter to Wu Zhi"

While prescript and postscript have the function of providing salutation and signature (both of which in early medieval China served to identify the writer of a letter), proem and epilogue are concerned with the embedding of the letter into the communicative thread connecting the correspondents.¹³ The proem is dedicated to the recollection and reaffirmation of their preceding relationship, and tries to secure the goodwill of the addressee. In order to "update" their personal relationship, correspondents mention the weather or the time of year as well as the reception or

non-arrival of letters; they report the state of their health and inquire about the others' well-being; they express good wishes and complain about their continuing physical separation. The inherent focus on both the moment of writing and that of reading—the “fragmentation of time” that characterizes epistolary communication—is an important expression of the letter's self-referentiality and dialogicity.¹⁴ The epilogue voices concerns that are similar to those expressed in the proem, among them wishes for good health and the lament of separation. Unlike the proem, which is concerned mainly with the past, the epilogue looks ahead, trying to secure the correspondents' future relationship. This intention is also expressed in a number of elements that typically are reserved for the epilogue, for instance the request for letters or expressions of the desire for a reunion of the correspondents. Finally, there are conventional reflections about the act of writing, especially its limitations compared to a face-to-face meeting. Such reflections appear to have been a favored way of concluding a letter in early medieval China.¹⁵

The beginning of Cao Pi's letter to Wu Zhi reflects all of the typical concerns of a proem:

On the third day of the second month, Cao Pi lets you know:

Years and months are easy to come by. It has already been four years since we parted. Not seeing each other for three years is lamented as a long time in the ode “Eastern Mountain.”¹⁶ How much more so when three years have been exceeded! How can I cope with my longing for you? Although we exchange letters, they do not suffice to relieve the weariness of longing.

Last year when the epidemic raged, our relatives and friends were struck hard by this calamity. Xu Gan, Chen Lin, Ying Yang, and Liu Zhen all passed away at the same time. Can the pain be expressed in words?

This point in the letter, when four of the Seven Masters have been mentioned, seems to indicate the onset of the body of the letter: an assessment of contemporary literature. Reading on, however, we discover that Cao Pi does not continue as we might have expected, but instead digresses into memories of the past and thus continues to stay with his addressee, Wu Zhi:

In former days, whether traveling or staying at home, our carriages would be connected when we drove and when we stopped our mats would touch. When did we ever lose sight of each other, if only for a moment? When the goblet went round amid the sound of strings and pipes, when our ears were hot from wine and we looked up to recite rhapsodies and poems, I was too careless to realize my own happiness. I assumed that each of us had been allotted a hundred years and that we could forever be together and take care of each other. Who could have imagined that within a few years almost all of us would be withered and fallen? My heart aches if I so much as talk about it.

I have just compiled the writings that our friends left behind and gathered them in one collection, where their names look like a register of the dead.

Again, we might expect that Cao Pi at this point will finally have arrived at the letter's main body. That he has mentioned his editorial work will undoubtedly lead to the heart of the letter. It will indeed, but not quite yet, since Cao Pi again lingers on the thought of his lost friends: “When I think back to our past excursions, I can still see all these masters in my mind's eye, but they have already become dung and soil. Is there anything more I can say?” The blurred boundaries between proem and the body of the letter arise from the character of this letter: despite its distinct literary agenda, it was at the same time also a letter of friendship. As such, it is characterized by a high

degree of attention to the addressee and to the epistolary situation, and thus showing a pronounced dialogicity and self-referentiality: Cao Pi addresses his friend through the lament of separation and of the passing of time, through the evocation of a shared past and the loss of mutual friends, and through expressions of his sentiments about all this. He repeatedly alludes to the epistolary character of his text by declaring that he is at a loss for words, which is both a ubiquitous epistolary topos and an important matter in early medieval Chinese philosophy of language.¹⁷ One way to describe this rhetorical strategy would be to say that the conventional subjects of the proem spill over into the letter's *narratio*, infusing it with a strong epistolary flavor. This amalgamation of general interpersonal concerns, as they are typical of the frame, with particular communicative intentions that are usually reserved for the letter body, produces the rhetorically and aesthetically most convincing of personal letters.

Cao Pi's letter proceeds to reflect on the frequent disconnect between a writer's talent and moral integrity, praising Xu Gan and in turn Ying Yang. But then, when we were sure that he will continue with his characterization of the Seven Masters, Cao Pi thwarts our expectations again by inserting an intensely personal remark: "Ying Yang was always brilliant, and he was intent on creating literature."¹⁸ Both his talent and his learning were adequate for writing. That he could not pursue his fine ambitions is really excruciatingly regrettable. Glancing through the writings of these masters, I had to rub my tears in front of their texts.¹⁹ Grieving for the departed, we turn our thoughts to our own death." The passage following is dedicated to Chen Lin, Liu Zhen, Ruan Yu and Wang Can. Cao Pi praises Ruan Yu's letters as "full of verve and producing ample enjoyment."

Structurally, the end of Cao Pi's letter mirrors its beginning: the actual closing is not clearly separated from the body of the letter. There is talk about friendship, evoking Confucius and the legendary ancient zither player Bo Ya, who both famously grieved for a dead friend, which again mingles artistic appreciation with personal concerns. Cao Pi also contemplates his own advanced age, conceding that it causes him a myriad of worries that often keep him awake through the night. He laments that he has "already become an old man," even if his "hair has not turned white yet," which is not that remarkable, given that Cao Pi was in his early thirties when he wrote this letter. After expressions of modesty triggered by immodestly comparing himself with Emperor Guangwu of the Han dynasty (reigned 25–57), Cao Pi eases into the densely allusive epilogue:

I am afraid I will never be able to go on travels as in the former days. We really must take advantage of our youth.²⁰ How could a year, once it has passed, be retrieved?²¹ The ancients longed to wander all night long, a candle in hand—there is certainly something to be said for that.²² How have you been amusing yourself recently? Surely there is something to tell. Are you writing? I am looking east, full of distress. I have written this letter to relieve my heart.

This is what Pi lets you know.

The epilogue is as exemplary in its epistolarity as the proem was: addressing the recipient, professing interest in his pursuits, sharing personal feelings with him, and expressing longing for the continuation of the conversation.

Cao Pi, the letter writer, appears to be striving for objective and relevant observations about literature just as the essayist did, but in the letter, as we have seen, he frequently interrupts his reflections about the literary accomplishments of his friends or other critical remarks to make room for very subjective and personal words that effectively evoke the dialogicity of correspondence. In

Figure 3, I have tried to indicate this intertwining of personal and literary reflections by marking different types of utterances in different colors: those parts of the letter body that share functions with the proem and thus serve to enhance the text's epistolarity are marked in red. What remains in black are those parts of the letter dedicated to literary criticism and thus form the *narratio* proper we expect in the body of the letter.

二月三日丕白。(Prescript)

歲月易得。別來行復四年。三年不見。東山猶歎其遠。況乃過之。思何可支。雖書疏往返。未足解其勞結。(Proem)

昔年疾疫。親故多離其災。徐、陳、應、劉。一時俱逝。痛可言邪。昔日遊處。行則連輿。止則接席。何曾須臾相失。每至觴酌流行。絲竹并奏。酒酣耳熱。仰而賦詩。當此之時。忽然不自知樂也。謂百年已分。可長共相保。何圖數年之間。零落略盡。言之傷心。

頃撰其遺文。都為一集。觀其姓名。已為鬼錄。追思昔遊。猶在心目。而此諸子。化為糞壤。可復道哉。

觀古今文人。類不護細行。鮮能以名節自立。而偉長獨懷文抱質。恬惓寡欲。有箕山之志。可謂彬彬君子者矣。著中論二十餘篇。成一家之言。辭義典雅。足傳於後。此子為不朽矣。德楫常斐然有述作之意。其才學足以著書。美志不遂。良可痛惜。間者歷覽諸子之文。對之流淚。既痛逝者。行自念也。孔璋章表殊健。微為繁富。公幹有逸氣。但未遒耳。其五言詩之善者。妙絕時人。元瑜書記翩翩。致足樂也。仲宣續自善於辭賦。惜其體弱。不足起其文。至於所善。古人無以遠過。

昔伯牙絕絃於鍾期。仲尼覆醢於子路。痛知音之難遇。傷門人之莫逮。諸子但為未及古人。自一時之雋也。今之存者。已不逮矣。後生可畏。來者難誣。然恐吾與足下不及見也。

年行已長大。所懷萬端。時有所慮。至通夜不眠。志意何時復類昔日。已成老翁。但未白頭耳。光武言年三十餘。在兵中十歲。所更非一。吾德不及之。年與之齊矣。以犬羊之質。服虎豹之文。無眾星之明。假日月之光。動見瞻觀。何時易乎。恐永不復得為昔日遊也。少壯真當努力。年一過往。何可攀援。古人思炳燭夜遊。良有以也。

頃何以自娛。頗復有所述造不。東望於邑。裁書敘心。(Epilogue)

丕白。(Postscript)

Figure 3: Cao Pi, "Further Letter to Wu Zhi"

Most striking in its expression of epistolary emotion is the passage about Ying Yang that I already mentioned. It suggests that Cao Pi, distracted by his agitated feelings and overwhelmed by a flood of memories, suspends the continuation of his catalogue of literary talents. Thinking of Ying Yang's prematurely crushed literary ambitions, Cao Pi is moved to painful sorrow and eventually to tears, while at the same time turning his thoughts and those of his friend and addressee, Wu Zhi,

to their own mortality. Despite the apparently informal character of this letter, it is unlikely that this passage reflects an impromptu stream of consciousness or inner monologue. The harmonious composition of the letter and its stylistic elaboration suggest that it was not penned spontaneously but with considerable attention to detail, not least because its writer, given his exalted social standing, certainly expected that this text would circulate more widely. Cao Pi masterfully exploited the generic potential in the inherent dialogicity of the letter, which allows the loose succession or even juxtaposition of different subjects and a relaxed train of thought resembling the back-and-forth of a conversation. It also allows for the dramatization of arguments and charges them with personal concern. The epistolary persona Cao Pi has created in this letter—moved to tears pondering the compositions of his dead friends—fabricated and polished as it may be, comes across as authentic enough to lend additional credibility to his catalogue of literary fortes and weaknesses. All this means that he communicates immensely successfully in rhetorical, aesthetic, and personal respects.

First Point of Comparison; a “Cover Letter”: Cao Zhi’s Letter to Yang Xiu

The pious beauty of Cao Pi’s letter with its intermingled concerns is not common in letters about literary thought. A famous letter by Cao Pi’s younger brother, Cao Zhi 曹植 (192–232), is a case in point. Written a few years earlier, Cao Zhi’s letter to Yang Xiu 楊修 (175–219) is the first extant letter about Chinese literary history. Slightly longer and also transmitted in its entirety but featuring only a very brief epistolary frame, the letter may at first sight look similar in its focus on the literary scene of the day, including a brief assessment of several of the Seven Masters (Fig. 4).²³ A closer look at the letter soon reveals a picture that is rather different and much less dappled than Cao Pi’s letter.

植白。(Prescript)

數日不見。思子為勞。想同之也。(Proem)

僕少小好為文章。迄至於今二十有五年矣。然今世作者。可略而言也。昔仲宣獨步於漢南。孔璋鷹揚於河朔。偉長擅名於青土。公幹振藻於海隅。德楫發跡於此魏。足下高視於上京。當此之時。人人自謂握靈蛇之珠。家家自謂抱荆山之玉也。吾王於是設天網以該之。頓八紘以掩之。今悉集茲國矣。然此數子。猶不能飛翰絕跡。一舉千里也。以孔璋之才。不閉於辭賦。而多自謂能與司馬長卿同風。譬畫虎不成還為狗者也。前為書啁之。反作論盛道僕贊其文。夫鍾期不失聽。於今稱之。吾亦不敢妄歎者。畏後之嗤余也。世人之著述。不能無病。僕常好人譏彈其文。有不善者。應時改定。昔丁敬禮嘗作小文。使僕潤飾之。僕自以才不能過若人。辭不為也。敬禮云。卿何所疑難乎。文之佳麗。吾自得之。後世誰相知定吾文者耶。吾常歎此達言。以為美談。昔尼父之文辭。與人通流。至於制春秋。游夏之徒。不能錯一字。過此而言不病者。吾未之見也。蓋有南威之容。乃可以論於淑媛。有龍淵之利。乃可以議於割斷。劉季緒才不逮於作者。而好詆訶文章。持摭利病。昔田巴毀五帝三王咎五伯於稷下。一旦而服千人。魯連一說。使終身杜口。劉生之辯。未若田氏。今之仲連。求之難。可無歎息乎。人各有所好尚。蘭茝蓀蕙之芳。眾人之所好。而海畔有逐臭之夫。咸池六英之發。眾人所共樂。而墨翟有非之論。豈可同哉。今往僕少小所著辭賦一通。相與夫街談巷說。必有可采。輦轅之歌。有應風雅。匹夫之思。未易輕棄也。辭賦小道。固未足以揄揚大義。彰示來世也。昔揚子雲先朝執戟之臣耳。猶稱壯夫不為也。吾雖薄德。位為藩侯。猶庶幾戮力上國。流惠下民。建永世之業。流金石之功。豈徒以翰墨為勳積。辭頌為君子哉。若吾志不果。吾道不行。亦將採史官之實錄。辨時俗之得失。定仁義之衷。成一家之言。雖未能藏之名山。將以傳之同好。此要之白首。豈可以今日論乎。

其言之不慙。恃惠子之知我也。明早相迎。書不盡懷。(Epilogue)

植白。(Postscript)

Figure 4: Cao Zhi, “Letter to Yang Xiu”

Cao Zhi, more acclaimed today as a poet than his older brother, probably wrote this letter in 216, at a time when he still cherished hopes of being made heir apparent. These hopes were thwarted in the following year, when their father, Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220), designated Cao Pi. Yang Xiu, the recipient of this letter, was among those friends and political supporters of Cao Zhi who were executed after Cao Pi’s appointment as heir apparent. The beginning of the letter reads:

Cao Zhi lets you know:

I have not seen you for several days. Longing for you I have become weary. I think you must feel the same.

Your servant has had a penchant for literature since I was child, for twenty-five years now. Thus I can briefly describe the writers of our time. Formerly, Wang Can strode without par south

of the river Han, Chen Lin soared like an eagle north of the Yellow River, Xu Gan made himself a name in Qingzhou, Liu Zhen vitalized literature on the coast, Ying Yang left his marks here in Wei, while you from up high command a view of the capital.²⁴

In Cao Zhi's letter, the prescript is followed by an extremely brief proem consisting of only a lament of separation. The intensity of longing that Cao Zhi professes seems at odds with the shortness of their separation and with the abrupt onset of the body of the letter, whose remainder is exclusively dedicated to literary matters. The last sentence of the passage quoted above is the last reference to the addressee in this letter before he is mentioned again several hundred words later in the epilogue, resulting in a weak dialogicity matched by the letter's almost complete absence of self-referentiality.

After the catalogue of prominent poets of his day, Cao Zhi moves on to a number of aspects of literary criticism: he praises his father as a benefactor of literature, criticizes fellow poets for their shortcomings, justifies his criticism by casting it as required by the demands of literary posterity, insists that criticism is important for the development of literature, and spends a long paragraph arguing that one needs to be a fine writer in order to be a critic—thus implicitly establishing his critical legitimacy.²⁵ In the last third of the body of the letter Cao Zhi writes about his own literary work. Unlike his brother Cao Pi, whose letter mentions that he compiled an anthology of the compositions left behind by his dead friends, Cao Zhi shares the news that he has put together a collection of his own poetical works, sent as an accompaniment—a sentence that could be interpreted as an element of self-referentiality and/or dialogicity. The customary self-deprecation following this news includes remarks that denigrate literature compared to matters of the state and are thus often interpreted as expressions of Cao Zhi's political ambitions: how could he, a feudal lord, presume that merely composing poetry would be enough to prove his virtue and nobility?

The body of the letter ends as abruptly as it began. In the brief epilogue Cao Zhi mentions the addressee again, enfolding their relationship within a composite allusion, and finishing with the letter's only element of self-referentiality:

If I am not ashamed of my words, then it is only because I trust that Master Hui will understand me. We will meet tomorrow morning. Writing does not fully capture the heart.

This is what Zhi lets you know.

When Cao Zhi calls Yang Xiu his “Master Hui” he refers to the legendary friendship between the Warring States philosopher Zhuangzi and his intellectual sparring partner Hui Shi 惠施. The phrase he uses to do that contains another allusion to another iconic friendship, that between the powerful Springs and Autumns politician Guan Zhong 管仲 (d. 645 BCE) and his collaborator Bao Shuya 鮑叔牙. Cao Zhi is alluding to this prototypical pair of friends via an epistolary reference, a letter by the eminent poet and polymath Zhang Heng 張衡 (78–139) that reads, “I trust that Master Bao will understand me.”²⁶ Yet another allusion, a reference to the *Odes*, is nested within the phrase “the one who understands me.”²⁷ As caring as the sentence “I trust that Master Hui will understand me” may seem, it is essentially self-flattering, since through his comparisons Cao Zhi assumes not only the place of the great statesman and reformer Guan Zhong, who is credited with the rise of his home state, Qi, but also that of the peerless word-smith Zhuangzi.

With its weak dialogicity and nearly absent self-referentiality, the body of Cao Zhi's letter to Yang Xiu resembles a loosely structured essay rather than a letter to a friend. Proem and epilogue are short and almost perfunctory, just as the rare instances of dialogicity within the body (see Fig. 5).

植白。(Prescript)

數日不見。思子為勞。想同之也。(Proem)

僕少小好為文章。迄至於今二十有五年矣。然今世作者。可略而言也。昔仲宣獨步於漢南。孔璋鷹揚於河朔。偉長擅名於青土。公幹振藻於海隅。德槌發跡於此魏。足下高視於上京。當此之時。人人自謂握靈蛇之珠。家自謂抱荆山之玉也。吾王於是設天網以該之。頓八紘以掩之。今悉集茲國矣。然此數子。猶不能飛翰絕跡。一舉千里也。以孔璋之才。不閑於辭賦。而多自謂能與司馬長卿同風。譬畫虎不成還為狗者也。前為書啗之。反作論盛道僕贊其文。夫鍾期不失聽。於今稱之。吾亦不敢妄歎者。畏後之嗤余也。世人之著述。不能無病。僕常好人譏彈其文。有不善者。應時改定。昔丁敬禮嘗作小文。使僕潤飾之。僕自以才不能過若人。辭不為也。敬禮云。卿何所疑難乎。文之佳麗。吾自得之。後世誰相知定吾文者耶。吾常歎此達言。以為美談。昔尼父之文辭。與人通流。至於制春秋。游夏之徒。不能錯一字。過此而言不病者。吾未之見也。蓋有南威之容。乃可以論於淑媛。有龍淵之利。乃可以議於割斷。劉季緒才不逮於作者。而好詆呵文章。掎摭利病。昔田巴毀五帝三王訾五伯於稷下。一旦而服千人。魯連一說。使終身杜口。劉生之辯。未若田氏。今之仲連。求之不難。可無歎息乎。人各有所好尚。蘭茝蓀蕙之芳。眾人之所好。而海畔有逐臭之夫。咸池六英之發。眾人所共樂。而墨翟有非之論。豈可同哉。今往僕少小所著辭賦一通。相與夫街談巷說。必有可采。擊轅之歌。有應風雅。匹夫之思。未易輕棄也。辭賦小道。固未足以掄揚大義。彰示來世也。昔揚子雲先朝執戟之臣耳。猶稱壯夫不為也。吾雖薄德。位為藩侯。猶庶幾戮力上國。流惠下民。建永世之業。流金石之功。豈徒以翰墨為勳積。辭頌為君子哉。若吾志不果。吾道不行。亦將採史官之實錄。辨時俗之得失。定仁義之衷。成一家之言。雖未能藏之名山。將以傳之同好。此要之白首。豈可以今日論乎。

其言之不慙。恃惠子之知我也。明早相迎。書不盡懷。(Epilogue)

植白。(Postscript)

Figure 5: Cao Zhi, "Letter to Yang Xiu"

We may wonder if this text ever was a letter at all or if it was rather an essay in disguise. There is no way of knowing, but if the text was indeed composed as a letter, the reason for its lack of epistolarity may have been that it was, at least on the surface of it, a more utilitarian endeavor than Cao Pi's letter: where Cao Pi seeks exchange with an absent and sorely missed friend, Cao Zhi writes in anticipation and preparation of an imminent meeting. Even more consequential may be that his text accompanied a manuscript gift of his own collected works. Given these circumstances,

the letter to Yang Xiu may never have been sent at all; written on the day before their meeting, it may literally have been the “cover letter” that was handed over along with Cao Zhi’s gift to Yang Xiu. Under these circumstances, one of the main drivers of the epistolary imagination is missing—the wish to bridge the separation between the correspondents through a letter’s content and materiality. The letter may well have been meant to provide a frame for his collected works, guiding their reading as a preface would, another paratextual genre. In the case of this letter, too, it is safe to assume that Cao Zhi expected that his audience would not be restricted to his friend Yang Xiu. Even if Cao Zhi’s text is not infused with the same epistolarity as that of his elder brother, Cao Zhi nevertheless chose his genre wisely, because the letter provided a looser corset than an essay or preface. It also gave the writer the opportunity to insert himself into an otherwise less personal communicative situation and to establish himself at a certain position in a social network.

In personal letters, the presence of a clear communicative purpose is often felt to be slightly problematic and associated with “ulterior motives.” The lack of any particular message or intention, on the other hand, is read as proof of the affectionate, sincere nature of a letter—an observation that was made in the west as early as in ancient Rome.²⁸ The “purposelessness” of many intimate Chinese letters may have been a reflection of the notion of pure friendship that had been an important ideal since early China: it seems to have been an attempt to create a sphere unblemished by the utilitarian purposes that necessarily dominated much of social life and relationships.

Cao Pi and Cao Zhi were by no means the only writers who expressed their ideas about literature in letters; there are many more, in early medieval China and later.²⁹ In western literary history, letters about literature are common as well, from ancient Greece and Rome to Dante and up through the centuries.³⁰ In what follows, I would like to draw on three examples from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to test their epistolarity: a fictional letter by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and two family letters by John Keats and Gertrud Kolmar.

Second Point of Comparison; a Fictional Reply: Hofmannsthal’s “Letter of Lord Chandos”

Hugo von Hofmannsthal (1874–1929) was sixteen when his poems took the literary circles of his home town Vienna by surprise. Although he enjoyed a growing reputation as a poet, he had virtually stopped writing poems by twenty-two, turning to drama and a wide variety of prose works, including critical essays. A letter of Hofmannsthal’s, published as “A Letter” (“Ein Brief”) in the Berlin newspaper *Der Tag* in October 1902, is a compelling document of an intellectual and literary crisis and came to be regarded as a major document of the emerging modernist movement. In addition to its tremendous relevance for literary criticism, Hofmannsthal’s letter has inspired a range of literary responses—another proof of this text’s continued momentousness.³¹

As far as personal letters go, Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s piece is exemplary. Figure 6 shows the beginning of the text, which comprises almost 4,000 words and is thus much longer than the Chinese texts I have quoted above.³²

Dies ist der Brief, den Philip Lord Chandos, jüngerer Sohn des Earl of Bath, an Francis Bacon, später Lord Verulam und Viscount St. Albans, schrieb, um sich bei diesem Freunde wegen des gänzlichen Verzichtes auf literarische Betätigung zu entschuldigen.

Es ist gütig von Ihnen, mein hochverehrter Freund, mein zweijähriges Stillschweigen zu übersehen und so an mich zu schreiben. Es ist mehr als gütig, Ihrer Besorgnis um mich, Ihrer Befremdung über die geistige Starrheit, in der ich Ihnen zu versinken scheine, den Ausdruck der Leichtigkeit und des Scherzes zu geben, den nur große Menschen, die von der Gefährlichkeit des Lebens durchdrungen und dennoch nicht entmutigt sind, in ihrer Gewalt haben.

Sie schließen mit dem Aphorisma des Hippokrates: »*Qui gravi morbo correpti dolores non sentiunt, iis mens aegrotat*« und meinen, ich bedürfe der Medizin nicht nur, um mein Uebel zu bändigen, sondern noch mehr, um meinen Sinn für den Zustand meines Innern zu schärfen. Ich möchte Ihnen so antworten, wie Sie es um mich verdienen, möchte mich Ihnen ganz aufschließen, und weiß nicht, wie ich mich dazu nehmen soll. Kaum weiß ich, ob ich noch derselbe bin, an den Ihr kostbarer Brief sich wendet; bin denn ich's, der nun Sechszwanzigjährige, der mit neunzehn jenen »neuen Paris«, jenen »Traum der Daphne«, jenes »Epithalamium« hinschrieb, diese unter dem Prunk ihrer Worte hintaumelnden Schäferspiele, deren eine himmlische Königin und einige allzu nachsichtige Lords und Herren sich noch zu entsinnen gnädig genug sind? Und bin ich's wiederum, der mit dreiundzwanzig unter den steinernen Lauben des großen Platzes von Venedig in sich jenes Gefüge lateinischer Perioden fand, dessen geistiger Grundriß und Aufbau ihn im Innern mehr entzückte als die aus dem Meer auftauchenden Bauten des Palladio und Sansovin? Und konnte ich, wenn ich anders derselbe bin, alle Spuren und Narben dieser Ausgeburt meines angespanntesten Denkens so völlig aus meinem unbegreiflichen Inneren verlieren, daß mich in Ihrem Brief, der vor mir liegt, der Titel jenes kleinen Traktates fremd und kalt anstarrt, ja daß ich ihn nicht als ein geläufiges Bild zusammengefaßter Worte sogleich auffassen, sondern nur Wort für Wort verstehen konnte, als träten mir diese lateinischen Wörter, so verbunden, zum ersten Mal vors Auge? Allein ich bin es ja doch, und es ist Rhetorik in diesen Fragen, Rhetorik, die gut ist für Frauen oder für das Haus der Gemeinen, deren von unsrer Zeit so überschätzte Machtmittel aber nicht hinreichen, ins Innere der Dinge zu dringen.

Mein Innres aber muß ich Ihnen darlegen, eine Sonderbarkeit, eine Unart, wenn Sie wollen eine Krankheit meines Geistes, wenn Sie begreifen sollen, daß mich ein ebensolcher brückenloser Abgrund von den scheinbar vor mir liegenden literarischen Arbeiten trennt, als von denen, die hinter mir sind und die ich, so fremd sprechen sie mich an, mein Eigentum zu nennen zögere.

Ich weiß nicht, ob ich mehr die Eindringlichkeit Ihres Wohlwollens oder die unglaubliche Schärfe Ihres Gedächtnisses bewundern soll, wenn Sie mir die verschiedenen kleinen Pläne wieder hervorrufen, mit denen ich mich in den gemeinsamen Tagen schöner Begeisterung trug. Wirklich, ich wollte die ersten Regierungsjahre unseres verstorbenen glorreichen Souveräns, des achten Heinrich, darstellen! Die hinterlassenen Aufzeichnungen meines Großvaters, des Herzogs von Exeter, über seine Negotiationen mit Frankreich und Portugal gaben mir eine Art von Grundlage. Und aus dem Sallust floß in jenen glücklichen belebten Tagen wie durch nie verstopfte Röhren die Erkenntnis der Form in mich herüber, jener tiefen wahren inneren Form, die jenseits des Geheges der rhetorischen Kunststücke erst geahnt werden kann, die, von welcher man nicht mehr sagen kann, daß sie das Stoffliche anordne, denn sie durchdringt es, sie hebt es auf und schafft Dichtung und Wahrheit zugleich, ein Widerspiel ewiger Kräfte, ein Ding, herrlich wie Musik und Algebra. Dies war mein Lieblingsplan. Was ist der Mensch, daß er Pläne macht! ...

[ca. 1/6 of the text]

Figure 6: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "A Letter"

Hofmannsthal not only created a fictional letter writer, "Philipp Lord Chandos," but also an fictional addressee, based on the historical figure of Francis Bacon, whom he equipped with personal features and to whose letter Lord Chandos now, after two years of silence, pretends to reply, setting the time at August 22, 1603. The addressee gains additional substance and credibility because the letter he is supposed to have sent makes occasional appearances in the "Letter of Lord Chandos," in the form of both references and quotations. Hofmannsthal was even more successful in creating the writer of this letter, his Lord Chandos: a twenty-six-year-old poet with his own extensive personal history, with a grandfather and an infant daughter with a proper name, with notable literary works, and with abandoned plans for future works. By fashioning a writer and an addressee along with a history of correspondence, Hofmannsthal provides an "epistolary fullness" that convincingly simulates a letter of friendship. This fullness is supported by another fictional player, an

anonymous editor who placed the letter in the *Der Tag* and provided its brief paratextual introduction.

Into this openly fictional letter Hofmannsthal wove elements that are clearly meant to appear autobiographical, among them both writers' precociousness and the fact that their daughters share a name. Chandos also expresses ideas that are important elsewhere in Hofmannsthal's oeuvre, most prominently the insufficiency of language and the difficulty in grasping the mutability of one's personality throughout one's life.³³ To complicate matters, Hofmannsthal himself suggested an interpretation in autobiographical terms, for instance in his *Ad me ipsum* (1916–28), a collection of notes about his earlier works, and in private letters announcing the publication of the "Letter of Lord Chandos"—sent to several correspondents together with the enclosed published letter.³⁴ We cannot assume the identity of author and narrator in any fictional text, but the persona of the letter writer in particular is a decidedly flexible entity, in *both* fictional and non-fictional epistolary writing, created by the writer depending on the addressee and the overall communicative situation. That Hofmannsthal has succeeded in merging his own persona with that of Chandos may be another indication of the longing he ascribes to Chandos in the letter, the longing to merge with certain mythological and literary figures, "to disappear in them and talk out of them with tongues."

The most famous passage of the letter is Chandos's confession that he has "lost completely the ability to think or speak of anything coherently"—paradoxically eloquent, as so much else written in the area of language skepticism.³⁵ This loss followed another loss, that of being able to conceive "the whole of existence as one great unit" where "the spiritual and physical worlds seemed to form no contrast"; Chandos described this lost naiveté as "a state of inflated arrogance." Despite the agony of feeling words crumbling in his "mouth like moldy fungi" and the fragmentation of his perception—"for me, everything disintegrated into parts, those parts again into parts"—Chandos recognizes that the loss of "the simplifying eye of habit" yielded something precious: previously unknown ecstatic, almost revelatory states, and an immense sympathy, triggered by animals, things, and ideas, by "the Present, the fullest, most exalted Present." He writes, "I experience in and around me a blissful, never-ending interplay, and among the objects playing against one another there is not one in which I cannot flow." Describing "these strange occurrences" he admits that he hardly knows whether to ascribe them "to the mind or the body," adding, that "the whole thing is a kind of feverish thinking, but thinking in a medium more immediate, more liquid, more glowing than words."

So why write fictional autobiography in the form of a fictional letter and not an essay about the loss of trust in the intelligibility and expressibility of the world and one's mind? The letter itself suggests that Hofmannsthal chose the epistolary form with good reason, because he lets Chandos express doubt that content can be expressed in *any* form, but that form (and thus genre) has a transformative effect. At the beginning of the letter, following the paratextual introduction, Chandos writes of "his realization of form"—"that deep, true, inner form which can be sensed only beyond the domain of rhetorical tricks: that form of which one can no longer say that it organizes subject-matter, for it penetrates it, dissolves it, creating at once both dream and reality, an interplay of eternal forces, something as marvelous as music or algebra."³⁶ In light of the particular personal crisis at the center of the letter, it would seem only logical that Hofmannsthal chose not to write an essay with its greater expectation of stringency and formal unity, but rather a letter—and a letter of response (as we will see directly)—as a more suitable medium to convey the idea of fragmentation and confusion. The letter form also permits Lord Chandos to write about episodes from his

everyday life that carry strong allegorical or metaphorical overtones. A pragmatic reason for choosing the letter form may have been that writing letters was thoroughly familiar to Hofmannsthal. Going by his surviving oeuvre alone, Hofmannsthal emerges as an uncommonly prolific correspondent: roughly 11,000 of his letters are extant; they are addressed to approximately 1,000 correspondents.³⁷ Several other fictional letters (as well as fictional dialogues) in Hofmannsthal's oeuvre also indicate that the form of the "Letter of Lord Chandos" was not a happenstance but that Hofmannsthal was drawn to a way of writing about critical matters that imitated and re-created types of everyday communication.³⁸

Let us take a closer look at Hofmannsthal's creation of epistolarity. The usual epistolary frame is embedded into another framing device, the opening paragraph that establishes the epistolary character of the following text and thus ensures that the text be read as a letter. The letter's self-referentiality is evident as well: Chandos repeatedly brings up his friend's letter and his own process of writing (or keeping silent). The letter's most pronounced feature may be its strong dialogicity. Chandos's sustained references to his correspondent—"whose presence alone distinguishes the letter from other first-person forms," as Janet Altman reminds us—help to create a convincing epistolary situation and a history of Chandos's interrupted correspondence with Francis Bacon.³⁹

Chandos's arguments throughout the letter are following cues of his own making, though, since they are taken from an entirely imaginary letter, whose existence we have to accept sight unseen. For instance, when Chandos quotes Bacon's letter in the second paragraph—by quoting a quotation from Hippocrates—he introduces the idea that he suffers from a malady of the mind, an idea which runs through the letter as a leitmotif. This conceit of "the letter of reply" is the most conspicuous rhetorical device of the "Letter of Lord Chandos." In pretending to respond to a letter that is withheld from the reader (whether such a letter ever existed or not) writers gain enormous freedom in the creation of their own texts. The imaginary letters they respond to provide an external system of reference and sanctions liberties that otherwise would elicit criticism, in particular sudden and apparently arbitrary changes of topic. What we observed with respect to Cao Pi's letter—the loose succession or juxtaposition of subjects and a relaxed train of thought—is thus potentially yet more pronounced in an imaginary letter of reply: writers can present their ideas in an even less stringent form and in a more personal fashion than a regular letter, not to mention an essay, would have allowed.

How powerful the autobiographical and literary potential of a letter in reply can be was demonstrated in China as early as around 100 BC by Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145 – ca. 86 BCE). In his magnificent letter in reply to Ren An 任安 (d. ca. 91 BCE), Sima Qian explains why he rather suffered to live with the shame of castration than choose to die by his own hand and leave his magnum opus, the *Records of the Historian* (Shi ji 史記), unfinished.⁴⁰ This letter, written at about the same time when Cicero elevated letter writing to an art form in the west, acquired the highest literary fame and developed paradigmatic power for centuries to come, "setting the pattern for more intimate and personal autobiographical writing" in China.⁴¹ Chinese writers have made use of the literary conceit of the letter in reply in following centuries as well; the most famous example in fiction may be the female protagonist's letter in Yuan Zhen's 元稹 (779–831) novella *Story of Yingying* (Yingying zhuan 鶯鶯傳).⁴²

Another indirect connection between Hofmannsthal's letter and ancient and early medieval Chinese letter writing lies in their common focus on the limitations of language and writing, as

mentioned above in the description of the typical Chinese epilogue in general and in Cao Pi's letter in particular. Given Hofmannsthal's interest in Chinese and Asian philosophy, this may well reflect not merely an indirect, coincidental connection, especially if we consider other vaguely "eastern" themes that the letter raises, for instance the recurring idea of a cosmic unity with all things and creatures.⁴³

Despite its pronounced epistolarity, however, the "Letter of Lord Chandos" shows a different rhetorical pattern from those we have seen above, as the color treatment shows (Fig. 7).

Dies ist der Brief, den Philip Lord Chandos, jüngerer Sohn des Earl of Bath, an Francis Bacon, später Lord Verulam und Viscount St. Albans, schrieb, um sich bei diesem Freunde wegen des gänzlichen Verzichtes auf literarische Betätigung zu entschuldigen.

Es ist gütig von Ihnen, mein hochverehrter Freund, mein zweijähriges Stillschweigen zu übersehen und so an mich zu schreiben. Es ist mehr als gütig, Ihrer Besorgnis um mich, Ihrer Befremdung über die geistige Starrnis, in der ich Ihnen zu versinken scheine, den Ausdruck der Leichtigkeit und des Scherzes zu geben, den nur große Menschen, die von der Gefährlichkeit des Lebens durchdrungen und dennoch nicht entmutigt sind, in ihrer Gewalt haben.

Sie schließen mit dem Aphorisma des Hippokrates: »*Qui gravi morbo correpti dolores non sentiunt, iis mens aegrotat*« und meinen, ich bedürfe der Medizin nicht nur, um mein Uebel zu bändigen, sondern noch mehr, um meinen Sinn für den Zustand meines Innern zu schärfen. Ich möchte Ihnen so antworten, wie Sie es um mich verdienen, möchte mich Ihnen ganz aufschließen, und weiß nicht, wie ich mich dazu nehmen soll. Kaum weiß ich, ob ich noch derselbe bin, an den Ihr kostbarer Brief sich wendet; bin denn ich's, der nun Sechszwanzigjährige, der mit neunzehn jenen »neuen Paris«, jenen »Traum der Daphne«, jenes »Epithalamium« hinschrieb, diese unter dem Prunk ihrer Worte hintaumelnden Schäferspiele, deren eine himmlische Königin und einige allzu nachsichtige Lords und Herren sich noch zu entsinnen gnädig genug sind? Und bin ich's wiederum, der mit dreiundzwanzig unter den steinernen Lauben des großen Platzes von Venedig in sich jenes Gefüge lateinischer Perioden fand, dessen geistiger Grundriß und Aufbau ihn im Innern mehr entzückte als die aus dem Meer auftauchenden Bauten des Palladio und Sansovin? Und konnte ich, wenn ich anders derselbe bin, alle Spuren und Narben dieser Ausgubt meines angespanntesten Denkens so völlig aus meinem unbegreiflichen Inneren verlieren, daß mich in Ihrem Brief, der vor mir liegt, der Titel jenes kleinen Traktates fremd und kalt anstarrt, ja daß ich ihn nicht als ein geläufiges Bild zusammengefaßter Worte sogleich auffassen, sondern nur Wort für Wort verstehen konnte, als träten mir diese lateinischen Wörter, so verbunden, zum ersten Mal vors Auge? Allein ich bin es ja doch, und es ist Rhetorik in diesen Fragen, Rhetorik, die gut ist für Frauen oder für das Haus der Gemeinen, deren von unsrer Zeit so überschätzte Machtmittel aber nicht hinreichen, ins Innere der Dinge zu dringen.

Mein Innres aber muß ich Ihnen darlegen, eine Sonderbarkeit, eine Unart, wenn Sie wollen eine Krankheit meines Geistes, wenn Sie begreifen sollen, daß mich ein ebensolcher brückenloser Abgrund von den scheinbar vor mir liegenden literarischen Arbeiten trennt, als von denen, die hinter mir sind und die ich, so fremd sprechen sie mich an, mein Eigentum zu nennen zögere.

Ich weiß nicht, ob ich mehr die Eindringlichkeit Ihres Wohlwollens oder die unglaubliche Schärfe Ihres Gedächtnisses bewundern soll, wenn Sie mir die verschiedenen kleinen Pläne wieder hervorrufen, mit denen ich mich in den gemeinsamen Tagen schöner Begeisterung trug. Wirklich, ich wollte die ersten Regierungsjahre unseres verstorbenen glorreichen Souveräns, des achten Heinrich, darstellen! Die hinterlassenen Aufzeichnungen meines Großvaters, des Herzogs von Exeter, über seine Negotiationen mit Frankreich und Portugal gaben mir eine Art von Grundlage. Und aus dem Sallust floß in jenen glücklichen belebten Tagen wie durch nie verstopfte Röhren die Erkenntnis der Form in mich herüber, jener tiefen wahren inneren Form, die jenseits des Geheges der rhetorischen Kunststücke erst geahnt werden kann, die, von welcher man nicht mehr sagen kann, daß sie das Stoffliche anordne, denn sie durchdringt es, sie hebt es auf und schafft Dichtung und Wahrheit zugleich, ein Widerspiel ewiger Kräfte, ein Ding, herrlich wie Musik und Algebra. Dies war mein Lieblingsplan. Was ist der Mensch, daß er Pläne macht! ...

[ca. 1/6 of the text]

Figure 7: Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "A Letter"

Although Hofmannsthal's letter appears distinctly dappled if studied with this type of lens—references to the addressee and to the epistolary situation, marked in red, make up a considerable part of the text—the dapples appear in neater blocks than in Cao Pi's letter. It is tempting to speculate

that the orderliness and regularity of references to the correspondent and the epistolary situation could unintentionally reveal the fictionality of this letter: the fact that it was carefully constructed without an actual interlocutor or epistolary situation, but with a good, if not exactly perfect understanding of what it takes to write a decent personal letter. It is just as possible, of course, that this effect was calculated and meant to enhance the fictionality of the letter.

Third Point of Comparison; a Family Letter: John Keats to His Brothers

In letters written by John Keats (1795–1821) a much less orderly image of the back and forth between personal and literary reflections emerges. T. S. Eliot pointed to just that quality when he said, in a lecture about Keats and Shelley at Harvard in 1933, that Keats's letters "are what letters ought to be; the fine things come in unexpectedly, neither introduced nor shown out, but between trifle and trifle."⁴⁴ Keats, the Romantic poet whose brief life and poetic oeuvre have been the object of admiration and investigation for the last two hundred years, was a prolific letter writer, although his letters fill no more than two volumes.⁴⁵ His letters are not only mined for biographical data and information about the circumstances surrounding the composition of certain works, but have also been appreciated for their literary and epistolary qualities. To quote T. S. Eliot again, he called Keats's letters "certainly the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet."⁴⁶ Lionel Trilling, in his introduction to a collection of Keats's selected letters, emphasized their unique character when he wrote that "even among the great artists Keats is perhaps the only one whose letters have an interest which is virtually equal to that of their writer's canon of created work."⁴⁷

Several of the approximately 250 letters by Keats's hand are so-called "crossed letters," a technique that was meant to make the best use of a sheet of paper. One of these crossed letters is particularly interesting from a sinological perspective, because Keats crossed his letter with part of an early version of his poem "Lamia" (Fig. 8).⁴⁸ This poem has been discussed in connection with the Chinese *Legend of White Snake* (Baishe zhuan 白蛇傳). The roots of this narrative about a snake spirit in human form can be traced back to the ninth century, although it appears to have lain dormant until the seventeenth century, when it started to gain in popularity. Since then, the *Legend of White Snake* has been told in China and other East Asian cultures in a variety of narrative and dramatic forms.⁴⁹

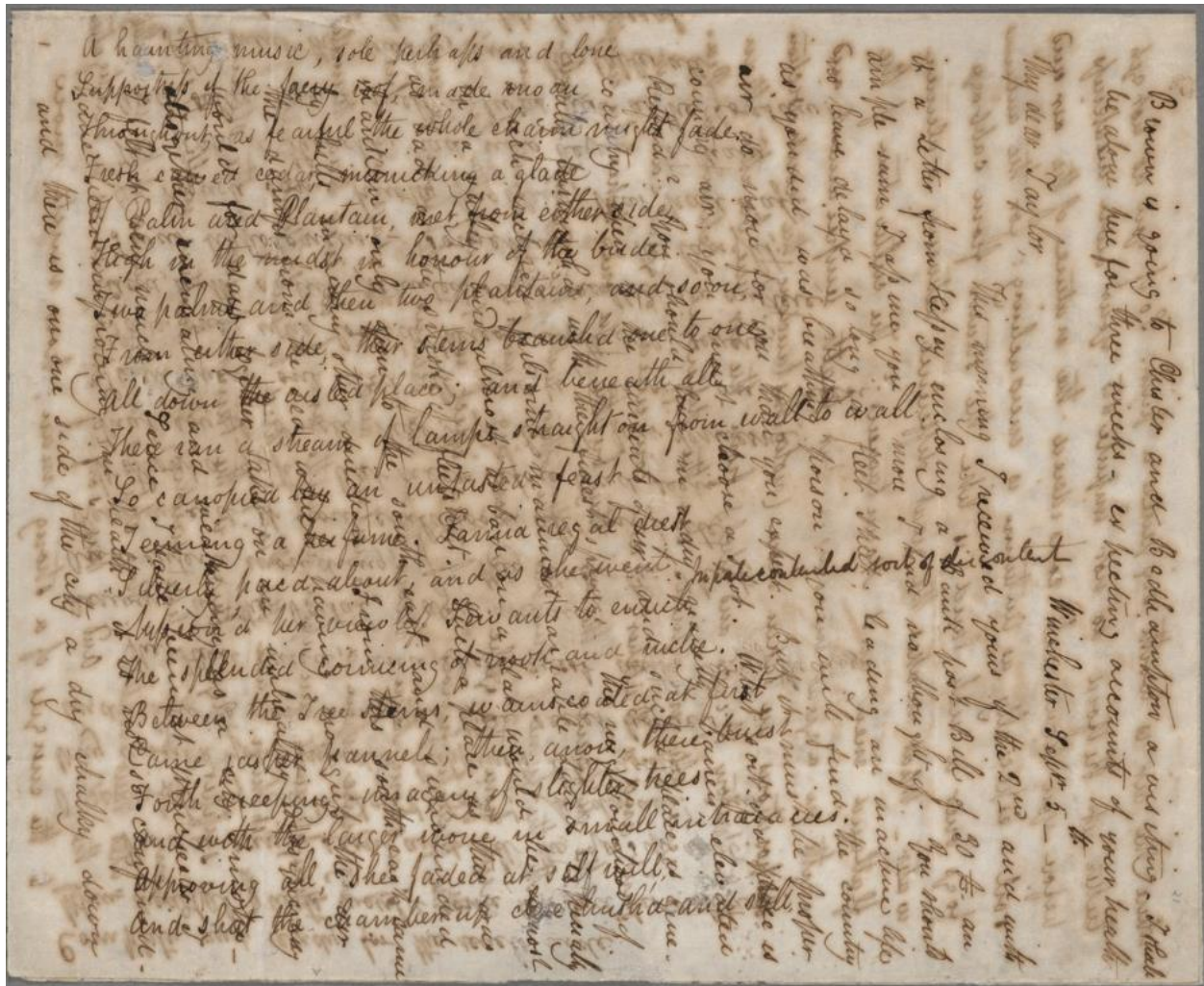
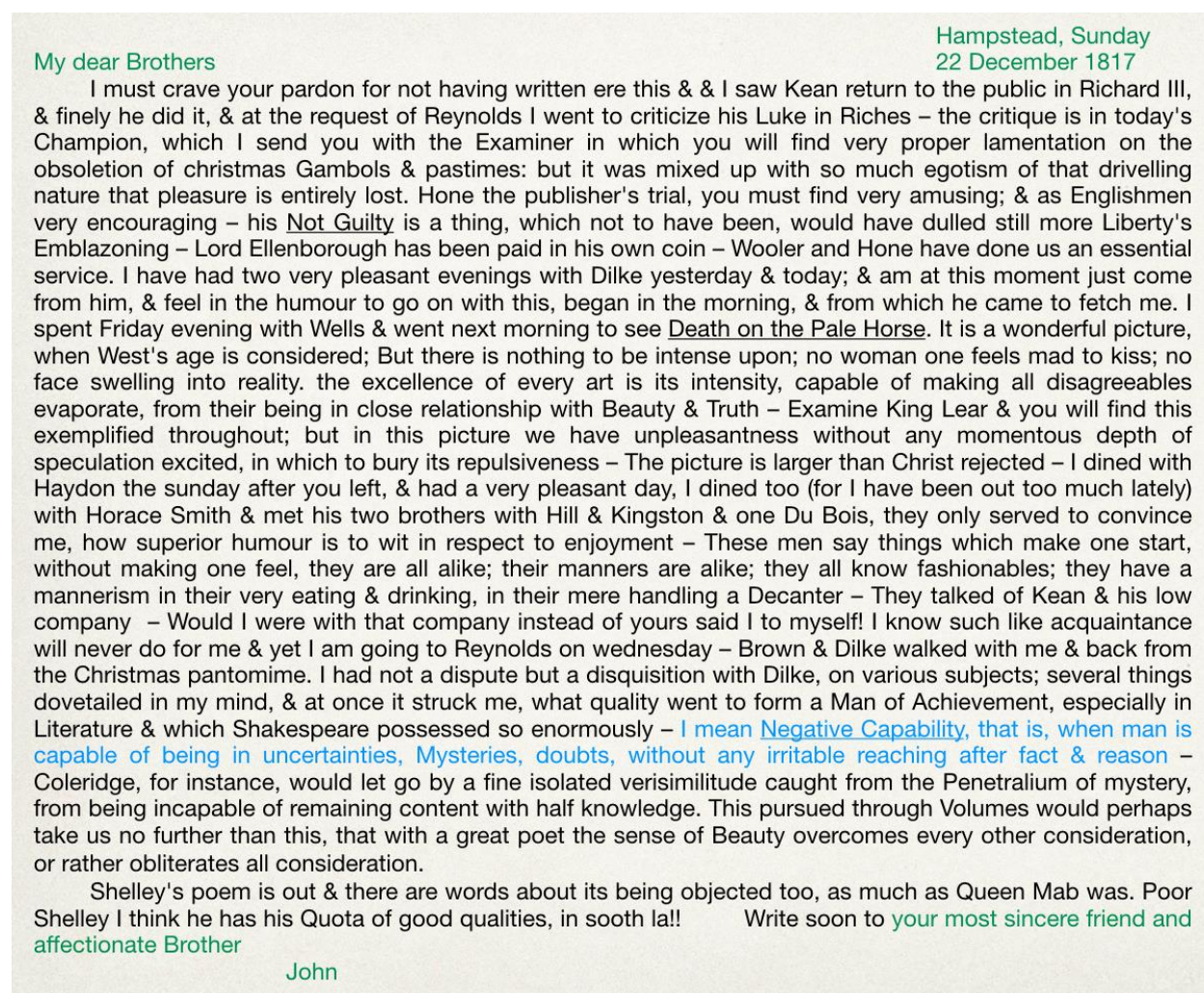


Figure 8: John Keats, Letter to John Taylor, September 5, 1819
(MS Keats 1.63, Houghton Library, Harvard University)

The letter that serves as our third point of comparison is a family letter, written in late December of 1817 in London and addressed to Keats's younger brothers George (1797–1841) and Thomas (1799–1818), who had left for a visit to the seaside town of Teignmouth in Devon.⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the autograph of the letter has not survived, only a transcript in the hand of John Jeffrey (1817–1881), second husband of Keats's sister-in-law Georgiana (ca. 1797–1879). Since Jeffrey also transcribed letters that have survived in Keats's own hand, we know that Jeffrey was far from being a faithful copyist, so that it is quite unlikely that the letter as we have it now is an exact copy of the one that Keats wrote in late 1817.⁵¹ This uncertainty has not done damage to the reception of the letter at all. On the contrary, the "Negative Capability" letter, as it is known today, became one of Keats's most celebrated letters, and might even rank first among those of his letters that were awarded a "title" by later readers and critics, such as the "Mansions of Many Apartments" letter or the "Vale of Soul-making" letter.⁵²

The “Negative Capability” letter (Fig. 9) was written over several days and gives a vivid record of Keats’s busy social life during this “drear-nighted December,” to allude to the only poem that Keats wrote that month, as far as we know.⁵³ Within the letter, hidden among incidental chit-chat, are embedded casual critical reflections. They may not have been taken very seriously by George and Thomas Keats, but were literally “pursued through Volumes” by generations of later readers of Keats’s work. Two of these reflections stand out. While the first, provoked by a painting Keats had seen, is concerned with the essential quality of an artistic product—“the excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relation with Beauty & Truth”—the second observation, which gave the letter its title, turns to the preconditions of the artistic process. Thanks to the letter’s narrative, we know that Keats’s observation was triggered by a process, too.



Hampstead, Sunday
22 December 1817

My dear Brothers

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this & I saw Kean return to the public in Richard III, & finely he did it, & at the request of Reynolds I went to criticize his Luke in Riches – the critique is in today's Champion, which I send you with the Examiner in which you will find very proper lamentation on the obsolescence of Christmas Gambols & pastimes: but it was mixed up with so much egotism of that drivelling nature that pleasure is entirely lost. Hone the publisher's trial, you must find very amusing; & as Englishmen very encouraging – his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning – Lord Ellenborough has been paid in his own coin – Wooler and Hone have done us an essential service. I have had two very pleasant evenings with Dilke yesterday & today; & am at this moment just come from him, & feel in the humour to go on with this, began in the morning, & from which he came to fetch me. I spent Friday evening with Wells & went next morning to see *Death on the Pale Horse*. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth – Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness – The picture is larger than Christ rejected – I dined with Haydon the Sunday after you left, & had a very pleasant day, I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith & met his two brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois, they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment – These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter – They talked of Kean & his low company – Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me & yet I am going to Reynolds on Wednesday – Brown & Dilke walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime. I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – *I mean Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason* – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

Shelley's poem is out & there are words about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!! Write soon to *your most sincere friend and affectionate Brother*

John

Figure 9: Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21–27, 1817

Although it is difficult to determine a first step in the chain of events that led to the formulation of Negative Capability as a decisive precondition of creativity, the Drury Lane Christmas pantomime

Keats attended with his friends Charles Brown (1787–1842) and Charles Dilke (1789–1864) probably played an important role and may even have been among “the various subjects” of Keats’s “disquisition” with Dilke on the way back from the performance, one of the “several things [that] dovetailed in [his] mind.”⁵⁴ We thus see the idea of Negative Capability emerging from a succession of different types of communicative situations: the pantomime performance leading to a lively conversation with friends, which was then, probably after further reflection, added to a letter that had been in progress for a few days. Keats described Negative Capability as “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason,” “of remaining content with half knowledge,” a characterization that has been interpreted in different and sometimes contradictory ways.⁵⁵

Figure 10 visualizes the intermingling of elements—dedicated to dialogicity and self-referentiality (marked again in red and green)—and reflections on art and literature (left in black), resulting in an image that is familiar from Cao Pi’s letter to Wu Zhi discussed earlier.

Hampstead, Sunday
22 December 1817

My dear Brothers

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this & I saw Kean return to the public in Richard III, & finely he did it, & at the request of Reynolds I went to criticize his Luke in Riches – the critique is in today's Champion, which I send you with the Examiner in which you will find very proper lamentation on the obsolescence of Christmas Gambols & pastimes: but it was mixed up with so much egotism of that drivelling nature that pleasure is entirely lost. Hone the publisher's trial, you must find very amusing; & as Englishmen very encouraging – his Not Guilty is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning – Lord Ellenborough has been paid in his own coin – Wooler and Hone have done us an essential service. I have had two very pleasant evenings with Dilke yesterday & today; & am at this moment just come from him, & feel in the humour to go on with this, began in the morning, & from which he came to fetch me. I spent Friday evening with Wells & went next morning to see Death on the Pale Horse. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. the excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth – Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness – The picture is larger than Christ rejected – I dined with Haydon the Sunday after you left, & had a very pleasant day, I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith & met his two brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois, they only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment – These men say things which make one start, without making one feel, they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their very eating & drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter – They talked of Kean & his low company – Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me & yet I am going to Reynolds on Wednesday – Brown & Dilke walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime. I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is, when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.

Shelley's poem is out & there are words about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!! Write soon to your most sincere friend and affectionate Brother

John

Figure 10: Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21–27, 1817

It is important to note, though, that Keats's surviving letters are quite diverse in character. The dappled type is most common in letters to family and friends, where everyday observations are frequently interspersed with literary reflections and excerpts from poems Keats was writing at the time. But there are also letters—usually written to literary figures rather than family members or friends—that are neat essays on literary matters framed by some form of hello, goodbye, and in that way similar to Cao Zhi's "cover letter" to Yang Xiu. A good example of a more essayistic letter by Keats is the so-called "Chameleon Poet" letter addressed to Richard Woodhouse (1788–1834).⁵⁶

The casual and partly cursory narration of the "Negative Capability" letter—skipping many of the day-to-day activities of the week when it was written—and its easy movement from "trifle" to "fine thing" suggests that Keats did not write with the expectation of seeing this letter published, although he may well have assumed that his letters would be saved, copied, or forwarded, as was the case for many letters written at the time. It is unlikely that Keats wrote in letter form because he believed that an essay would have been less effective in communicating his views, but rather because he longed to connect with his absent brothers and share his experiences and ideas with them, and a letter was the only means to do so.

Fourth Point of Comparison; a Family Letter Again: Gertrud Kolmar to Her Sister

The letters I have discussed so far enjoy major, even canonical standing in their respective fields, and have each received immense scholarly attention practically since the time they were written. That the same is not true for the letters of the German-Jewish poet Gertrud Chodziesner, better known by her pen-name Gertrud Kolmar (1894–1943?), has a number of reasons. One of them overshadows all others: Gertrud Kolmar's persecution and enforced silence during the Third Reich and her untimely and violent death in the Holocaust. Gender certainly plays a role too: women writers have rarely achieved the fame of their male counterparts, and even when critics are enthusiastic, as they have been about Kolmar's poems, these works are usually described in the limiting terms of "women's poetry." Another reason for Kolmar's relative obscurity may have been her personal reticence and the resulting detachment from the literary scene of her day. Kolmar may not yet be as well-known as the male writers I have discussed above, but as both a towering poet, whose eminence was already recognized during her lifetime, and as a letter writer of the first rank she undoubtedly deserves to be mentioned in the same breath as the Cao brothers, Hofmannsthal, and Keats.

Kolmar, who started writing as a child, published her first book of poetry in 1917, followed by two more volumes of poetry, published in 1934 and 1938, as well as several writings in other genres.⁵⁷ Much of her oeuvre has meanwhile been translated into English.⁵⁸ Her work has long been obscure, but it seems to be gaining in appreciation. The bulk of Kolmar's approximately one-hundred and thirty letters are addressed to her youngest sister, Hilde Wenzel (1905–1972). A handful of letters to Kolmar's famous cousin, Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), and other luminaries of her time have survived as well.⁵⁹ With a few exceptions, Kolmar's letters to her sister were written after Hilde, together with her young daughter Sabine (born in 1933), had escaped to Switzerland in 1938.⁶⁰ Kolmar wrote every one of her letters to Hilde knowing that they, as letters sent abroad, were subject to postal censorship and would very likely be read by hostile official eyes before they

would reach their addressee.⁶¹ Under these conditions, the inevitable, innocuous gaps in a letter's narrative that we have mentioned above in connection with Keats's "Negative Capability" letter assume a very different meaning. The things Kolmar does not write about—especially the horrific effects that the increasing anti-Jewish persecution must have had on herself, her father, and society as a whole—lend her letters an ominous character that is often at odds with the dignity, composure, and occasionally even cheerfulness (especially in the parts addressed to her beloved niece) on the surface of the text. Reading Kolmar's affectionate letters to her sister in light of what would prove to be their irrevocable separation, and Kolmar's eventual deportation and death in a concentration camp, is a disturbing and yet illuminating experience.

The context of postal censorship that made writing about much of daily life off limits for Kolmar partly explains why her work as a poet plays such an important role in the letters to her sister. Another reason must have been that Kolmar could no longer publish after the November pogroms in Germany in 1938 and lost every opportunity for public exchange of her work. Under these conditions, correspondence became the only form of communication on matters of poetry and was probably also one of the few remaining outlets for Kolmar's literary creativity. The letters to her sister Hilde include not only autobiographical reflections on her development as a poet and on her earlier works, but also tales written for her niece Sabine ("Püppi"), especially after the girl had started school and began to read and write herself.

The example I would like to introduce here is a letter that Kolmar wrote to Hilde on August 12, 1940.⁶² The letter (Fig. 11) starts with a reference to another letter to Hilde, written the day before but not yet sent. In this earlier letter Kolmar had expressed regret that she would have to be brief because she had just written a long letter to a young poet.⁶³ Both letters to Hilde appear to have been sent together on the 13th, together with two postscripts, also written on the 13th, one by Kolmar and the other by her father.⁶⁴ This postal complexity is not unusual: many of Kolmar's letters carry postscripts by her father (although she sometimes also mentions that she is not sharing every one of her own or of Hilde's letters with him) or passages addressed to her niece. Her letters also frequently mention or quote other correspondence, and thus show how important this form of epistolary connection was for a family that had been scattered across the world.

D. 12.VIII.40.

Liebe Hilde,

Nun ist der Brief wider Erwarten doch noch hiergeblieben, und ich kann mich also etwas mehr »ausbreiten«, wie ich's gewollt. Freilich fällt einem das Schreiben leichter, wenn man vor seinem leiblichen oder geistigen Auge einen Brief des anderen liegen hat – wie ein Knäuel, dessen Faden man an sich zieht, um nun drauf los zu stricken. Solch ein Strickknäuel hab' ich heute nicht von Dir; aber schließlich geht es auch so; ich muß mir mein Garn eben selbst verschaffen. Wollen wir mit dem Lesestoff anfangen? Was hab' ich zuletzt gelesen? Seit geraumer Zeit ausschließlich das umfangreiche Lavaterbuch von Mary Sloman-L. Lavater-Sloman, fast jeden Abend im Bett 1-2 Kapitel – das war gegen meine Gewohnheit; aber tagsüber kam ich niemals dazu. Das sehr anregende Werk, in dem eine Fülle von Arbeit steckt, hätte verdient, mit größerer Muße und ausgeruhterem Kopfe studiert zu werden, als ich sie mitbrachte, doch hab ich geliehene Bücher immer bald wiedergeben mögen, selbst wenn mir, wie hier, ein langes Behalten ausdrücklich gestattet ward. Und darum wollt' ich das Lesen nicht auf gelegeneren Zeit verschieben; diese Zeit wäre wohl erst wer weiß wann gekommen; denn die Bäume, Püppis gemalte Bäume, fingen inzwischen an, in meiner Phantasie Wurzeln auszuschlagen, und sobald ich in Bezug auf das Dichten »Selbstversorger« bin, muß ich, wie billig, auf die dichterischen Erzeugnisse anderer Hersteller verzichten. Ich schrieb wohl schon, daß ich die Bäume auf eine von mir geschaffene Insel, die Arlatinsel im Indischen Ocean (1743 von dem gleichfalls von mir geschaffenen französischen Seefahrer Arlat du Moutier entdeckt), versetzt hatte; inzwischen ist aber die Insel, nachdem ich sie mit allen möglichen Tieren und Pflanzen belebt, wieder im Meer versunken. Nur die Bäume hab' ich gerettet und bin dabei, mich nach einem neuen Standort für die umzusehen. Zur Zeit fahre ich zwischen der Landschaft um Ebermergen (Nördlingen, Donauwörth) und der Landschaft um Bad Pyrmont (Höxter, Hameln) hin und her; vielleicht vermene ich beide Gegenden in einer künftigen Erzählung. Wollen sehen. Ich bin ein bißchen gespannt, was wird, fast so als wäre ich an dem Entstehen des Neuen gar nicht beteiligt. Und es ist ja auch etwas, was »über einen kommt« ... Gern wüßt' ich (ich schrieb Dir's im letzten Brief) ein wenig mehr über Deine »schriftstellerische Tätigkeit«, von der Du mir nur andeutungsweise erzähltest.

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Figure 11: Letter to Hilde Wenzel, August 12, 1940

Kolmar, alluding to the regret mentioned the day before, announces that this will be a letter in which she can "spread" herself out a little more, as she had intended. However, she does not turn to news right away but first dwells on her situation: having to write without the letter from her sister that she had expected. She compares the letter from the other person to "a ball of yarn from which one pulls the thread to start knitting along" and concedes that "such a ball of yarn I don't have from you today, but I'll make do without." This exemplary proem shows both dialogicity and self-referentiality, and it does so in an original and poetic form—Kolmar's image of the ball of yarn exquisitely combines literary connotations of Ariadne's thread with the lowly sphere of female domesticity that Kolmar and her sister had shared in the past. Leaving the proem behind, Kolmar continues to address her sister, asking "shall we start with the reading material?" The following passage focuses less on the content of the book she had been studying than on how

difficult it is to find time to read, and the “clearer, rested head” the book would have deserved. She also mentions that she “didn’t want to put off reading it to a more convenient time,” and adds, apparently in passing, “such a time will come who knows when.” At the time when this letter was written, almost a year into the war, the situation for Jews in Germany had already become very dangerous.⁶⁵

The ominous implications of her last remark are immediately defused by the following passage. Of remarkably poetic quality, it works both on the level of a fantastic story, possibly meant to be told to her niece, and on a metaphorical level. Turning to a picture by her niece, Kolmar describes how “Püppi’s painted trees meanwhile have begun to bloom in my imagination.” She mentions in passing that she cannot read other people’s poetry when she is in the process of writing herself, and goes on to describe the imaginary island where she had planted her niece’s trees and how this place has “sunk back into the sea” with all the creatures she had invented for it. “All I saved were the trees, and I’m just now in search of a new place in which to plant”—another aside that may have been intended to convey a deeper meaning. Kolmar then mentions another facet of her poetic process: “I’m curious how it will all turn out, almost as if I had no part in this new creation myself. After all, it is something that ‘comes over’ a person....”⁶⁶ This last remark, rather than setting Kolmar up as special and creating a distance between herself and her addressee, segues into a question about her sister’s recent writings.

The last third of the letter is dedicated to editorial matters: Kolmar asks her sister to correct a typographical error in the printed version of one of the poems in her last poetic cycle *Worlds* (*Welten*).⁶⁷ She writes, “otherwise, there will be for a hundred years to come a dispute among scholars whether the place cited commands the authority of the ‘Swiss manuscript’ or of the existing fragments of the ‘Berlin transcription.’ There is a poem by Fontane about which something like this is going on today.” Notwithstanding the slightly ironic flavor of this passage, we are in no doubt that Kolmar is absolutely serious about her poetic legacy. She was fully aware of her own eminence in the history of German poetry, an awareness that fortunately was shared by members of her family who helped to preserve Kolmar’s manuscripts, especially Hilde and her husband Peter Wenzel (1906–1961) despite their divorce in 1942.

The epilogue of the letter is particularly interesting because Kolmar, turning to her sister again, offers an apology for “the exclusive ‘shop talk’ of this letter”—although it is quite obvious that it was far from being exclusive, as the following visualization of the intermingling of the epistolary elements of the letter (in red) with passages on literary matters (in black) shows (Fig. 12):

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Figure 12: Letter to Hilde Wenzel, August 12, 1940

This is not the only letter in which Kolmar apologizes to her sister for “shop talk.” She also often includes comments on letter writing itself and on the expectations she assumes her addressee to hold—citing, for instance, a friend who once reproached her “for not writing letters but treatises, essays.”⁶⁸ Overall, Kolmar appears to be deeply concerned with balancing different epistolary needs, her own and those of her addressees. Explaining this simply in terms of gender performance, that is, as self-effacing and overly attentive to others, would be reductive. An important reason for Kolmar’s balanced and controlled epistolary voice is that she clearly saw her letters as writings that would contribute to her legacy, or, as Monika Shafi suggests, as parts of an “epistolary autobiography.”⁶⁹ The superficial similarity between Kolmar’s family letters and those of Keats—both writing to siblings they missed and sharing their quotidian life along with intellectual and poetic meditations—turns out to be untenable. It is difficult to imagine a greater contrast between the easy immediacy of Keats’s letters, probably rooted in a profound trust in the medium, and

Kolmar's deliberations in the face of censorship, isolation, persecution, and, at certain point towards the end of her correspondence, probably also the expectation of her own death. How much it must have cost Gertrud Kolmar under these conditions to achieve the epistolary luminosity of her letters is hard to imagine.

Conclusion: In Praise of the Epistolary Mode

The five texts whose epistolarity I have probed present five different models of writing about literature in letter form: the family letter that casually expresses thoughts on art and literature, apparently without ulterior motives regarding its wider dissemination (Keats); the family letter that appears to have been written as part of the writer's poetic legacy (Kolmar); the carefully crafted letter to a distant friend about matters of criticism that was obviously written with a larger audience in mind (Cao Pi); the essay on literary criticism, thinly disguised as a letter to a friend and meant to frame its writer's collected poems (Cao Zhi); and the openly fictional letter about a fictional letter writer's intellectual and creative crisis, published in a newspaper but convincingly fashioned as a response to a letter from friend (Hofmannsthal). Four of these letters show an impressive mastery of the epistolary mode, and even the fifth, Cao Zhi's "cover letter," reflects a carefully considered choice of genre despite its weak epistolarity. With one exception, the letter by Gertrud Kolmar, every one of these letters has been of foremost critical relevance in their respective cultural contexts. It also bears mentioning again that these letters are by no means exceptional; if I did not extend the frame of reference here, it is certainly not because of a lack of letters of comparable significance in other periods and cultures.

From the perspective of epistolary studies it is quite remarkable that the fame of these texts rests much more on what they have to say about literary criticism and aesthetics than on the fact that they are letters. Although it is a commonplace that genre shapes the reception of a text or any other work of art, this does not necessarily translate into a general genre awareness. Letters are often relegated to an ancillary role and treated merely as sources: they are mined for neat quotations, biographical data, or information about the background of an author's works with little consideration of the epistolary origins (or epistolary pretenses) in which this information is embedded. In order to grasp the potential of a text fully, though, we need to take its genre into account. In the case of letters this means that we need to acknowledge that these are texts that were once part of a correspondence, or that they, due to an authorial decision, were written in epistolary form and were meant to be read as letters. Recognizing their epistolary character and incorporating it in our interpretations may entail elements of conjecture, as with any other genre reading, but bearing this condition in mind, the interpretative gain can be considerable.

Let us return to the question about the particular potential of letters in the writing of literary criticism and recapitulate the answers that emerged in this review of the one essay and the five letters discussed. Letters perform as well as essays when it comes to discussion of literary or critical topics, but they also have distinct advantages over essays. Good letter writers can harness epistolarity toward their rhetorical ends. The effective performance of dialogicity and reciprocity—which relies on the inscribed addressee as much as on the inscribed writer—enlivens and strengthens a letter's arguments and helps to increase its appeal to readers, who often respond by feeling drawn into an intimate personal relationship.⁷⁰ The effective performance of a letter's self-

referentiality, on the other hand, can make an argument more convincing by rooting it in the tangible, concrete lifeworld, whether actual or fictional, of the correspondents; this too can help to entice readers to join a conversation they might otherwise avoid. The downside of these two strengths (and the only possible rhetorical disadvantage of a letter) is that the wisdom a letter puts forward might come across as subjective and incidental. This possibility has not deterred writers throughout history and across cultures to express their critical ideas in letter form, and they have found eager and receptive audiences who might easily have turned away had these ideas instead been “pursued through Volumes.”

NOTES

I presented earlier versions of this paper at the 222nd Annual Meeting of the American Oriental Society in Boston (2012), in the *China Colloquia Series* of the University of California Berkeley (2012), and at the 10th Annual Chinese Medieval Studies Workshop at Rutgers University (2014). I am deeply grateful for the valuable feedback I received on these occasions, especially from Meow Hui Goh, Wendy Swartz, and Xiaofei Tian. I would also like to thank Jeffrey N. Cox, R. Joe Cutter, Jeffrey A. Grossman, and Jutta Müller-Tamm, who were so kind to read and comment on drafts of this article and thus helped me to improve it.

¹ Stephen Halliwell, *The Poetics of Aristotle: Translation and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 33; Erich Trunz and Hans Joachim Schrimpf, eds., *Noten und Abhandlungen zu Besserem Verständnis des West-östlichen Divans* (1816/18), in *Goethes Werke: Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden*, gen. ed. Erich Trunz (München: Beck, 1981), 2:187–88.

² See, for instance, John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge, 2015).

³ Anis S. Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy* (West Lafayette, IN: Parlor, 2010), 3.

⁴ My reading of the Chinese text of this essay is based on *Wen xuan* 文選, comp. Xiao Tong 蕭統 (501–31) (Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe, 1986), 52.2270–73. Studies and translations include Donald Holzman, “Literary Criticism in China in the Early Third Century A.D.,” *Asiatische Studien* 28.2 (1974): 128–31; Wong Siu-kit, *Early Chinese Literary Criticism* (Hong Kong: Joint Publishing, 1983), 19–25; Stephen Owen, *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 57–72; R. Joe Cutter, “To the Manner Born? Nature and Nurture in Early Medieval Chinese Literary Thought,” in *Culture and Power in the Reconstitution of the Chinese Realm, 200–600*, ed. Scott Pearce et al. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 53–71. My translations from this text are especially indebted to the translation by Xiaofei Tian in *Hawai’i Reader in Traditional Chinese Culture*, ed. Victor H. Mair et al. (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005), 231–33.

⁵ The Seven Masters of the Jian’an period (Jian’an qī zǐ 建安七子) are Xu Gan 徐幹 (170–217), Ying Yang 應瑒 (?–217), Chen Lin 陳琳 (d. 217), Liu Zhen 劉楨 (?–217), Ruan Yu 阮瑀 (d. 212), Wang Can 王粲 (177–217), and Kong Rong 孔融 (153–208). For an excellent study of the Seven Masters as a group, see Xiaofei Tian, *The Halberd at Red Cliff: Jian’an and the Three Kingdoms* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), especially chapters 1 and 2.

⁶ On the position of letters in Cao Pi’s genre catalogue see also my *Letters and Epistolary Culture in Early Medieval China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013), 44–47.

⁷ This brings to mind the Greek demand for clarity: see Heikki Koskeniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400 n.Chr.* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1956), 27–28.

⁸ Horst Belke mentions the “subjective, casually improvising, dialogic form of the letter” as being close to the essay in *Literarische Gebrauchsformen* (Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann, 1973), 147. Wolfgang G. Müller points out similarities between the *Essais* of Michel de Montaigne (1533–92) and personal letters of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, especially because they shared a “radical self-expression and disclosure of their innermost feelings” based on a “plain

and unaffected style.” See Müller, “Der Brief als Spiegel der Seele: Zur Geschichte eines Topos der Epistolartheorie von der Antike bis Samuel Richardson,” *Antike und Abendland* 26 (1980): 138 and 143–44 n. 40.

⁹ “You yu Wu Zhi shu” 又與吳質書, *Wen xuan* 42.1896–99. Previous studies and translations of this letter include Ronald C. Miao, “Literary Criticism at the End of the Eastern Han,” *Literature East and West* 16 (1972): 1030–32; Holzman, “Literary Criticism,” 122–25; Burton Watson, “Cao Pi: Two Letters to Wu Zhi, Magistrate of Zhao,” *Renditions* 41–42 (1994): 9–11.

¹⁰ Violi, “Letters,” in *Discourse and Literature*, ed. Teun A. van Dijk (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1985), 160.

¹¹ Guillén, “Notes towards the Study of the Renaissance Letter,” in *Renaissance Genres: Essays on Theory, History, and Interpretation*, ed. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 80.

¹² Guillén, “Renaissance Letter,” 86. For a good study of epistolarity from the Chinese perspective, see Zhao Xian-zhang 趙憲章, “Lun minjian shuxin ji qi duihua yishu” 論民間書信及其對話藝術, *Qinghua daxue xuebao* 96.4 (2008): 475–509.

¹³ Ancient and early medieval Chinese letters do not usually feature an *adscriptio*, that is, a designation of the recipient, in the prescript. Starting in the seventh century, the epistolary format changes to include an *adscriptio* in the prescript.

¹⁴ Guillén, “Renaissance Letter,” 98.

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of early medieval epistolary structures and phrases, see my *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 75–116.

¹⁶ Cao Pi interprets the line “自我不見於今三年” in the ode “Eastern Mountain” (*Mao shi* 156) as saying, “since we have not seen each other, it has now been three years.” This interpretation is not universally shared; see, for example, James Legge, trans., *The Chinese Classics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1861–72; repr. Taipei: SMC Publishing, 1994), 4:237.

¹⁷ See also my *Letters and Epistolary Culture*, 134–38.

¹⁸ The phrase “was always brilliant” is used in the *Analects* to describe exuberant literary excellence that needs to be curtailed; *Lunyu* 5.22 (斐然成章，不知所以裁之).

¹⁹ Cao Pi alludes to the phrase “the orphan sobs and rubs his tears” 孤子吟而拭淚兮 in the poem “Grieving at the Eddying Wind” (Bei hui feng 悲回風) in the collection *Songs of the South* (Chu ci 楚辭), trans. David Hawkes, *The Songs of the South: An Ancient Chinese Anthology of Poems by Qu Yuan and Other Poets* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1985), 181.

²⁰ An allusion to the couplet “if you don’t take advantage of your youth / you will feel sorrow when you are old” 少壯不努力，老大乃傷悲 in the anonymous “Long Song Ballad” (Changge xing 長歌行), *Wen xuan* 27.1279–80.

²¹ A similar sentiment, similarly phrased, is expressed in the *Zhuangzi*, “the years cannot be held off; time cannot be stopped” 年不可舉，時不可止; *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, comp. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1896) and Wang Xiaoyu 王孝魚 (1900–1981) (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1995), 17.585; trans. Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 132.

²² This is an allusion to the couplet “when days are short you are anguished by long nights / why don’t you keep on wandering, a candle in hand” 晝短苦夜長，何不秉燭遊 in the fifteenth of the “Nineteen Old Poems” (Gu shi shijiu shou 古詩十九首), *Wen xuan* 29.1349).

²³ Cao Zhi, “Yu Yang Dezu shu” 與楊德祖書, *Wen xuan* 42.1901–05. Translations and studies include Holzman, “Literary Criticism,” 116–19; Miao, “Literary Criticism,” 1028–30; Wong, *Early Chinese Literary Criticism*, 27–37; Richard M. W. Ho, “Cao Zhi: Letter to Yang Dezu,” *Renditions* 41–42 (1994): 12–14. See also R. Joe Cutter, “Letters and Memorials in the Early Third Century: The Case of Cao Zhi,” in *A History of Chinese Letters and Epistolary Culture*, ed. Antje Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 307–26.

²⁴ The image of the soaring eagle alludes to a phrase in *Mao shi* 236 (Da ming 大明); trans. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 4: 436 (時維鷹揚).

²⁵ See also Qian Zhongshu’s 錢鍾書 analysis of the topic “The Writer as Critic” in *Guanzhui bian* 管錐編 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1986), 3:1050–54, trans. Ronald C. Egan, *Limited Views: Essays on Ideas and Letters by Qian Zhongshu* (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1998), 61–66.

²⁶ 侍鮑子之知我. This fragment of Zhang Heng’s letter survives in the *Wen xuan* commentary; see *Wen xuan* 42.1904.

²⁷ *Mao shi* 65 (Shu li 黍離); trans. Legge, *The Chinese Classics*, 4:110–11 ([不]知我者).

²⁸ See, for example, Wolfgang G. Müller, “Der Brief,” in *Prosa Kunst ohne Erzählen: Die Gattungen der nicht-fiktionalen Kunstprosa*, ed. Klaus Weissenberger (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1985), 79–80. Gertrud Kolmar was also quite

explicit about the inappropriateness of ulterior motives in a family letter, which in her case meant writing about a certain topic, such as language or literature, in the way of an essay or a disquisition.

²⁹ Well known early medieval Chinese letters about literature include Cao Pi's "Letter to Wang Lang (d. 228)" (Yu Wang Lang shu 與王朗書); Yang Xiu's "Letter in reply to Cao Zhi" (Da Linzi hou jian 答臨淄侯牋); Lu Jue's 陸厥 (472–99) "Letter to Shen Yue (441–513)" (Yu Shen Yue shu 與沈約書), Xiao Tong's "Letter in reply to Xiao Gang 蕭綱 (503–551)" (Da Jin'an wang shu 答晉安王書); Xiao Gang's "Letter to Xiao Yi 蕭繹 (508–554)" (Yu Xiangdong wang shu 與湘東王書).

³⁰ Ancient Greek examples by authors such as Philostratos of Lemnos (born ca. 190) or Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329–90) are quoted in Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee*, 20. A famous Roman example would be Horace's (65–8 BC) *Ars Poetica* (ca. 18 BC), a guide to young poets that is also known as *Epistula ad Pisones* (Letters to Piso). Dante Alighieri's (1265–1321) letter to Can Grande della Scala deals with his *Divine Comedy*.

³¹ The best known example may be another letter to "Francis Bacon," written by "Lady Elizabeth Chandos," the "wife" of Hofmannsthal's "Lord Chandos." For a collection of more than thirty letters in response to the "Lord Chandos Letter," written on the occasion of the centennial of the text, see Roland Spahr et al., ed., "*Lieber Lord Chandos*": *Antworten auf einen Brief* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 2002).

³² Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Erzählungen, Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe, Reisen*, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1979), 461–72. The Austrian National Library (Vienna) has made a manuscript of the text digitally available at <http://data.onb.ac.at/rep/1002FE77>. Research on Hofmannsthal is thriving; see the online bibliography of the Hofmannsthal Society at <http://hofmannsthal.bibliographie.de>.

³³ An example is Hofmannsthal's 1894 poem "Über Vergänglichkeit" ("On Transitoriness"), translated as "On Mutability" by J. D. McClatchy, ed., *The Whole Difference: Selected Writings of Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 26–27.

³⁴ Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke in zehn Einzelbänden: Reden und Aufsätze III (1925–1929), Aufzeichnungen*, ed. Bernd Schoeller (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1980), 599–627; Jörg Schuster, *Kunstleben: Zur Kulturpoetik des Briefs um 1900—Korrespondenzen Hugo von Hofmannsthal und Rainer Maria Rilkes* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2014), 149–50.

³⁵ This is an observation that seems to have become almost a topos in research on the "Letter of Lord Chandos"; see the collection of references in Schuster, *Kunstleben*, 151 n. 141. Here and in the following I am quoting the English translation of the letter by Tania Stern and James Stern as published in McClatchy, *The Whole Difference*, 69–79.

³⁶ Stern and Stern in McClatchy, *The Whole Difference*, 70.

³⁷ Hofmannsthal's correspondence with more than thirty individuals has been published; see Heinz Hiebler, *Hugo von Hofmannsthal und die Medienkultur der Moderne* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 2003), 552–53. On Hofmannsthal's letters, see, for example, Anne Overlack, *Was geschieht im Brief? Strukturen der Brief-Kommunikation bei Else Lasker-Schüler und Hugo von Hofmannsthal* (Tübingen: Stauffenburg, 1993) and Schuster, *Kunstleben*. The latter is one of the few studies of the "Lord Chandos Letter" that take the letter's genre into account (see 147–56); another one of the exceptions is Rudolf Helmstetter's "Entwendet: Hofmannsthal's Chandos-Brief, die Rezeptionsgeschichte und die Sprachkrise," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 77.3 (2003): 446–80, see especially 478–80.

³⁸ For an excellent introduction to these fictional and semi-fictional letters and dialogues, some of which only exist as fragments, see the essays in chapter VI.B, "Erfundene Gespräche und Briefe" in Mathias Meyer and Julian Werlitz, eds., *Hofmannsthal Handbuch: Leben – Werk – Wirkung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2016), 313–33.

³⁹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 87.

⁴⁰ "Bao Ren Shaoqing shu" 報任少卿書, *Wen xuan* 41.1854–69. For scholarship and translations see Stephen Durrant, Wai-Yee Li, Michael Nylan, and Hans van Ess, *The Letter to Ren An and Sima Qian's Legacy* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016).

⁴¹ Wolfgang Bauer, *Das Antlitz Chinas: Autobiographische Selbstdarstellungen in der chinesischen Literatur von ihren Anfängen bis heute* (München: Hanser, 1990), 83.

⁴² Wang Jinxiang 王進祥, ed., *Yuan Zhen ji* 元稹集 (Taipei: Hanjing wenhua shiye youxian gongsi, 1983), 670–80. Translations and studies include James R. Hightower, "Yüan Chen and *The Story of Yingying*," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 33 (1975): 90–123; Stephen Owen, *The End of the Chinese 'Middle Ages': Essays in Mid-Tang Literary Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 149–73; Luo Manling, "The Seduction of Authenticity:

‘The Story of Yingying’,” *Nan Nü* 7.1 (2005): 40–70. See also my forthcoming article “The Literary Imagination and the Writing of Letters: Discovering Early Epistolary Fiction in China.”

⁴³ See Thomas Pekar, “Hofmannsthal’s ‘Umweg über Asien’: Zur Konstellation von Europa und Asien im europäischen ‘Krisen-Diskurs’ am Anfang des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 83.2 (2009): 246–61, especially 255 n. 39, for a bibliography of titles about Hofmannsthal’s interest in China.

⁴⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933), 100.

⁴⁵ Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958). A richly annotated edition, which places many of the letters chronologically in the context of Keats’s life and work is Jeffrey N. Cox, ed., *Keats’s Poetry and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Criticism* (New York: Norton, 2009). Research on Keats’s letters abounds. For an excellent introduction, see Grant F. Scott, ed., *Selected Letters of John Keats: Revised Edition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), xxi–xxxiii. See also Heidi Thomson, “Keats’s Letters: ‘A Wilful and Dramatic Exercise of Our Minds Towards Each Other’,” *The Keats-Shelley Review* 25.2 (2011): 160–74; and especially 160–61 n. 2 for a list of relevant previous publications. See also the resources provided at <http://keatslettersproject.com>.

⁴⁶ Eliot, *Use of Poetry*, 100.

⁴⁷ The introduction to Lionel Trilling’s *The Selected Letters of John Keats* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951) was later republished under the title “The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters,” for instance, in *The Moral Obligation to Be Intelligent: Selected Essays*, ed. Leon Wieseltier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 228–262.

⁴⁸ Letter to John Taylor, September 5, 1819 (MS Keats 1.63); Rollins, *Letters of Keats*, 2:155–59; Scott, *Selected Letters of Keats*, 334–38. On “Lamia,” see Cox, *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, 412–29.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Ting Nai-tung, “The Holy Man and the Snake-Woman: A Study of a Lamia Story in Asian and European Literature,” *Fabula* 8.1 (1966): 145–91; Wilt L. Idema, *The White Snake and Her Son: A Translation of The Precious Scroll of Thunder Peak with Related Texts* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009).

⁵⁰ Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21–27, 1817 (MS Keats 3.9); Rollins, *Letters of Keats*, 1:191–94; Scott, *Selected Letters of Keats*, 59–61; Cox, *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, 107–9. For information on the context of the letter, see <http://keatslettersproject.com/negativecapability/>, a collaborative website created for the 200th anniversary of the letter that describes itself as offering a “portal for all [manner of] negative capability related content.”

⁵¹ John Jeffrey’s transcript is now part of the Harvard Keats Collection (f. 5, seq. 13–14) and digitally available at [https://iiflib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:35522552\\$13i](https://iiflib.harvard.edu/manifests/view/drs:35522552$13i). For a recent study of the ramifications of Jeffrey’s transcription practices, see Brian Rejack’s “John Keats’s Jeffrey’s ‘Negative Capability’; or, Accidentally Undermining Keats,” published in a collection of essays on this letter and its reception: Brian Rejack and Michael Theune, eds., *Keats’s Negative Capability: New Origins and Afterlives* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), 31–46.

⁵² The “Mansion of Many Apartments” letter, addressed to John Hamilton Reynolds (1794–1852), was written on May 3, 1818; the “Vale of Soul-making” letter, addressed to his brother George and George’s wife Georgiana, was written between February 14 and May 4, 1819. See Scott, *Selected Letters of Keats*, 120–26 and 196–209; Cox, *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, 242–46 and 311–32.

⁵³ For the context of this poem and comments on variants, see Cox, *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, 105.

⁵⁴ Trilling has emphasized the role of Dilke’s personality in Keats’s formulation of Negative Capability; see “The Poet as Hero” 250–53.

⁵⁵ The articles collected in Rejack’s and Theune’s volume *Keats’s Negative Capability* provide a convenient entry into this discussion.

⁵⁶ Written on October 27, 1818 (MS Keats 1.38); Scott, *Selected Letters of Keats*, 194–96; Cox, *Keats’s Poetry and Prose*, 294–95; see also <http://keatslettersproject.com/letters/letter-99-to-richard-woodhouse-27-october-1818/>.

⁵⁷ For a complete list of Kolmar’s publications, including posthumous publications, see Kolmar, *Briefe*, ed. Johanna Woltmann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2014), 311–15.

⁵⁸ The most comprehensive edition of Kolmar’s poetry is *Das lyrische Werk*, 3 vols., ed. Regina Nörtemann (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007); see also *Dark Soliloquy: The Selected Poems of Gertrud Kolmar*, trans. Henry A. Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1975). Scholarship on Kolmar includes Monika Shafi’s *Gertrud Kolmar: Eine Einführung in*

das Werk (München: iudicium, 1995). See also the more recent entry by Kirsten Krick-Aigner in *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia* at <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/kolmar-gertrud> (2009).

⁵⁹ Complete critical editions of Kolmar's transmitted letters in German and in English (translated by Brigitte M. Goldstein) were prepared by Johanna Woltmann; see Kolmar, *Briefe*; and Kolmar, *My Gaze Is Turned Inward: Letters, 1934–1943* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004). See also Woltmann's afterword (included in German and English in both editions).

⁶⁰ Kolmar's letters to her sister are housed at the German Literature Archive (Deutsches Literaturarchiv—DLA) in Marbach am Neckar (access number 93.18.58–60). See also the typed compilation of their correspondence in the Gertrud Kolmar Collection at the Leo Baeck Institute (AR 1346), digitally available at <http://digifind-inguids.cjh.org/?pID=478515>.

⁶¹ Starting from 1940, Kolmar's letters to her sister all bear censorship stamps; see Kolmar, *Briefe*, 295.

⁶² Kolmar, *Briefe*, 84–85; all my quotations from the letter follow the translation in *Gaze Turned Inward*, 49–51.

⁶³ Kolmar, *Briefe*, 83; *Gaze Turned Inward*, 49. The young poet has been identified as Marianne Rein (1911–1941/42); Kolmar, *Briefe*, 250; *Gaze Turned Inward*, 190.

⁶⁴ Kolmar, *Briefe*, 86; *Gaze Turned Inward*, 51.

⁶⁵ See the “Translator's Chronicle of Selected Nazi Anti-Jewish Legislation, Decrees, Ordinances, and Actions, 1933–43” in the appendix to the English translation of Kolmar's letters; *Gaze Turned Inward*, 175–79.

⁶⁶ The ellipses are Kolmar's.

⁶⁷ Monika Shafi reads this cycle, written in late 1937 and published in 1938, as already constituting Kolmar's “poetic legacy” or “literary testament”; see Shafi, *Gertrud Kolmar*, 160–64.

⁶⁸ See, for example, “Letter to Hilde Wenzel, January 15, 1940” in Kolmar, *Briefe*, 60; *Gaze Turned Inward*, 31.

⁶⁹ Shafi, “Turning the Gaze Inward: Gertrud Kolmar's *Briefe and die Schwester Hilde 1938–1943*,” in *Facing Fascism and Confronting the Past: German Women Writers from Weimar to the Present*, ed. Elke P. Frederiksen and Martha Kaarsberg Wallach (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 111.

⁷⁰ This point has been expressed throughout epistolary research. Albrecht Schöne, for instance, suggested that a letter's inscribed recipient operates as a role that is offered (Rollenangebot). See his “Über Goethes Brief an Behrisch vom 10. November 1767,” in *Festschrift für Richard Alewyn*, ed. Herbert Singer and Benno von Wiese (Köln: Böhlau, 1967), 213.