

Passion Prose

Written for *Elle* by Eli Gottlieb in 1991.

© Eli Gottlieb 1991-2008, All Rights Reserved.

Ever since that moment in the history of neolithic chivalry when a love-smitten swain first took his favorite cavegirl for a walk in the woods while grunting in a way that more or less signified, “Look up at the beauty of the night sky, my darling,” romance has been a boom field. Not, be it understood, that such prehistoric billing and cooing had anything to do with love as we know it today. It took a few thousand years of pillow talk before the poets of the Middle Ages invented that species of fluttering, pining, often unrequited passion, which we recognize as modern love. And while romance in the glitzier clubs of big cities these days sometimes seems to have more in common with a drive-by shooting than it does old-fashioned hearts and flowers, the rituals of courtship and flirtation endure, and even, after a fashion, thrive.

“Love,” sings Bonnie Raitt, “is strange,” but it’s also democratic. Everyone, with the exception of the occasional serial killer, has known romantic passions—the starry eyes, the quickening breath, the obsessional longings, the buoyant, generous, elastically good mood. But a less remarked aspect of love is that it opens the floodgates of expression—effortlessly, it seems. To be in love is to feel one’s secret self sublimely understood, and in the thrall of such feelings, to be possessed of a tongue from which eloquence tumbles with unwonted ease.

When a pen is taken in hand at such moments, the same fluency is transferred to paper. No more vivid evidence exists of the power of love to ennoble or quicken the mind than the world’s wealth of preserved love letters—documents whose sentences testify to the urgency and power of the experience of passion. The love letters of practiced writers may be the most articulate, but one needn’t be a phrasemaker to write a beautiful billet-doux: possession of a robust romantic sentiment and an open heart is enough.

Take Sigmund Freud. Though his name is more usually associated with the dour dismantling of joy than it is with dewy-eyed passion, Freud joins the club of the love-struck with an ardor that borders on the puppyish when, writing to his fiancée Martha Bernays of his ascent of Notre-Dame, he pants: “One climbs up three hundred steps, it is very dark, very lonely, on every step I could have given you a kiss if you had been with me, and you would have reached the top out of breath and wild.”

In love we let down our hair; we feel ourself at last able to speak with our true self—uncomplicated, direct, without the constraints and cautions of our social, self-conscious persona. Simone de Beauvoir had the one true sexual passion of her life with American writer Nelson Algren, and her letters to him reveal the simple soul of a lover beneath the feminist grande dame. Though, true to form, she writes him that she feels “humiliated being such an adoring wife, finding nothing to disagree with,” she also adds, with a coyness bordering on the preteen: “How come you get to be the big crocodile, and I am just the little frog?”

Though the names and nuances may change with the times, the love letter has remained essentially the same in all literate societies down through the ages: legal tender for the exchange of deep feelings and for the biologically serious act it so often precedes. Modern or ancient, however, all love letters are written under the sign of eternity, composed from that extratemporal place of passion located, in T. S. Eliot's phrase, at "the still point of the turning world." But a letter finds its way to its intended at a given, glorious point in time and it is to illustrate such a moment that Antonia Fraser, in the introduction to her anthology *Love Letters*, selects a passage from Edith Wharton that describes, in phases, the sensual ecstasy of opening a love letter: "the first glance to see how many pages there are, the second to see how it ends, the breathless first reading, the slow lingering over each phrase and each word, the taking possession, the absorbing of them, one by one, and finally the choosing of the one that will be carried in one's thoughts all day, making an exquisite accompaniment to the dull prose of life."

Notice the phrase, "dull prose." In two words it captures everything love letters aren't ever: tedious or humdrum. The love letter is designed both to draw the writer near the beloved (a hankering neatly summed up by Mary Todd Lincoln when she wrote to Abe, "How much, I wish instead of writing, we were together this evening") and to exalt the recipient. The result? The world's love letters are filled with great arabesques of purple prose, with trumpeted exaggerations and histrionic hyperbole, with impossible claims and the amatory equivalent of saber rattling.

When the diminutive Dylan Thomas wrote to his future wife: "I don't want you for a day: a day is the length of a gnat's life . . . : I want you for the lifetime of a big, mad animal, like an elephant," he is in the main tradition of love-drunk epistolary inflation. Likewise Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who concluded a steamy letter to Countess Sophie d'Houdetot with a shout worthy of center stage at La Scala: "What heart, what god could have experienced you and resisted?" Silkier and more aromatic by far is Oscar Wilde, who, after receiving a sonnet from his boyfriend (and the cause of his eventual downfall) Lord Alfred Douglas, scribbled back: "It is a marvel that those red roseleaf lips of yours should be made no less for the music of song than for the madness of kissing. I know that Hyacinthus, whom Apollo loved so madly, was you in Greek days."

Love letters show us that love, while it may be many-splendored, is certainly not a fragmentary thing. When a real passion comes along, it is full blown, whole-souled and consuming—which is not to say it can't be fickle, too. Even so faithless a soul as Henry VIII was just another man in love with a woman when he wrote to Anne Boleyn in 1528 of "having been for more than a year now struck by the dart of love." He desired only that she give herself "body and heart to me." When they were finally married (at her insistence; he preferred her as a mistress), Henry quickly grew tired of her and her inability to produce an heir, and had her beheaded.

The Dirty Little Secret (as D. H. Lawrence referred to sex) is, as might be expected, never far away in love letters, but in those of the more decorous past, it is often found as a figure woven unconsciously into the carpet of other sentiments. When Virginia Woolf writes to Vita Sackville-West, with whom she was to have a long affair, that after their first extended vacation together she had "seen a little ball . . . bubbling up and down

on the spray of a fountain: the fountain is you; the ball me,” one can’t help noticing the anatomical suggestiveness of the phrasing.

Less elliptically erotic is James Joyce, who left to posterity not only great literature but perhaps the most blindingly obscene love letters ever written. Penned in an attempt to re-inject sex into a relationship shaken by accusations of infidelity, the spectacularly smutty sentences (“my dirty little fuckbird” is one of his milder endearments) still scorch nearly 80 years later, and even in today’s more liberal climate remain for the most part unprintable. One may, however, get a taste of Joyce’s appetite for the raffish in the opening of a love letter to his future wife designed to provoke pity: “I have just finished my midnight dinner for which I had no appetite,” writes Joyce. “When I was half way through it I discovered I was eating it out of my fingers. I felt sick just as I did last night. I am much distressed. Excuse this dreadful pen and this awful paper.”

Consider yourself excused, Jim. A crooked foot needs a crooked shoe, as the saying goes, and human attachment is a law of nature, equally among great writers as small. The threads that bind lovers, heart to heart, run through the inky coils of an infinitude in folly and from vanity, in purest passion and out of the depths of rage. Fax machines and cordless telephones may weaken the desire to take pen in hand, but beeping machinery will never replace that singular, intimate pleasure of the love letter—a written kiss.