

Introduction

“What can people demand of writing that cannot be satisfied by letters?” asks Laura Riding in the “Editorial Postscript” to *Everybody’s Letters*, a collection of letters that she published in London (with Arthur Barker) in 1933. Riding asks this question in quite a serious way. What if letters were not a secondary literature, but instead were on par with poems? Emily Dickinson took this idea equally seriously; she did not, however, advocate it in an essay. Riding’s is perhaps the first and still the only to do so at length. But because *Everybody’s Letters* was not a success commercially and has never been reprinted, and because (Riding) Jackson’s critics have largely ignored the book, few people have read her fascinating “Postscript.”

Books composed of letters by various writers had been in circulation for centuries when Riding published hers. The first collection in English was *The Enimie of Idlennesse* in 1568, and the first to be printed in North America was *The Secretary’s Guide* in 1698 (in New York). By the eighteenth century *The Complete Letter-Writer* had replaced *The Secretary’s Guide* as the popular title; and in the late nineteenth century *Everybody’s Letter-Writer* was used by a number of publishers. Typically the letters were organized either by content (condolence letters, for example, or letters between parents and children) or chronologically (the letters would be from ancient Roman times to the recent past, as in Vicesimus Knox’s popular *Elegant Epistles*, first published in 1789). These collections were thus thought of as both reading material in themselves and as useful: readers would learn about the personal lives of historical figures, and find model letters to suit their epistolary circumstance.

Riding follows neither of these tacks in *Everybody’s Letters*. First she includes only contemporary letters (most were written in the late 1920s and early 30s) by relatively unknown people, many of them friends or acquaintances; then she changes all the writers’ names; and then she organizes the 94 letters into three types (British, Universal and American Spirit) by what she calls (in a brief “Foreword”) “the literary idea behind the letter.” We thus neither look to the letters as models nor are we drawn by the celebrity of the writers. The three types are not “nationalistic groupings,” she notes, but instead clarify certain tendencies: a British letter is self-conscious and questions whether the energy necessary for writing is justified; an American letter, in contrast, is spontaneous and pleased merely to have released energy.

Both the purpose and style of a Universal letter are, Riding admits, more difficult to indicate. It is “in some degree an experiment in the effects of words”; and its writer is “telling his story to himself as if it were all the stories and he the personified fascination of all imaginable listeners.” In

the Universal series there are letters by African cocoa squires, South Seas adventurers, old men being wise, children, working-class people, and young lovers. My favorite letters in this series are by a Norwegian woman who tells her life story to an English novelist that she knows only from having seen one of his books. At one point she says: "I send you this as the best I have to give away and you may do with it as you please." For the writer of a Universal letter, typically, a definite relation with the reader either has not begun or has ended; and after finishing the letter, the writer may well be somewhat disinterested in its fate—whether it remains unsent, or goes astray and strangers read it, or actually reaches its addressee. Without the addressee the letter would never have been written, but since the letter incorporates into itself the addressee's reply, the actual personality of the addressee almost becomes a moot point. Thus Riding's comment that the reader senses in these letters a "circularity." Letters are seen usually as components in an exchange; a Universal letter, though, has the relative independence of a poem.

After the three series of letters, *Everybody's Letters* concludes with the "Editorial Postscript," which responds only indirectly to the book's contents. The "Postscript" suggests that with an "understanding of the [modern] letter," which the essay aims to develop, we will also understand the state of literature in general. A quick look at any newspaper will confirm, Riding notes, that the ordinary person now can write an intelligent letter. When such is the case, how are literary people to distinguish themselves? These terms, these binaries, are devised by Riding: readers are either ordinary or literary, with the former demanding only that the writing be intelligent; and letters are either legitimate or true, with the former merely bringing a reader up to date. (To some extent "true" corresponds with the "Universal" letters in the book.) For the most part, Riding addresses the latter in both cases.

A study of letters, the essay implies, can tutor literary people in the necessary art of inarticulate writing. At this point in her career Riding regards poetry as more serious and permanent than temporal letters, and she points out some ways in which letters fall short: while letter writers can be "humanly and hatefully intelligent," poets can be something better, "humanly stupid and artless"; and while letters are often used only to "relieve emotional strain," poems "formulate intellectual intensity." There are moments, though, when I find the proposed differences between the two genres to be minor. For instance, I wonder how the poem's need for "sanction" (by the reader) fits with Riding's other proposition that a poem relies on an "internal necessity" to bring it into being—and how much more do letters lack "inner restriction" than poems? However, what interests me most is that the comparison is made seriously. Letters may be "the very best next-best-thing to the

too-good best [poems],” and as Riding asserts, almost all writing can be “classified as letters. Letters are statements of the truth from a strictly ‘human’ point of view.”

In the end, though, letters cannot be “literature” because ultimately our “reactions to them are not based on the merits or demerits of the writing, but on the character of the writer as revealed by the writing.” With that idea in mind Riding offers the four “charms” of a true letter: (1) it is mortal, and “reeks with life like a corpse” (2) it is ambiguous, being both earnest and flippant (3) it is composed in leisure and will therefore bore its readers (4) and it is magnanimous. True letters, in sum, display a “calculated perversity” that makes them charming, as people can be charming. True letter writers fully enjoy the “passing sensation” that they experience when “talking with finality”; at such moments, the “guilty thrill of temporary importance” gives a letter its “confused charm.” True letters also have an ethical component: while the writer must feel the particular presence of the addressee, nothing more is demanded of the person at the other end than that they *are*. The true letter writer accepts, in other words, that possible “readers want to be left alone, not benefited.”

This line of thought goes even further: “You must agree with me that the relation between letter-writers is unfriendly, though the magic essence of letters consists in a friendly concealment of the fact.” Here Riding overturns what had been long assumed, that letters are agents of intimacy. To say “intimate letters” has been regarded as practically a redundancy (setting aside all letters not of a personal nature). I do agree with Riding. My own reading on epistolarity has shown that letters have been used to reinforce the distance between people as much as bring them close together; with letters, people have been able to insist that they are not one but two. Riding makes this argument, I think, in the context of her thinking on gender politics—as she notes at the end, “it could not be a complete essay on letters without being also somewhat an essay on sex.” Many writers at the time, Riding included, were considering the idea that the relation between women and men was unfriendly, though the magic essence of marriage consisted in a friendly concealment of the fact. Riding brilliantly connects the marriage relationship with the epistolary one.

Readers of the “Postscript” will thus be considering not just issues of epistolary history and style but the “modernistic attitude” on authorship and sex. Riding argues for the “social character” of letters, which are written in the interests of both the writer and the reader. Identity is not inherent but socially constructed and performed: “One may be anyone in a letter, or say anything.” Letters are useful—thus the attractiveness of letters for women in the last four centuries as a means to exercising “themselves unobtrusively” in the “world of men.” Riding reminds us, however, that

women “are not born letter-writers.” Her analysis of these issues has provided me with real insight, more than any single essay on them I know.

Riding began collecting the material for *Everybody's Letters* in November 1929, after she and Robert Graves moved from London to Deyá, Mallorca. On their way to the island they had a three-week visit with Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas at their home in the French countryside (in Bilignin, not too far from the Swiss border). In the “Postscript” Riding tells how the book began when she considered publishing her correspondence with “a curious young man who turned out to be the devil.” This was Geoffrey Phibbs, an Irish writer who attached himself to the Riding-Graves-Nancy Nicholson triad early in 1929; his presence was a significant factor in Riding's suicidal jump from the upper story of her London apartment that April. Also late in 1929 Riding began a book in letter form, *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine*, published in 1930 and dedicated to Stein. Catherine, a daughter of Graves and Nicholson, was eight years old; Riding wrote four letters on how best to make the transition into adolescence and adulthood. The letters are “Universal” ones, so although Catherine was the addressee she need not have literally replied. As well, Riding and Graves's Seizin Press published Len Lye's *No More Stories* (1930), a series of letters that Riding helped Lye revise.

After *No More Stories*, *Four Unposted Letters to Catherine* and *Everybody's Letters*, Riding continued to promote the idea that letters by living people are book-material. In 1935 she edited four issues of *Focus*, each composed of friends' letters and distributed privately through the post. She asked the contributors to write on subjects of personal interest, even if they felt awkward doing so. Then in 1938 Riding published *The World and Ourselves*, a large collection of letters by various friends and acquaintances who responded to a semi-public letter Riding had sent to 400 people which addressed the growing European crisis; in this case, Riding continued the dialogue in print by including her thoughts on each letter. (About 100 replies were sent, and 64 of those were included.) *The World and Ourselves* was the last of these epistolary projects, though Riding never renounced letter form as she did poetry in 1941. For the rest of her life Riding was a prodigious and engaging correspondent, and soon, I hope, a book of her personal letters will be published.

Esdale, Logan. “Laura Riding's ‘Editorial Postscript’ (1933).” *The Poker* 5 (Winter 2005): 13-17.