

PREFACE

It is a truism that writing letters is talking on paper, and millennia before the invention of the telephone, literate people learnt to assuage their need to exchange information, thoughts and feelings through written messages carried by travellers. The illiterate could, as they still can, engage the services of amanuenses.

Letters transcend the distance between correspondents, and when they are preserved, they transcend time, carrying to posterity the experience of earlier generations with an immediacy that is not often shared with other forms of literature except the diary.

While a diary is usually kept for perusal by the writer's future self, a letter is addressed to a contemporary and is written from the perspective of one who cannot certainly know what the morrow will bring. This relation to time can be complemented, in the case of a chronologically arranged collection of one writer's letters, by the way that the collection follows the arc of the writer's development from youth through maturity to old age.

The study of epistolary literature invites the reader to make a tentative judgment as to whether there is truth in either Dr. Johnson's view (expressed through his character Imlac) that "Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed" or Horace Walpole's assertion, "I firmly believe, notwithstanding all our complaints, that almost every person upon earth tastes upon the totality more happiness than misery."

The composition of letters equal to Walpole's is not an easily won accomplishment. From the fifteenth through the late seventeenth centuries, English letter-writing goes through what may be regarded as an apprenticeship during which no correspondences to match the best bequeathed by ancient Rome appear. Earlier chapters of this book highlight both the merits and limitations of letters written during this period. The more detailed chapters that follow are devoted to the productions of British epistolary art in its maturity, when they are no longer surpassed by those of antiquity.

Walpole maintains that news and anecdotes are the soul of a letter, and from the point of view of the immediate recipient this may be true, but for letters to constitute a distinguished category of literature, more is required. In the most satisfying correspondences, all the elements of a self-portrait are accompanied by lively observation of the writer's social and material environment, and by a record of his or her quest for fulfilment. This fulfilment may be sought, to cite some examples, through romantic love,

family, arts, sciences, worldly advancement, religion, politics, philanthropy, or patriotism. The play of emotions and the unrolling of events in relation to the quest for fulfilment is what letters, at their richest, reveal.

The body of distinguished British letters is too large to be surveyed in one book of moderate size, so a choice must be made. Some of the writers almost select themselves: Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Horace Walpole, Lord Byron, and John Keats could hardly be omitted. Others, both well and little known, help to demonstrate the range of content and style to be found within a great literature's epistolary heritage.

For reasons of copyright, all quotations of any length are taken from older editions. The dates given are in certain cases the products of later research.

In some quotations, the spelling and capitalization have been modernized. It should also be noted that Elizabeth Barrett Browning frequently uses a sequence of two periods as a punctuation mark.

I would like to acknowledge the help and encouragement I have received from Patrick Grant, who has listened most patiently while I have talked about the progress of this book and has offered useful advice.