

Letters to his Neighbor

The writer suffers in place

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One winter when I was struggling to finish my novel, I went to Paris to séance with dead writers in a last ditch Hail Mary for inspiration. Or commiseration, more like. The problem was that I couldn't write. I know: a writer's agonies are all too easy to dismiss in light of the world's greater tragedies, and to complain of spiritual malaise as a writer is almost to complain of the very parameters of one's chosen profession. But since pain levels all reason, that winter I was not exactly pining for heroics, but rather, for sufferers-in-arms.

My oldest college friend was in Paris finishing up his doctoral work in Comparative Literature and graciously agreed to host me last minute. As I traveled to his address, I thrilled, stupidly: *Soon I will be in the company of an equally condemned person.* To my horror, when he intercepted me on the corner of his street, he looked rosy-cheeked and healthy, a baguette tucked under his arm. He was doing great. He was in a special seminar with a famous theorist. They met weekly in the theorist's apartment and they were all required to wear Japanese slippers and silk robes.

"So how are *you*?" he asked cheerfully, "What did you want to do here?"

What did I want to do? I repeated his question back to him, tears pooling suddenly. It was a sensitive issue. It seemed I had arrived here precisely because I had only done what I wanted to do, my entire life, that is, I had become a writer. I was here to figure out why I had made such a bad decision, and why others before me had made the same bad decision. I was here to see if this decision could be undone.

I told him I wanted to see Proust's famous cork-lined bedroom at the Musée Carnavalet. His eyebrows did a little pushup on his forehead. "Really?" He seemed surprised. "That's sort of kitschy, right?"

The next morning, we went to the Musée Carnavalet to see the recreation of Proust's bedroom. I remembered reading somewhere that the two iconic sites of literary communion, where the visitor could burrow deep into the heart of solitude, were Thoreau's cabin and Proust's cork-lined room. Proust seemed to me the apotheosis of a writer who *couldn't even*. Noise, loneliness, bad hair, spurned love, asthma, constipation—he had suffered from all of it. Famously referred to as a man born without skin, he was sensitive to the extreme, and could not tolerate smells, light, most foods, and above all, noise. Having suffered from debilitating asthma since the age of nine—which his harshest critics suspected was purely psychosomatic—he kept his windows tightly sealed and the doorway blocked with a heavy blanket. Shut away from the outside, he would spend the last dozen or so years of his life in bed. “The social butterfly became a literary caterpillar,” as Adam Gopnik said of Proust's backwards life trajectory.

Because he seemed to have fewer attacks in the evening, Proust eventually adopted a nocturnal schedule, sleeping at around nine in the morning and waking in the late afternoon. This schedule meant that the sounds of the living became a constant torture. “There is an inanimate object which has the capacity to exacerbate which no human being can ever attain: a piano,” he once griped. Striking hammers, sharp human voices, carpet beating, all of it was intolerable. He nearly expired from frustration during a neighbor's renovation project: “A dozen workers a day hammering away with such frenzy for so many months must have erected something as majestic as the Pyramid of Cheops.” He would repeat this joke with variations on other works of art—the Sistine Chapel, for instance—for anyone who would listen. In yet another letter, he complained to his landlord that his neighbors were having sex too loudly. To keep these noises at bay, he lined his entire room with cork.

The simulation of the corked room at the Musée Carnavalet was unassuming, a corner within a larger room cordoned off with

a length of tasseled rope. The set-up recalled an impromptu thrift store showroom: a few pieces of threadbare furniture and a narrow bed with a blue bedspread. Standing before it, I tried to summon a sense of awe: Here, in this bed, Proust wrote *The Remembrance of Things Past!* But the cork tiles reminded me, with a shudder of recognition, of the acoustic ceiling tiles in my own Chinatown apartment. As a simulation, the assemblage achieved its intended purpose: I was transported. I saw Proust sitting there with knees up, underneath a mountain of blankets, pages propped up beside his dark lamp. It was as though I were looking at my own future, remembering Javier Mariás's warning about getting too close to one's literary heroes: "The one thing that leaps out ... about these authors is that they were all fairly disastrous individuals ... their example is hardly likely to lure one along a path of letters."

After a recuperative coffee, I wondered whether I should continue my quest to commune with dead writers. The visit to the room had been almost harrowing. Fine, I thought, if the consequence were that I would never write again, I could settle definitively into a life of accounting. So, in the same spirit of slash-and-burn, I went with a kind of fevered zeal to other sites of absurd circumstance. I went to the former Balzac residence to see the trap door he built to run away from creditors. And the coffee grinder he used to grind—and then eat—his coffee. I went to the bars along the Left Bank where writers had learned not just how to write but how to endure penury, nursing a single café crème all morning. I stood in the bathroom where Fitzgerald and Hemingway had apparently sized up one another's genitals. I went to the corner where Barthes was fatally struck by a laundry cart while crossing the street. I went to the bug-infested hotel where George Orwell had stayed while working as a down-and-out dishwasher, then to the Hotel d'Alsace where Oscar Wilde had died, boasting: "I am dying beyond my means!"

What a group to belong to, I thought, pausing for ice cream outside Hemingway's dismal, unheated apartment on Rue Cardinal Lemoine. I gazed up at the fuzzy night-stained plaque that com-

memorated his presence. Writers were truly an unenviable bunch, as hapless as children.

Before leaving, I took one final excursion and ended up at the Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits (MLM) along the Saint-Germain-des-Prés. I landed there on accident, originally searching for a corner where Georges Perec had advised his pupils to stand and record “what is of no consequence.” Overly air-conditioned and off the tourist beat, the museum was empty. All that afternoon, I inspected pieces of paper detritus in complete solitude.

Looking at scraps of moldy paper turned out to be a riveting experience. The artifacts immediately brought forth the embodied presence of the writer. You felt the swoop and curve of their hand behind each scrawl. Language was the medium of a writers’ art, but it was also the medium she used to record debts, register complaints, and divulge insecurities. I lingered over a letter written by Jules Verne to his father, itemizing his expenses and begging for a higher allowance (“I can’t do without books—it’s impossible!”). Another letter was written by Camus, despairing that his four years of labor on *The Plague* had resulted in nothing.

With each scrap of paper I felt conviction returning. All of these famous writers were completely miserable! I was nobody, and my work was nothing, but even these writers who had composed masterpieces were spared no relief from daily woes. Suddenly my own situation seemed less bleak. I stayed all day in that chilly, neglected museum, moving slowly through each exhibit, and, when I had inspected everything, settling down to flip through the exhibition catalogs. It was here that I encountered the letters of Marcel Proust for the first time.

Last August, New Directions published *Letters to His Neighbor*, a translation of previously undiscovered letters, published by Gallimard in 2013, that Proust wrote to one Mme Marie Williams, the wife of a dentist whose practice was directly above Proust’s bedroom

at 102 Boulevard Haussmann. Proust lived there from late 1906 to the spring of 1919, the second to last residence before his death. The trove of twenty-three letters had been placed in the collection of the Musée des Lettres et Manuscrits by Mme Williams' grandson.

The New Directions edition, exactly translated by Lydia Davis, hews close to the original. It includes the same foreword by pre-eminent Proust biographer Jean-Yves Tadié, in addition to a lengthy translator's afterword by Davis. Also included in the English edition is the brief but unforthcoming "note on the French edition," which mentions, without showing its hand, that the MLM had been "closed in late 2014." (In fact, several months after my suspiciously peaceful visit there, the MLM was raided by French authorities for possibly serving as a front for a sham investment scheme. The museum's founder, the financier Gérard Lhéritier, was arrested on suspicion of orchestrating the most elaborate Ponzi scheme the art world has seen in recent years.) The letters, however, seem to be genuine, and taken together, they retain a cohesion rooted in context. Tadié characterizes them as an "epistolary novel," tracing the development of a tender friendship between two suffering artists. Marie Williams was an idealistic harpist married to a practical American dentist, a "disparate" couple, Proust had suggested to his housekeeper, Celeste Albaret. Although we don't have the corresponding letters that Mme Williams sent to Proust, it seems she, too, wrote letters dripping with flattery, flirtation, and over-the-top affection.

Mostly, the letters are about noise.

"You are very good to think of the noise. It has been moderate up to now and relatively close to silence," Proust writes in Letter 4. "These days a plumber has been coming every morning from seven to nine; this is no doubt the time he had chosen." The postscript for Letter 13: "The successor to the valet de chambre makes noise and that doesn't matter. But later he knocks with little tiny raps. And that is worse." These are only two examples, picked at random, among many. Occasionally Proust's tone veers into peevishness—"Permit me to tell you frankly. Yesterday ... I was a little bothered

and you will understand why”—before settling into needy chiding—“How I would like to know Madame how you are. I think of you all the time.”

These swerves of mood and temperament are why one gravitates toward letters and diaries: they reveal something true underneath all the artifice of fiction. There is a particular pleasure to reading Proust’s letters precisely because they are unflattering. When some of Proust’s correspondence was first published in the late 1920s, Proust aficionados were appalled, believing that they tarnished his reputation. According to French scholar Victor Brombet, Proust’s letters made the esteemed author seem “effete, obsequious, and snobbish,” his personal communications “filled with affectation, ceremonious flattery, and hyperbole.”

Letters to His Neighbor will not change that perception. In these letters, Proust prostrates himself with cunning and ingenuity, contorting his words into elaborate compliments, equivocations, apologies, while relentlessly sending flowers, books, and even pheasants to Mme Williams. It’s the kind of behavior one expects of any insecure people-pleaser. Proust knows that Mme Williams holds the key to a good day’s sleep, so he must be convincing, and, above all, likable. He is at turns apologetic, accusing, contrite, and servile, often undercutting his own pleas in the most spectacular fashion.

In Letter 2, for instance, written at 1 a.m., possibly at the end of 1908 or beginning of 1909 (the letters are all undated), Proust apologizes for a previous request for silence with such ingratiating obsequiousness it borders on comedy. In a counterintuitive move, he insists that his previous demands for silence be *ignored completely*:

Madame, I thank you with all my heart for your beautiful and good letter and *come to ask you on the contrary to allow all possible noise to be made starting now.* (Emphasis his.)

Chagrined, the next lines that follow:

I had in fact not anticipated a shortness of breath so severe that it prevents me from trying to sleep. *Noise will therefore not bother me in the least* (and will be all the more relief for me on a day on which I could rest). (Emphasis mine.)

Absent the original letter from Mme Williams, one can only conjecture its contents, but it's likely she may have apologized for disturbing his rest, or characterized herself as an "annoying neighbor." To counter her self-blame, Proust is compelled to respond:

Don't speak of annoying neighbors, but of neighbors so charming (an association of words contradictory in principle since Montesquieu claims that most horrible of all are, first, neighbors and, second, the smell of post offices) that they leave the constant tantalizing regret that one cannot take advantage of their neighborliness.

Constant tantalizing regret! This is Proust at maximum charm. By all accounts, his exaggerated correspondence worked; Proust was, after all his complaining, well-appreciated by his neighbors. Perhaps they were sympathetic to his distress—as funny as some of the requests may sound in retrospect, Proust seems genuinely beleaguered to the point of desperation, suffering but trying to be amenable.

I have learned that the doctor is leaving Paris the day after tomorrow and can imagine all that this implies for tomorrow concerning the "nailing" of crates. Would it be possible either to nail the crates this evening, or else not to nail them tomorrow until starting 4 or 5 o'clock in the afternoon (if my attack ends earlier I would hasten to let you know). Or if it is indispensable to nail them in the morning, to nail them in the part of your apartment that is above my kitchen, and not that which is above my bedroom ...

He appends at the end of this same letter: “Don’t tire yourself out answering me!”

I’m sure Proust would have been horrified by the publication of this trove of letters, as with every other attempt at biographical excavation, an inevitable consequence of celebrity. In his essay “Contre Sainte-Beuve,” Proust argues that “a book is the product of another self to the one we display in our habits, in society, in our vices.” In other words, the artist’s personal life should be of no interest or relevance to understanding his artistic work.

I, for one, take pleasure envisioning that “other self” of habit and vice that Proust sought to excise from his novels. I am not alone in this. In her translator’s afterword, Lydia Davis suggests it may be helpful “to picture the room in which Proust wrote [the letters], and him in the room.” She describes her own trip to 102 Boulevard Haussmann, now the premises of a bank, which contains only subtle nods to its former tenant. Classy panels of marble-patterned “compromise cork” line the wall, along with a portrait of Proust and some shelves of Proust-related books. In the bank, one must make a strenuous imaginative effort to conjure his presence. There was once a body here, very mortal, very close.

Luckily, with the letters, one does not have to strain so hard to conjure Proust. By reading the letters against the grain, as a testimony to an embodied life, as pure presence, they constitute the simplest message from beyond: “I was here.” Here, tangibly, one finds ample evidence of that other self, that hidden self dashed off in the margins: unflattering and all too human.

Before I left Paris, I paid one final visit to the museum to see the last handwritten note that Proust would ever write. Behind the glass, there was a small brown index card marred with two coffee-ringing stains that contained his last words. It read: *J’avais entendu fer au lieu de verre*, “I heard iron instead of glass.” The handwriting was shaky and barely legible. The enigmatic phrase was explained thus: In those final days of illness, Proust, so short of breath he lost

the ability to speak, communicated with his maid Celeste on pieces of paper. That night, Celeste had been keeping watch, passing time with a crossword puzzle. She read aloud: “There is this, sometimes, or perhaps especially, in a glass house.” After a while, Proust guessed *antirouille*, rustproofing. Just then, the kettle began to whistle so Celeste got up to attend to it. Proust took up the paper to look at the answer, and found that the right answer was *cachotterie*, a little secret. Ah! Comprehension. He’d heard iron—“fer”—instead of glass—“verre.” Soon after, he fell into a coma.

I stood there and looked at this last trace, the coffee stains, the imperfect handwriting, the fallible ear, the banality of the crossword puzzle. It was a life. There was nothing glamorous about it, and yet I was profoundly moved. That afternoon I got on a plane and flew back to New York. I decided that I would probably try to finish my novel.