



MICHAEL ALIPRANDINI

# An Elegy Postponed

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Perhaps I'm a devotee of lost causes, but I would like to make a stand for a mode of writing that exercises about as much hold along the swift networks of contemporary culture as messages once brought by day-runners over rocky Grecian soil. Whether ambitious or modest in scope, it is a mode of writing that surveys a compass of ground and then explores that ground from something of an intimate distance. Slowness, freedom, reflection, and direct address are its hallmarks, where practice and potential coincide. In short, and in a time when the form has been eclipsed by shallower, technocratic upstarts, I would like to defend, in a sort of quaint, conservative rear-guard action, the values of letter writing.

Back in the day, I didn't consider letter writing to be rear-guard at all. On the contrary, letters were a hip medium that I was passionate about from a young age. The origins of this passion are not hard to sort out. First and foremost, under the influence of youthful literary

aspirations, I may have misunderstood the meaning of the phrase 'a man of letters' and thought it sage to get a jump-start on exactly such a starry career.

Additional impetus came when I made an adolescent discovery in my small hometown library: the now out-of-print, still subversive *High Weirdness By Mail* (1988) by one Reverend Ivan Stang. Profiting from its dense listings of fringe groups and off-kilter minds, one could write away for sundry printed material and paraphernalia. *Weird Politics—Left Wing, Bad film & Sleaze, Cosmic Hippie Drug-Brother Stuff, Weird Art, and More Weird Religion* were the sections I plumbed with the most enthusiasm. The short articles in the book and the high weirdness that arrived by mail helped define my teenage aesthetic. And while my aesthetics have changed, influential residue from that period no doubt remains—not least the sense that mail can bring word from 'out there,' beyond the confines of wherever I find myself at the time.

But up to that point an essential element had been consistently missing: an exchange with someone 'out there' whom I knew. As the last of seven children and a teenager in the habit of making older friends, I was the kid who stayed behind waiting his turn to venture out into the free world. Even counting the copy of *High Weirdness By Mail*, my horizons were circumscribed. In

hindsight, though, the isolation was fortunate because it pushed me to correspond with siblings and friends and thereby push creatively against the limits of that small-town boy whose eyes were on the prize of becoming a sophisticated man of letters. The high weirdness would carry on for a while yet, but the terms had changed.

Thus the origins of what I consider my golden age of letter writing. It was to be a period that continued full-force through my university years and then through my first decade abroad, lasting in all about two decades. Though I never actually said it, I often felt like suggesting to friends that we spend time apart so that we could exchange letters, as if through direct address in written language, slowly delivered, we would best discover one another. My instinct seems to have been justified. Through letters I kept in contact, entrusted the stories of my life and was entrusted in kind, took measure of myself and my correspondents, and elaborated my ideas on any number of topics and experiences that vexed and inspired me.

I started using e-mail just after graduating from university. The letters continued, maybe more intermittently than before, but there wasn't any reason why the two forms couldn't—and can't—coexist: one form devoted to the quick and ephemeral, the other to the slower and

more thoughtful. Yet speed and convenience are seductive and in the end impose their own values. I held out for a while by crafting letters and sending them as e-mails. Then a few years ago, the golden age entered terminal decline. I worked a lot, but not at my misconstrued career in letters. I wrote a good bit, stories and novels but rarely letters. E-mails, like ill-fitting symbols, came to stand in for them. They tended to be the worst kind of e-mails, too, glib and facile, bored and boring, written in pixelated prose that lacked for depth and nuance. And just as I wrote few letters, I received few letters. The common ground staked out and explored over the years was turning arid.

My inspiration to undertake this rear-guard action stems from the by now ignominious sense that, in giving up on the form, I lost access to a constellation of values that other forms can neither fully promote nor satisfy. For the record, they are values that lie well beyond the more superficial and fetishistic components of letters, the stationary, the stamps and postmarks, the handwriting—all components which tend to be mentioned when someone waxes nostalgic about 'the lost art of letter writing'.

So then what have I squandered, by failing letters? What kind of discourse do I aim to protect?

Similar to the notebook and journal, the letter is ca-

pacious. Philosophy, anecdote, reader response, every sort of essaying can find space within it. Unlike these other forms, the letters that concern me here are intimately addressed to particular individuals. In a correspondence that lasts, they are the two sides of an active, delayed dialogue, without which they are not letters.

It is dialogue that gives letters an edge over journals. Letters can have the intimacy of a journal yet head off a large degree of its petty complaints, its degrading solipsism—too often the result when an audience is absent. The best letters combine deep disclosure with a tacit agreement not to descend into the murky chambers of the unaided self where even the most intimate guests should not be invited.

By holding that dignified line, an exchange of letters creates the territory across which the exchange takes place, land of light, air, time, distance, perspective. Together these elements make for one of the preeminent curiosities of letters and, to my mind, one of their foremost strengths: the rarefied commingling of distance and intimacy. My peripatetic life, which has absented me from any stable community, has only augmented my need for creating meaningful, shared spaces. Letters are a moveable refuge that is written into being and sustained through writing.

The mediation of language, of written language, is paramount to the enterprise. Talking has its charms and strengths. Talking is practical, immediate, and easy, and all but intrinsic to the human condition. Yet for every conversation that yields a frisson of excitement, there are scores that are banal, facile, or sloppy, that slur over chances for genuine insight. Writing can be talky and talking can be formal, but talking and writing are radically different idioms. Neither can stand in for the other.

Nor does conversation tolerate much delay. With letters, on the other hand, delay is one of the rules of engagement. It may appear tedious or unnecessary, a slowness to be factored out at the speed of one's Internet connection. But as with any sort of game, so with letters. Changing the rules can forfeit the game—or, in this line of argument, the values. Maturity, even while it may be loath to lose out on convenience, is thankfully less taken with immediate gratification. Maturity recognizes that time distended is time won and time won is a temporary, artful dodge of the eternity in store for us. Better to cultivate our land than rush to dig our graves.

•

I haven't kept copies of all the letters I wrote during the golden age, and they have in the main most likely

been thrown away. However, because I wrote letters, I also received them.

The sense of having lost access to a vital mode of expression came principally through these letters. Acting on a hunch that they comprised a time capsule of personal histories, I kept them stored in a crate in my parents' house. Last summer, troubled by the fact that I was neither writing nor receiving letters anymore, I decided to read through stack after stack of them. Several hundred letters later, it was much more evident whether the letters were a treasury and, if so, the nature of the treasure they held.

They arrived with postmarks from Chile, Ethiopia, Russia, Ireland, England, and a number of American towns and cities. They reached me in in the USA, Russia, Turkey, Ethiopia, Italy, Ireland, Indonesia. The envelopes are decorated with quotations, stickers, sketches, collages. At times I'm addressed with a peculiar inflation—Sir Michael Aliprandini, for example, or Michael Aliprandini, Boheme, or Michael Aliprandini, Esq. The stationery ranges from standard lined notebook paper to homemade paper to less common materials like birch-bark, plastic, cloth, and sheaths of bubblegum wrappers. Many are handwritten; others are typed, a few on a typewriter. In addition to the letter itself, some include draw-

ings, clippings, and photographs.

I've kept at least one letter from each of my correspondents, in the interest of preserving his or her voice. They are in turns funny, sad, vivid, well or poorly written. They contain bursts of emotive power from unexpected quarters. In the finest examples, individual style and self-stylizations reveal their writer in microcosm. In each there are qualities worth preserving, often less in the letters themselves than for the values they represent. Taken together, they inspired this double maneuver, rear-guard then avant-garde, as if I am undertaking a mission to record a habitat before it vanishes, in the ultimate hope of rescuing it for the future.

I've held off the voices of these men and women of letters long enough. Here then is an informal case study of twenty-five correspondents as they go about animating the letter's formal components and limning a host of themes.

The openings—

*To write a whole letter in Limerick  
An odd idea that might be slick  
So I'll try as I might  
If it works, a delight*

*Will surely be easier than Slavic.*

•

*Sat. 9:30 a.m. Hot, sticky, humid, trailer vibrating from cooler being on, 10,000 maniacs playing on the box, bowl of cereal in one hand and pen in the other. This is the way my first of two days off of work has begun.*

Apologies for not having written sooner—

*Please forgive me. I have only just started to win the battle against my crankpot condition and any communication problems arising thereof...My problem is that I wanted to write to you about everything I have experienced or thought since we parted—in other words to make my letter complete; but Rob said to me the other day, as I started complaining for the nth time, ‘Don’t write a masterpiece, write a letter!’*

•

*I am sorry I didn’t write sooner to thank you. What excuse can I offer for bad manners? None I suppose...just general lack of focus and follow-through skills brought about by stress, lack of sleep, apoplectic seizures and knuckle-white gripping tension from working with motherfuckers, I suppose. Please find it in your heart to forgive me.*

•

*A thousand apologies: I have been a bad correspondent whereas you have proved to be exemplary. I sometimes have times when I don’t wish to correspond. They are generally times of change and/or difficulty. I wait until they are finished (or feel finished, which has to be the same thing?) But please, do not be thrown by my intermittent gaps, I do not wish to lose contact with you, and your letters and postcards as in your last one from the Dolomites are received with extraordinary pleasure.*

•

*This, my friend, is the only excuse I have for not writing sooner...I can’t seem to get back to me, and I don’t know where I am or why I have gone to get here, or who or what it is in my mind that makes me start spinning my mental wheels at an incredibly fast but random speed...smoke, putrid smells, bones crushing, wailing cats sounding in my head. I lack focus, control, and am overcome by fear, a sense of being hunted, attacked, and a desire to flee.*

*To write you is to have to tell you, it is the only honest thing to do. To paint my daily activities and intellectual curiosities in any other color would make me dishonest to you.*

On letters—

*How will you start the letter you are going to write me soon? What nonsense will it include? What prose? Ask yourself, what does a letter want to be?*

•

*I have found it, my typewriter, that is, a fifty-some-year-old machine which I purchased for \$20 from a friend in Santiago. You must excuse the messiness of the letter as I am unaccustomed to typing with such an antiquated device for one, and for two, the machine is in fairly poor shape. But I trust you will be able to decipher my intent. The marking on the front of the typewriter reads “HERMES 2000” and I hope that perhaps some day with enough practice, prostration, and deceit, this may indeed become a messenger for the gods or the devils, or both...I was given a Mapuche drum, which I have placed next to my typewriter to pound upon when I have writers-block, or when I feel too intoxicated to write.*

•

*From conversations to letters once a week is a change, and I'm not sure friendships last that way (do they?)—I guess I'm addicted to the real live thing, instant reaction, eye contact—even silence.*

•

*This letter requires celebration should the envelope escape the dead-letter bin, and you per chance are now reading it. Honestly, Michael, the address is what your mother gave me, I swear. Never would write to expose [her] as whacko, nor myself as led by one...Great letter you wrote, so very well composed with its refreshing dots of interest and humor, the exciting cultural places you've experienced [in St. Petersburg], the details you've shared with us. Love that, flat love that! A cousin, then a niece, have returned from European visits with not one story to relate. What a waste, just as well be a cricket at the local MacDonald's.*

•

*I enjoyed your latest letter—It had a certain art to it, a depth—thought. Bravo to your possession w/ living. You are perhaps only the second person I know who spoke of life beyond what happens to you daily.*

•

*I will write more and e-mail less, the immateriality of electric communication bothers my primitive heart.*

•

*Last but not least I want you to reconsider your abandon-*

*ment of the letter form. It is the closest thing to essay-writing, which is a very rewarding form.*

Advice—

*I am about to ask you to do something for me that I don't know if I have the right to ask you. Well, here it goes! Please don't settle for Arizona State University. Challenge yourself. Go away if you can. I know it's hard and seemingly impossible, but don't assume you have to go to ASU the first year. Apply to Columbia, NYU, Stanford...wherever. If you don't get in, no big deal. If you do, you could wind up in a wonderful educational setting. Believe me, I am not bashing ASU. But there is more, Michael darling, so much more.*

*I have got a few things to say about your letter. First I don't think I like your hectic life. It seems to me you are living the bustling life of the typical American only in a foreign country. Maybe it is when you travel you are hurried. I hope in your Italian village you live in a slower, more leisurely way befitting an intellectual. Otherwise I don't know how on earth you could finish another manuscript?*

From the groves of academia—

*Finally I will settle down again into the joy of academia and will have endless hours to dedicate to reading and study. As I stand on this threshold, however, I hesitate. I must admit that I'm a bit nervous about the possibility that I will fail. It is not that I fear expulsion, rather that this too will prove not 'who' I am. If not a professional and not a student, then what?...Yet again, maybe I will succumb to the comforts of student life and I will be safe for a few years, safe in knowing that I have a 'cover' of respectability and dignity...So I pick up the books and the backpack and diligently I will take notes and nod my head and hand in everything on time and maybe no one will know, not even myself, of what else there could be.*

•

*Several weeks ago I read a synopsis of the personal writings of that famous Columbia University professor, Lionel Trilling. His professorial story, although no one really knew it at the time, is one of 'a university teacher who had never got to write.' At the age of 28 (haunting the similarity in age, isn't it?) he writes in his journal: 'And how far-far-far I am going from being a writer—how less and less I have the material and the mind and the will. A few—very few—more years and the last chance will be gone.' In those nascent years of formalized learning and in his first journeys into the business of looking smart, he feared that he, like almost all academics that he*



*knew, would 'grow weaker and weaker, more academic, less a person.' I cannot tell you how honest and true his observation is from my own encounters with academia.*

*The undergraduate years are ones of joy, times dedicated to reading, expansive learning and much drinking and dreaming.*

*But then graduate school becomes oddly depressing. Why? It is because as an undergraduate you get a taste of how freeing learning can be, but as a graduate student you see behind the university and realize that in such institutions learning is used as a tool of power. Knowledge in such circumstances is not freeing but enslaving. Professors bicker and back-bit, they are jealous little children who lash out at colleagues who have books which sell better, and learn to hate those who have been invited to more conferences (coincidentally, the epitome of the ridiculousness of taking a professorship as a vocation; conferences are chances to exert your own theories laced with neologisms, mock others, and maybe sleep with a graduate student who believes in all of your ridiculous gnashings of teeth).*

On love and lust—

*Enough of academics—I am in love! I know, I know, but I also know that you will never pass judgment on me. Therefore, I can always tell you about my trials and tribula-*

*tions in the department of love...You see, Ed has a wife...I tried to remain faithful to my moral code and tell myself that this was wrong, but it just felt right...Well, let me give you a bit of advice: If you ever feel that you must stick to your convictions, DO NOT involve any sort of mind-altering substances! The next thing I knew I was kissing him with every ounce of my existence—I awoke some hours later in his bed while he was playing with my hair. (His wife is in Russia.)*

•

*Last night in Baiardo—'I'm so glad to have you and it's getting worse,' as the husky voice of Morcheeba says. Simple but to the point. I love you so much it almost hurts...You've given me a time out of time, a time out of life—almost surreal. As you told me one day in surprise—you exist!*

•

*Oh by the way am not pregnant thank god and guess what? I might be getting married to Hector. Babe, he finally asked me this past weekend. Stacy [her daughter] is all pissed off because she doesn't like him at all and either do my Mom & Dad because he's a Mexican so please don't say anything to them about this okay even Stacy doesn't know yet. But Michael I love this Mexican and I am going to marry him. I don't know the date yet because am really kinda scared you*

*know what I mean. This will be the 4th for me and number 5 for him but I sure love this ass-hole.*

and anguish—

*Well Michael a lot has been happening to me. Well first of all we kicked Tommy out in May, remember him? Well he wasn't helping Mom pay bills so she kicked him out. Michael I still love the (fat pig). Am still dating him behind Stacy and Mom's back so please Mike this is our secret, and you will never believe this one, I gotten pregnant by him. I found out after we kicked him out, can you believe that all this time with Vincent I wasn't, remember how worried I was about it at the time and now I was with Tommy's baby. Was, Michael. I had my first abortion on May 25th at 3:00. It didn't hurt at all like thought it would. It's a terrible feeling knowing you had a baby growing inside. I was 5½ weeks at the time. I didn't know where Paul was until it was too late. He wanted me to keep it but I was just too afraid he wouldn't help me support it, know what I mean? And now I hope am not pregnant again because you're not supposed to have intercourse for 2 weeks and on Thursday he put it inside of me but I kicked him in the stomach before anything happened so am praying nothing did because, Babe, things are starting to look better, am going to start working at Mesa Lutheran Hospital across*

*the street which pays \$6.39 an hour. That's where I've always wanted to work so maybe now I can start paying my own bills but Michael a part of me still loves that con man Tommy, that's what Stacy and Mom call him but I just can't help myself. I still love him. Am I stupid or what? He's supposed to come down tonight to pick me up. I left a message at where he works. I've been staying away for like a week to see if I still want him and Michael I do. I must be crazy. I've been writing to a pen pal in Australia. He's 53, works for the government. We've been getting kinda serious through letters and now he's coming out here in aug 10th to meet me & my mom. I get 2 letters a week from him. One audiotape. I've got to mail him one out tomorrow or he's going to disown me. So see Babe am all confused by 2 guys. I love Tommy, want to have his baby again but also to chance it with Mike, maybe to even go to Australia. Am just so confused. Do you have any suggestion on my rotten life? As for Stacy, she's staying away from men. Maybe she's the smart one.*

Quotations—

*“De repente me canso de ser hombre.”—Pablo Neruda*

*“Fellas, don't drink that coffee. You'd never guess. There was a fish in the percolator.”—Pete Martell, Twin Peaks*

*“LITERATURE IS ONE OF THE SADDEST*

ROADS THAT LEADS TO EVERYTHING.”—Andre Breton

Reader response—

*I take back what I said about Byatt’s book. There is a reason for her “in depth” and seeming obsession with “far out” sexual material. However, I can get along just fine without going off in that direction.*

•

*Among other first-rate third-eye openers, I would name Viktor Pelevin; to say the least, he is the only present-day Russian writer that deserves any mention at all.*

•

*Did I say that William Faulkner is a bit tough to figure out? Am I alone in this thought?*

•

*I am taking a break from Faust and supplementing it w/ Rosencrantz & Guildenstern. I am sure to return to Faust, but the book was much too heavy to hold in the pool.*

•

*The opening months of this year have seen a rapid expansion in my reading list. [Our sister] said you told her 11 books in a year would save her soul. At that rate I am well on my way to salvation.*

Analyses of my shitty character—

*You are a weak weasel. I don’t believe almost everything you have typed about me on that cold sheet of paper. I have to say that I’m glad to see you actually have any strong emotion for me at all being as I have often thought of you as a machine...It takes two selfish people to not see how wonderful the other is and you well know I admire you, I love you, and I have learned a lot from you. You have helped to shape my life and I am very grateful to you for this. Unfortunately for me, you helped me in my craft and strength of thought in ways reminiscent of a mathematician. I learned about love, dedication (to people), and loss from everyone else. I am very sensitive and needy, yes, but the rewards of knowing me are not for the coldhearted. You lose this time—I do very much love myself; I know this well. Yet I also love many, many other people. It is something very easy to do and very rich in its rewards. That was the one thing I thought you would come around to experience, to perhaps become more human.*

•

*You have a different heart.*

Explicit historical markers—

*Oh yes, and one final tale of the end. I was reading in Newsweek how the year 2000 may really be the end, and it will be the fault of computers. (1996)*

•

*Please let the Russian people know that there are a few Americans that are more concerned about the effects of the Russian economy than our president that is in heat. It is a circus here. Six & seven year olds are asking what oral sex is because it is now a common household word. (1998)*

•

*[My wife] and I are finally becoming accustomed to life in this land of routine, weekend leisure, mobility, and above all else, stability. America is the great monument to security these days, seemingly the only nation on earth unfazed by economic disaster, revolution, civil war, and extreme poverty. This is at once disconcerting and truly welcome. No, there is no daily stimuli which shocks, provokes, unsettles but there is plenty of time to breathe, take for granted and enjoy the simpler more familiar aspects of life. (1998)*

Anecdotes—

*There have been some good yuck yuck moments too such as Sat. evening, my first in Cork. While walking along in the city center I passed several teenage girls and one exclaimed in a strong Irish accent: "Did ya see 'im? He had a hoooooooooonch back! A hoooooooooonch back!" As the distance grew I could still hear her: "A hoooooooooonch back!"*

•

*My dad hired a receptionist the other day who reported for work, left to take her first coffee break, and never returned. When I sip coffee at work, I think of her and what she may be doing.*

•

*The local taxi driver in Contulmo has been arrested and sent to jail. He got drunk at five in the morning and drove around the plaza at high speed, doing doughnuts and shouting the name of his wife (one of my coworkers who was jailed for embezzlement). Unfortunately he was sent to a different jail than his wife, which means I will now have to send cigarettes to two different prisons, testing the limits of my generosity and Peace Corp spirit.*

•

*One of the guys...had told Simon of a banya where women could be had...My oh my was I so surprised by this sudden turn of events. 2 very pretty and friendly girls turned up and we had a great fun time although I was too nervous to be a fuck machine but really enjoyed myself.*

Big questions—

*The last point of the Alaska trip is the realm of discussion I have had, largely with myself, concerning mundane lives and the absence of danger. What is the point of most lives? Merely to live as long as one can with minimal discomfort or threat? Not for me, I have found. There is this fine line between a foolish act and a brave act. It changes. It looks different from the spectator point of view. It looks different in hindsight. I find it important to find a limit, to push that limit, and yes, at times, do some creative recovery if all does not go well. I do not mind this, but I do not like to subject others to it if they do not go willingly and with abandon. Risk is beautifully indeterminate. Anything can happen. Prepare the best you can and sally forth. It is the fact that anything can happen that keeps life interesting, that keeps it full. But one must pursue that fullness, it won't always find you. I leave this thought undeveloped and hope it does not scare you away from telling me when your*

*next major block of time off is and what, where, how you plan for us to do with it. Surely these thoughts have rattled in your mind for you now find yourself in a very foreign place, with the unknown all about you, and the very thought, though it causes our mama to fret, brings much envy and admiration from me.*

•

*What if we [Americans] don't fully exploit our bounty?... What if I were just like all of those other 5 billion souls on this planet of entropy, what if there was nothing special, exceptional at all about me? What if I had to struggle to eat? To find water? So what if I were just a poor campesino in the Chilean countryside with good friends, a small stash of wine, and a house that shook when the wind blew? Cold showers, no phone, floors that revealed the earth beneath my feet? What if my children did not have degrees from important universities or the newest fashions in clothes, toys, and braces? Would I be cheating them? After all, I have had all of these things—have they made me who I am? Would it be cruel to decide for that they do not need university careers or a swimming pool or access to high technology?*

The closings—

*Wishing you a book delirium just short of convulsions,*

•

*Take care of yourself because you are the only one that  
knows my funeral arrangements.*

•

*And on that note I will end this ramble which has spanned  
months from the trains of Siberia to the basement of Golden  
Valley, Minnesota.*

•

*Write when you have time.*

*Pursue art.*

*Take care.*

•

*Meaning it,*

•

Communication, community, commons, commune: these words have root in *communis*, in that which is held in common, that which is shared. When we don't swap stories of who did what and when and what it might have meant, of why and how it happened and how it

felt, of where we're coming from and where we're going or hope to go, we slip away from ourselves and we slip away from each other. Sharing within relationships, the discovery and upkeep of common ground, may be best accomplished day-by-day and face-to-face. But I wager that every relationship could benefit from periods of intimate distance.

Letters are both windows and mirrors to render the stories of our lives meaningful and mark an inner time of memory and thought. We put pause and perspective at risk if we content ourselves with the limited play of lesser exchanges—exchanges that tend to be a poor mimicry of communication in its deepest sense, and as fleeting as they are fast. Yet herein is an irony we might savor. Perhaps, just as photography freed painting, emails and more cutting edge means of communication have freed letters to be what we should aspire for them to be: an occasion, first in the writing, then in the reading.

And so I resolve to once again start asking what a letter wants to be and try out tentative answers. Rather than write an elegy, I will attempt to get kind of serious again through letters, writing and hopefully receiving them. Another golden age—potentially avant-garde in thought and feeling, if rear-guard in form—could be but a day's run away.