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Private Lives, Public Selves

Jean Bethke Elshtain*

In an interview with Philip Roth on the publication of Milan Kundera's splendid novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera pronounced:

Private life has always existed. There's something even more precious which modern man has made his specialty: *intimate life*. Intimate life is a creation of Europe during the last 400 years—in particular the creation of romanticism: intimate life understood as one's personal secret, as something valuable, inviolable, the basis of one's originality.¹

Kundera goes on to describe something terrible. A Czechoslovakian writer, Jan Prochazka, has his intimate talks taped by the secret police. Several years into this violation of his private life, the regime decides to destroy Prochazka. They destroy him by broadcasting his intimate conversations over state-controlled radio.

Kundera continues:

[T]here is a border between intimate and public life, I'd say a magic border that can't be crossed with impunity. Only a hypocrite would say that such a border doesn't exist, and that a man ought to be the same person in his public and intimate life. Any man who was the same in both public and intimate life would be a monster. He would be without spontaneity in his private life and without responsibility in his public life. For example, privately to you I can say of a friend who's done something stupid that he's an idiot, that his ears ought to be cut off, that he should be hung upside down and a mouse stuffed in his mouth. But if the same statement were broadcast over the radio spoken in a serious tone—and we all prefer to make such jokes in a serious tone—it would be indefensible.²

Prochazka's reaction to this humiliation, Kundera notes straightforwardly, was to die.

What of the making public of a letter, what of the vocation of correspondent? Letters are a private genre, belonging in general, Kundera would say, to the domain of intimate life. When they "go public" some boundary is crossed, some violation is committed. Kundera's position hints that the great Oliver Wendell Holmes was perhaps a bit of a monster, seeming in his private life to be very much the "same" man as he was in his public vocation, except for his romantic effulgency with Clare

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1. Roth, *In Defense of Intimacy: Milan Kundera's Private Lives*, *The Village Voice*, June 26, 1984, at 42, col. 1.

2. *Id.*

Castletown. Reading this occasionally twittery and schoolboyish prose in Professor G. Edward White's article, I found myself alternately embarrassed on Holmes's behalf and overjoyed that he could break out, however mildly, from the constraints of his tightly bound self.³

A second matter beckons for attention. When we—we scholars, we bibliophiles, we voyeuristic gazers on and into the lives of others—bring letters or a diary into the public domain, this entails a responsibility and presents an epistemological, if not an ethical, dilemma, depending on whether the correspondent intended the letters for destruction or preservation. We also confront a challenge of meaning or interpretation. Toward the end of his discussion of Holmes as correspondent, Professor White asks: "Why did Holmes write so many letters, and how did he conceive of his role as a correspondent? What light can his conception of that role shed on his life as a whole? Can we better understand Holmes the judge, or Holmes the person, from examining his correspondence?"⁴

White concludes that the correspondence is "not a particularly good source of insight into [Holmes's] life as a judge."⁵ Holmes "rarely discussed in detail the cases on which he was working," gave few clues as to how he adjudicated, and even fewer juicy details on interactions among the Justices.⁶ For Holmes, correspondence was itself an object of desire, a cathected pleasure. Thus, correspondence took second place to judging in Holmes's world, because desire ranked lower than duty.⁷ Turning to correspondence was like a visit to a mistress or an evening of ribaldry for Holmes, with this caveat: It was a respectable way for him to indulge himself and his interests and, very rarely, his whims. One gets the impression that this son of Boston Calvinists rarely was whimsical. The task of self-improvement exists even in the pleasure of correspondence. Discussing Berkeley, Kant, and Hume with a correspondent is a lofty pleasure, a way to take the measure of one's understanding and, dutifully, to pass it on. White concludes that Holmes's role as correspondent was central to his character.⁸ Letter writing helped to frame the horizon against which Holmes labored as a judge, did his duty as a family man, and further compartmentalized his life, or guaranteed its compartmentalization, by indulging in the role of

3. See White, *Holmes As Correspondent*, 43 VAND. L. REV. 1707, 1724-44 (1990). I will not comment further on Holmes's gender distinctions in his correspondence and social life because his views on this matter seem predictable to the point of banality.

4. *Id.* at 1757.

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. A similar perspective is presented in Holmes's judicial philosophy in which duty is prior to rights.

8. See White, *supra* note 3, at 1761.

charmer and flirt.

Let me return to one of White's questions: Can we "better understand" Holmes as judge and person from his correspondence?⁹ This, I suppose, turns on our criteria for "better understanding." Certainly we presume today that the more we know the better we understand. That is why we indefatigably seek more information, search giddily for more sources, particularly intimate or private reserves not yet emptied of their content. We presume we must have "it"—letters, diaries—if "it" exists. Thus, although White claims that Holmes's correspondence, constitutive of Holmes the man, is "not a particularly good source of insight into his life as a judge,"¹⁰ we have a need to know anyhow. Letters put flesh on the bones, particularly with one as reticent, proper, and dutiful as Holmes.

The voyeur in us, however, comes away a bit disappointed—one major, if unconsummated, love affair. As I write these words, I think of the eagerness with which we await the release and publication of Hannah Arendt's letters to Martin Heidegger. Breathless questions and anticipatory conclusions abound: Will Frau Heidegger commit them to the flames at the last moment, given her undying jealousy of her husband's love affair with his brilliant, intense young student who turned into one of this century's most distinguished political philosophers? Will they give us more of Arendt's reaction to Heidegger's spotty Nazi record? Perhaps, mused a political theorist and friend of mine, they are simply love letters; perhaps she merely loved him. That conclusion rarely surfaces in our graceless age.

It must be said, then, that not all correspondents are alike. Very different corresponding selves exist just as an enormous variety of diary selves exist. Take, for example, the war diaries of Mary Boykin Chesnut, a major source on Southern women, or one quite unusual Southern woman, and the Civil War. Chesnut began her diaries in February 1861 and crafted them with an explicit narrative purpose, a public aim. Staying within the diary form, she nonetheless turned to tropes and locutions, to literary genres of public expression. We learn of hardships endured and hopes raised and dashed. The enemy leader, Lincoln, is cursed ("an insidious villain") and her husband's going to war mourned ("makes me miserable!").¹¹ Chesnut's diary helped her to constitute a war identity and functioned subsequently to crystallize memories of Southern women and the Civil War.¹² This is very different from, for

9. *Id.* at 1757.

10. *Id.*

11. *THE PRIVATE MARY CHESNUT: THE UNPUBLISHED CIVIL WAR DIARIES* 78 (C. Woodward & E. Muhlendorf eds. 1984) [hereinafter *THE PRIVATE MARY CHESNUT*].

12. See J. ELSHTAIN, *WOMEN AND WAR* 97-99 (1987). See generally *THE PRIVATE MARY CHES-*

example, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, which had no public aim, yet which has stood, trimmed and expurgated by her father and an editor, as one textual monument to the suffering of European Jews during World War II.

Different yet again are the eleven intimate journals belonging to Kundera's character Tamina in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Left behind in Prague when she and her husband went into exile, these lost journals embody life—the very body of her now dead husband—to Tamina.

She longs to see the notebooks so she can fill in the fragile framework of events in the new notebook, give it walls, make it a house she can live in. Because if the shaky structure of her memories collapses like a badly pitched tent, all Tamina will have left is the present, that invisible point, that nothing moving slowly toward death.¹³

Die she does at the book's conclusion, the past irrevocably lost and violated because she learns that her diaries have been "gone through" by another and she must spurn their return.

Different yet again from Tamina's wholly private diary and Chesnut's knowing, cunningly public construction of a private genre, were the diaries of Leo N. Tolstoy and his wife, Sofia. Throughout their married life they wrote diaries in which each lamented the depredations of the other and then left the diaries lying in some visible space, "accidentally" opened to just the page one wanted the other to read so that the other "viciously" would read those excerpts and grow enraged.¹⁴ Today, we would suggest that they seek marriage counseling, or that Sofia join a feminist support group, but this construction of a relationship, in part through lurid diary entries, helped them to constitute a difficult but long-lived marriage.¹⁵

Correspondents, like diarists, are not all alike. We have learned what Holmes was up to. Consider another great correspondent—over 4000 letters are extant—Sigmund Freud. Freud's correspondence is remarkable for its complexity, irony, unblinking disillusionment, and scope. True to the rectitude that was an inviolable part of his character, Freud never confesses to the truth of his sexual life. This has led some debunkers to speculate, given the lack of epistolary evidence, that Freud really must have worked at hiding something. These tireless debunkers, because of no written evidence, conclude that these writings must have been destroyed or, alternatively, this is a silence, a gap, that they must fill.

NUT, *supra* note 11.

13. M. KUNDERA, *THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING* 86 (1981).

14. See M. DE COURCEL, *TOLSTOY: THE ULTIMATE RECONCILIATION* 248-50 (1988).

15. *Id.*

Freud would be amused at this privileging of the sexual in the most literal sense and in a form that can only be called "vulgar Freudianism," something of which Freud himself rarely was guilty. For Freud the central markers of his identity take shape early through his letters to Wilhelm Fliess. Written between 1887 and 1902, the letters are an extraordinary account of the actual construction of psychoanalysis's beginnings. Intense, determined, and driven by a demon that would give him no rest; alone, seeing himself as a heroic conquistador of thought, Freud poured out page after page of the most remarkable, complex, and brilliant correspondence. Fliess clearly was out of his depth. Freud persisted, however, projecting into Fliess an understanding that was not there, so that Freud might continue to develop what he thought through writing it. When that correspondence ended as Freud's central preoccupation, having arrived at the point in which he could begin to compose *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud entered a state of creative transport, completed sections in a flurry, and sent one section to Fliess with this comment:

It was all written by the unconscious, on the well-known principle of Itzig, the Sunday horseman. "Itzig, where are you going?" "Don't ask me, ask the horse!" At the beginning of a paragraph I never knew where I should end up. It was not written to be read, of course—any attempt at style was abandoned after the first two pages. In spite of all that I of course believe in the results. I have not the slightest idea yet what form the contents will finally take.¹⁶

In this early correspondence before Sigmund Freud, struggling practitioner and family man, had become simply "Freud," his correspondence is the volatile, dynamic working out of his theory. It is an adventure of the highest sort, a war, a struggle against the barriers thrown up by anxiety and repression. We see a creative and driven mind. Correspondence was central to Freud's identity. One might even say that in and through this early correspondence he created his identity and with a far less tidy paper trail than that bequeathed by Holmes.

Finally, and different yet again, is the prison letter—the correspondent as a political thinker and activist. This is a genre central to twentieth century political life and thought. Think of Antonio Gramsci, Mahatma Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*.¹⁷ The prison self as correspondent constitutes and sustains a political identity through correspondence. He buttresses the faithful and reassures those still on the outside that he has not lost the faith and neither should they. Two of the most power-

16. S. FREUD, *THE ORIGINS OF PSYCHOANALYSIS: LETTERS, DRAFTS AND NOTES TO WILHELM FLIESS, 1887-1902*, at 261 (1957).

17. See, e.g., M. KING, *WHY WE CAN'T WAIT* 76-95 (1964).

ful prison selves in recent years come from central Eastern Europe, Adam Michnik's *Letters from Prison*¹⁸ and Vaclav Havel's *Letters to Olga*.¹⁹ The prison letter is an encoded form. In his foreword to Michnik's letters, Czeslaw Milosz begins by quoting Gandhi, another great prisoner of conscience and prison correspondent.²⁰ With Gandhi, Michnik insists on a politics of nonviolence, a politics that repudiates revenge, a politics that insists "neither maggots nor angels,"²¹ no crude Manichean reduction. One excerpt states:

I am afraid not of what they will do to us, but of what they can make us into. For people who are outlaws for a long time may feed on their own traumas and emotions which, in turn, strangle their reason and their ability to see reality. Even the best people can be demoralized by years of persecution and the shock of regaining their lost stature. I pray that we do not return like ghosts who hate the world, cannot understand it, and are unable to live in it. I pray that we do not change from prisoners into prison guards.²²

Vaclav Havel's letter writing occurred under even more stringent conditions than those confronting Michnik.²³ Strict prohibitions and injunctions governing style, content, tone, size, and structure ruled Havel's correspondence. His mastery was in handling these regulations, following them yet "managing to slip his message through, remaining within the limits of a standardized model of utterance yet imbuing it with the urgency of his individual voice."²⁴ Havel's letters are remarkable. He could write just one letter a week. The letter could not exceed four pages. The letter could be sent only to the writer's immediate family and only family matters could be discussed. Humor was banned. No foreign words were allowed. Nothing could be crossed out or corrected or the letter would be destroyed. Quotation marks and underlined words were not allowed. Havel somehow overcame these difficulties, writing to Olga, and managing to turn these letters "into a philosophical treatise in weekly installments, addressed to the outside world at large and dealing with the universal questions of human identity and responsibility."²⁵

For this Symposium on law, literature, and social change, and what recent change is more dramatic than Havel's transition from the prison to the castle, I will conclude these comments, inspired by White's

18. A. MICHNIK, *LETTERS FROM PRISON AND OTHER ESSAYS* (1985).

19. V. HAVEL, *LETTERS TO OLGA* (1988).

20. See A. MICHNIK, *supra* note 18, at ix.

21. *Id.* at 169.

22. *Id.* at 99.

23. See Baranczak, *Eastern Europe*, SALMAGUNDI, Fall 1989, at 24-25. The years of the Gustav Husak regime in Czechoslovakia were among the most brutal in the Eastern bloc.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.* at 27-28.

Holmes As Correspondent, with words from one of Havel's letters to Olga. Havel's letter expresses both the paradoxical nature of human existence as a whole and the certainty that each concrete act of responsibility establishes human identity.

Indeed: if I know what I have done and why, and what I do and why, if I can really stand behind this and (in private, perhaps) own up to it, I am thereby constantly relating to something stable, something I "win" from my "unstable" groundings, and thus I myself ultimately become "relatively stable"—something graspable, something that possesses continuity and integrity. In short, I am "someone," i.e., identical with himself.²⁶

The responsibility of the purveyors of private correspondence is not to resolve these tensions but to acknowledge them honestly.

26. *Id.* at 33.

