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The Letter Left to Me Sandra Schor

IN JOSEPH McELROY's ghostly little novel *The Letter Left to Me*, it falls to the lot of an unnamed fifteen-year-old boy to overcome the troubling presence of a letter, written to him by his father three years before the father's death. The boy is possessed by the letter perhaps more than he possesses it. The letter and its fate are the boy's dilemma; passing beyond it is the book's central and baffling concern.

Much in this beautifully imprisoning and liberating novel is therefore a study of passages. People move watchfully through events; a letter moves mysteriously from bank vault to living room desk; the dead father is journeying "somewhere" on his way, but where? how? Finally, authority passes from the "amazing" dead to the living; and a boy passes into manhood.

But besides psychic and physical transfer, passages are also pathways through a written work. Speculative, private "passages," writerly musings, a diarist's day-to-day newsreel reduced to linear paragraphs-these persist in the grieving boy's mind as the activities of the family resume. ("Was he in the letter? If he was, was it in the words?-or what I could make of thAm?" "I who of all people knew enough to say 'died': yet said 'passed away.' " And the same boy who attends so obsessively to language resorts to a mystical, schoolroom geography: "She said I am fortunate to have had such a father, and I feel like saying 'I still have him,' knowing also that I think he might be alive in another continent.") For although the boy is inactive, he is filled with internal resolve as he attends vigilantly to what is said and done around him, at best writing down his observations in his diary; meanwhile events occur all around him, decisions miraculously become deeds, the letter is reprinted and disseminated to family and friends. ("The deed-my stepgrandfather's deed-grew murky, spread, yet was a nice piece of printing; a new oddity, a new excellence, like the death-but an intermittent irritation, unlike the death-the death stays from this day to the next, alien, comprehensive, a power not previously here.....) The boy's mind thus teems with options, making startling and detailed comparisons as if minute observation were away of coping with the grandeur of tragedy. The writer in him is speaking loudly when the boy says, "But I have this terrific inkling 'once more' that my *life* might elapse without my acting on [it](#). . . ." Isn't this a boy who knows that a contemplative's pose before the world is inaction, the daydreaming skin concealing the writer's true muscle? An outer inaction masks an inner restlessness that silently recomposes, structures and restructures in endless, experimental detail a world abruptly transformed through the death of a loved one.

The boy's self-consciousness about language prefigures his growth. He must pass through his given but no longer intact world, through a set of given terms (cliches, set phrases) to arrive at a new expression of self. Writers surely are embattled by "received" language; this narrator reckons with a "received" letter. Family and friends mistake the letter's earnestness for originality and excellence-we would all make the dead wise!-but in fact the letter expresses banal homilies of a father to a son, "received" ideas through which this exceptionally bright and loving son must somehow pass, emerging from the private imprisonment *of* the writer to the more public freedom of the reader. Ironically, the homily-writing father has cautioned the son that he "shouldn't underline all the time." But youth has an impulse to italicize. Language cannot make it on its own. To McElroy's adolescent narrator, language either *requires* emphasis or is perceived as *having too much* emphasis, an excess of intensity inseparable from the forms and speech he hears all around him. Words are as obsessively burdened as he is. Accurately and within quotation marks he sets off the cliches of the family; often the phrases issue out of affection, and he constructs a kind of devoted child's pleasure house, especially of the trusted pet slogans of the father: "Let's have a little light on the subject." "Less noise from the cheap seats." "The subject is closed." The father is said to have had "a command of language. His talk survives in our memory." This boy, in accumulating facts to remember about his father's life, and confronted by the consensual, almost ritual adoration by others of the dead father's letter, cannot for the life of him escape the grip of the father's language, such as it is. Still, the letter is never quoted in its entirety, suggesting that the boy's competence as a reader is disappointed by what he reads. Snatches of the letter represent glimpses *of* the father; by dealing with fragments the boy understands, without recognizing that he does, how it fails to restore the father he idealizes.

The letter is full of Latinate words and overrefined platitudes; it tends to nominalize actions; it abstracts events; repeatedly, it generalizes. Its sentences are formal and balanced, studiously correct, its parts invisible under the hypotactic arrangement of relative clauses. It is stiff, not funny, not man to man, consistently like "a speech." "Time-wasting trifles caused me to lose sight of my objective"; "In retrospect I am appalled by my neglect of the vistas which life has opened to me"; "A man easily diverted from his work by trivial matters has little chance of making an impressive contribution to his profession"; "I know from my own personal observation that an average man who persists and works hard is much more likely to accomplish something worthwhile than-"; "Whatever else you have to endure, I fervently hope you will be spared this."

By contrast the boy's expression is keenly intelligent, witty, sharply imagined and realized with split-second revelations: "My father lying in the hospital was in my mind like a perhaps fine snake under a stone that evening. but like a new ability I could let wait. . . ."; "My father was spirited away on a government mission. No one else would do"; "Did this woman on the *phone* know what had happened therefore' -when I was only *acting* as if I knew'." The boy's syntax-brief sentences. declarative clauses-is like the tiny eye of a needle. It shuts out the bulky complexities of embedded adult logic but admits strings of dazzling ideas. all happening at once. each one sliding into a parataxis that creates its own youthfully crude complexity. And while parataxis appears casual, it must be taken with the utmost stylistic seriousness: these sentences are the continuing innovation of a masterful writer. The father has the *reputation* of a writer; the boy is a writer.

The mother is a musician and neither reader nor writer; she is moved by the letter's being there. The boy and his mother compete for places in a new world wherein the father (rival for the mother) is forever absent. Now *the o* are rivals for the father, or at least for possession of his letter; they fumble for position. The boy believes it is left "to" him, as if he had inherited it. He stands in a vertical relationship to it, yet one is not convinced that he owns it. The mother is adjacent to it, appropriating her claims in it sidelong, granting permission to reproduce it without ever claiming to own it. She so widens the circle designated to receive the letter that eventually it includes the dean of the boy's college and the entire freshman class! The boy has observed earlier that legally the father's body belongs to her. Does the letter? Is *it a second corpse*? What is her claim in it? Ernst Pawel in his biography of Franz Kafka casts Kafka's mother as the "real target of his savage anger." In discussing Kafka's famous letter to his father, he says. "The fact that she never passed it on to the accused does not seem to have disturbed Kafka: he knew that it had reached the person for whom it was intended" (*The Nightmare of Reason*, Vintage, 1985], 81). In a similar exercise. the mother's expanding authority is reinforced in the authoritative language of the father's letter. Did the father intend to instruct *the mother*? Has he left a program of behavior to follow in raising their son?

The boy is aware that she has become the new authority, though her authority over him without the father's proximity is untried and out of control. She is from the first few pages his "living, wildly valued mother." At the same time, in a way that perhaps the child of a deceased parent can never do, the wife is passing beyond the death of her husband. The son confidently observes that she has renewed her private life, that her musician friends call her "brilliant," that she is "truly busy with great grace and with a mainly secret hecticness."

Despite her "great grace." that elusiveness prevails. The mother is vaguely inaccessible, and the narrative gains moments of erotic imagination because of that. She has retained her value to him amid her secrecy; she "stylishly" walks the Brooklyn Bridge "with men she had known for years."

Her sexuality hovers over the developing narrative as the boy's own solemnly begins to make its demands. She, rather than the leftover image of a writer-father who has renounced pleasure, becomes his role model. She never discusses, let alone debates, the contents of the letter: she is a woman of unquestioned loyalty to her husband. Still, she strikes the boy as coy: speaks wcutelv: says she believes mother and son are "good friends." The mother appears to be less doleful (perhaps less reliable) than the father and within a reasonable time is re-involved among her friends. The boy loves her, but he must pass into his own secret. hectic world, and the letter, in its maleness and evenness, prevents him. The boy, competing with the mother in his own deadpan way and admiring her, is all the more ready to take his place in a heterosexual world.

One evening, as a child at play, the boy impulsively called out to the staid father returning along the street from work, "Drunk again, Dad!" I marvel at McElroy's inclusion of this bizarre vignette, for through its unexpected truth the boy reveals that he knows his father to be a very sober man (later to write a very sober letter). If a drunken father is the little boy's fantasy, why not a drunken woman for the older boy? Nina, not quite drunken, appears later with "whiskey in her," a young woman who arrives mistakenly in the boy's dormitory room. She is fully active. She attracts him as she sashays intelligently around the room. She

smokes. She asks for a drink. She too is a writer. She reads a copy of the letter (which all the boy's classmates have now received in their mailboxes).

For the first time a reader give, him back her reading of it: "Let's face it. It's not an affectionate letter. . . . I mean I hate it. It bugs me." And later, "It's about him. But here you are." She renders his delay and inaction into motion. The boy attempts, and fails, to seduce her. She is a flirt, a drinker, and a good, honest reader. She enables him to go public through her reading. This spirit finds it a "depressing letter, if you ask me" and volunteers her reading freely. She speaks candidly to him, and he believes he has someone at last to tell about the "Drunk again" episode: she has taken the ceremony out of the deathbed utterance, and returned the father to a negotiable reality, man to man. To her playful question, "Is you a fatherless child" he answers. "Not me." For through her clear-eyed frankness, McElroy finally enables the boy to pass beyond the letter and beyond the need to be like his father, and still retain the father. In rejecting the letter, he owns it. "I *will* live a new life," he says on the last page of the novel. "I'll answer the letter. I can't. But I will." Though many gestures in this novel are completed, the writer's uncertain passage through events is incomplete; and as the boy puts to rest the ghost of his father, he attempts his unmistakable passage to manhood.