

Letters to the Past

By Adam Rothstein

Published in *The Brutalitarian*, by Brute Press

Oct. 1st, 2009

[www.brutepress.com](http://www.brutepress.com)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 3.0 License.

Dear 1959 (or thereabouts),

Somewhere across the limited expanse of your body, the poet Jack Spicer was mailing and receiving letters with James Alexander. He thought of them as poetry. Maybe Alexander was a lover; maybe the poems were published during his lifetime, or perhaps not. I would be someone knows the answers to these questions—someone still alive. Or it even could be written down some place. To my edition of *The Collected Work of Jack Spicer* there is a lengthy introduction. Maybe it says there, but I read the introduction several weeks ago, and I cannot remember now.

But I read letter #5 in this edition just now—what do you mean, what “just now”? When? Just now. I don't understand your question. But this is some of what it said, if I may reproduce it here for you:

It is not the monotony of nature but the poems beyond nature that call to each other above the poets' heads. The heads of poets being a part of nature. It is not for us to make the lines of nature precise. Because of their fatal attraction for the lines of nature, for our heads.

We proclaim a silent revolution. The poems above our heads, without tongues, are tired of talking to each other over the gabble of our beliefs, our literary personalities, our attempts to project their silent conversation to an audience. When we give tongue we amplify. We are telephone switchboards deluded into becoming hi-fi sets. The terrible speakers must be allowed silence. They are not speaking to us.

Don't you see, dear friend, 1959? You know so much! So much happened during your brief, single year life. You are an epoch unto yourself. And you were in the age of letters, my friend. Letters. And yet—so much!

I don't need to tell you everything that occurred across the expanse of your skin. You know already. But Jack Spicer was sensing it. He was in it, friend, just as he was in you. The idealism within us, sending up poems like rockets into the even more idealistic heavens. But free from our gravity, the poems were still tied to our constraints. Poor natural us, stuck within our beliefs and our personalities. We could only aim upward, and fire away. It's only natural. Our heads refusing to rise above our headstrong selves. As if we could be such a revolution of stereo.

You know the story, don't you, friend? You've sent your share of letters, written your share of poems. Like any year, such a poet you, you let fire forward, trying to hit us in the back, and maybe remind us. The shooting gallery of history of course, no harm intended. Back in your day, when you mailed a letter, you had to believe—you had to take it on faith that it would get there. You had to write ahead of time to land your language missiles in the present, and more likely than not, when they got there they would too late, and land in the past. From one personality, to the next, you addressed your letters, and some times they got there. Sometimes not.

It must have been a hell of a time, friend 1959. I can't even begin to imagine. But I got your letter, written via Jack,

and I just wanted to touch base, and say, yes—I got it. I hope this reaches you well, wherever you are.

Love,  
Adam

PS. A better way to reach me might be on my... actually, never mind. Forget it.

Dear 1977 (or maybe it was 1976, though my letter wasn't translated for another ten years),

You had a hell of a life, didn't you my friend? I'm sorry that I can't quite recall your name, but this was about the time things were getting complicated. They perfected packet switching back then, and letter writing was going to change significantly. It's leaving me a bit confused, to puzzle over it. But we're still friends, aren't we? I think I can call you my friend. I'm writing you this letter, and I only write letters to my friends.

I'm not the only one who is (was?) confused. Look at Jacques Derrida, puzzling over it himself in *The Postcard*. Direct mail, from the master of letters himself:

You give me words, you deliver them, dispensed one by one, my own, while turning them towards yourself and addressing them to yourself—and I have never loved them so, the most common ones become quite rare, nor so loved to lose them either, to destroy them by forgetting at the very instant when you receive them, and this instant would precede almost everything, my *envoi*, myself, so that they take place only once. One single time, you see how crazy this is for a word? Or for any trait at all? [ ] Eros in the age of technical reproducibility. You know the old story of reproduction, with the dream of a ciphered language [ ] Want to write a grand history, a large encyclopedia of the post and of the cipher, but to write it ciphered still in order to dispatch it you, taking all the precautions so that forever you are the only one to be able to decrypt it (to write it, then, and to sign), to recognize your name, the unique name I have given you, that you have let me give you, the entire strong-box of love supposing that my death is inscribed in it, or better that my body might be enclosed in it with your name on my skin, and that in any event my own or its survival or your own be limited to the life of—you.

Do you see what I mean? Such paranoia of the subject, we were forced to write in code just to get away from ourselves! And what does it mean, and what does I mean? Are we any closer to the truth? With all this semiotic packet-switching, the exchange of meaning through into high gear, played out upon the wires, and still, written one letter at a time, just like we always have.

And even with one of the best languages out there, with the vocabulary of psychoanalysis, Derrida was tripped up in the complexity, in the polymorphous perversity of our language, unable to do something as simple as send a letter from one person to another without becoming lost in the pathways of desire. From the unconscious, to our heads, and up in the air in a brilliant Spicer Rocket, and down again—without any improvement in targeting. Our desires, beliefs, personalities, and egos, all of them clinging to the unchained beauty of our poetic language even as they try and set our poems free. Trapped in the bureaucracy, the academy of letters, our meaning certainly knew its form, but because a twisted mass of substance. Perhaps if Jacques knew about packet-switching—but then, such things were secrets back then.

Secrets, secrets, secrets! The ultimate in letters, such clear and concise poems of meaning, composed and sealed, signed, and delivered to the eyes only. These are not poems to be read to an audience, and allowed to bounce around the heavens. They are directed speech, expressed to one and one only. And afterwards, after communicate has been carried out, that one recipient is to destroy the message. The one, the I, must hear those fatal words, “this

message will self-destruct.”

If you had listened to me, you would have burned everything, and nothing would have arrived. I mean on the contrary that something ineffaceable would have arrived, instead of this bottomless misery in which we are dying. But it is unjust to say that you did not listen to me, you listened closely to the other voice (we were already a crowd in that first envelope) which asked you not to burn, to burn in order to save. Nothing has arrived because you wanted to preserve (and therefore to lose), which in effect formed the sense of the order coming from behind my voice, you remember, so many years ago, in my first “true” letter: “burn everything”. You had answered me the next day, and this is how your letter ended: “The letter ends on the exigency of this supreme pleasure: the desire to be torn by you” (you are the mistress of the equivocal and I liked it that you left it to me to attribute this desire to the letter, and then you added) “I am burning. I have the stupid impression of being faithful to you. I am nonetheless saving certain simulacra from your sentences (you have shown me them since). I am waking up. I remember the ashes. What a chance, to burn, yes yes [ ].”

Yes, yes dear friend, the tragedy of memory, which we all at some time forget. Luckily, fidelity to our promises has a way of being broken, and secrets have a way of getting out. The tragedies that have arisen throughout our history because of letters misdelivered, or misread, or worst of all, not delivered in time, will eventually be forgotten with everything else. Most the encyclopedias will be forgotten, many of the histories if not all, and we will forget some or all of our letters. And by this I mean, my friend, the small letters: the pieces torn from the larger letters, those individual signs, which we tear up and forget, and then build up and re-send, forgetting that we have already received such meaning.

Those were the times, these frantic mailings, and these dispatches from our own memories scribbled on the back of dirty postcards we came across among more scholarly books. There is a certain charm to them, don't you think? Something poetic about the search for meaning, about the drastic expressions we fired out of the tops of our heads, only falling back to earth to hit us, and leave us stunned.

But I fear I must go, because the future is calling me onward, and because time keeps a-ticking away, as it does, doesn't it my friend? Yes, indeed! Good luck with your letters, and with those early attempts at packets. Do a good job, because we're counting on you in the future!

Love,  
Adam

Dear Cyber-Time,

Hello! How I've looked forward to writing you this letter! You wouldn't believe the amount of paperwork I've had to deal with today, and now, finally, I can get on to the pleasure of correspondence.

But then, you know that, don't you, dear friend? You've seen my letters to my friends 1959 and 1976, because in the present, letters work a bit differently than they used to. Do you mind if I... no? Good. Yes, I'll explain a little bit for anyone listening in.

You see dear friend, (and I hope you won't mind if I continue to call you this, though I don't actually know you. No? Good!) we don't write letters anymore, do we? Now we send email, and instant messages, and a myriad other things I haven't even bothered to learn about yet. There is no more waiting for the infinite slowness of physical space, for pieces of paper to wind their way around the world, and through a slew of different D/T time zones, to

finally reach another person's hands. Now our letters are packets, and they are switched instantaneously, or nearly so, and continuously, meaning all kinds of things most of us don't even begin to understand. There are new languages and new technologies evolving almost daily. But the good part is, they easily replicate our old languages, so we can write up all those old beliefs, feelings, personas, and egos into tiny packets as send them whizzing off with the light, even faster than a rocket, these photon poems burning continuously, singing all kinds of things you could hope to know and more, across a brand new body of time—the body of time that is instant, and infinite in size. You'll never end, will you, Cyber-Time? Well, maybe. Probably. But I won't know a thing about that until it happens. No happy new years to you.

What we shoot out of heads does not launch on a doomed parabolic, a Cartesian acceleration we only hope will hit the mark. Now there is no “late”, “undeliverable”, “missed connection”, or “buried desire”. It is all thrown upward, where it hovers infinitely in a stasis of meaning, a giant unconscious of networked letters, which can be delivered at any time, forever. We still call it “mail” sometimes, out of nostalgia, or because we haven't bothered to come up with a better word. Maybe we don't think about it enough. But one thing is for sure—we sure aren't licking stamps, or visiting a post office, or remembering addresses.

But where is Jack? Jack? Are you there? Our telephone switchboards are no less deluded, my friend. Our typewriters think they are networked minds, but they are really no more than speedy telegraphs with really good memory. Better memory than us. We still send our poems out into the Internet, and don't even remember them when they are half sent. We are still clouded with our own unconscious, forever human, as we are. We still seek expression, and though our letters are unlimited, now unconstrained by space and time, we might never find the most perfect composition. We will probably never write that most perfect love letter, and James Alexander may never return to San Francisco. Oh, you rockets of desire! Is there any missile gap you can overcome? Probably not. Probably not, my friend.

And Jacques? What about Jacques? Who will understand all the fibers behind our new paper, and figure out the true meaning of all of those picture postcards we hopelessly write? Will the elimination of time, and the reduction of history to a constant, repeating unconscious exchange of memories amongst ourselves finally solve the problem of the longing for the perfect relationship with that ineffable one, the subject, who tempts, sucks, and squeezes our desires out from us, in the watery flow of ink upon the page, or in the pure difference between black and white as found in our pixels shimmering photons? No, my friend, most likely not. Whether in truth or in secret, there is nothing we could say that would dispel the darkness, purify in flame, and reduce the mystery of existence forever.

So what is there for my two dead friends, 1959 and 1976? Is there any historical justices for my friends, which will finally give them the answers they seek, and satisfy the desires within them, burning them in a constant flame of poetic pain? No, most likely not. The tragedy of Cyber-Time is that it is no freedom. The end of the play makes it no less tragic, because after all, the design of acts makes them only ever follow after each other. Things are different now perhaps, and we send a sort of letter we never would have desired, because we never believed it possible. History now looks all about the same—as far as I can remember, anyway.

Well, as you always say, dear friend, until then!

Love,  
Adam