

# Introduction

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“**P**hilosophy’s Letters” is a course I have always wanted to teach, although and probably because it would be regarded by the institution as non-serious, superfluous to “the discipline” and to critical theory proper. For at least since Plato, inheritance of the classical Western tradition has distinguished letter-writing from serious thinking, relegating the former to an outcast, non-philosophical (non-critical) genre. Consider for example Kant’s 1796 “Of an Overlordly Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy,” which opposes Plato the letter-writer to Plato the philosophical father, and which relegates letter-writing to the outside of philosophy, to the status of a “mystagogy” that contaminates *logos* with *mythos*, pure philosophy with mysticism, secrecy, and the poetic (see also Derrida’s “Of an Apocalyptic Tone”). But where does “outside of the proper” begin, and how does one distinguish a thinker, a philosopher, or literary critic from a poet and/or writer of letters? How, for instance, is a “serious” reading of Freud diminished by consideration of his letters, say to Wilhelm Fliess, Carl Jung, and Martha Bernays, among others? And what, if any, import might the exchange of letters between Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt have for a critical understanding of the philosophy/philosophical import of either correspondent?

Written over some twenty-five years, all to his dead wife Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes’s *Birthday Letters* are poems: letters *as* poems, released not long before the writer’s death. Of course, the collection raises the question of auto-bio-graphy—what

this term means and how the auto-thanato-graphical might be, and perhaps should be, read. The collection calls as well for a rereading of the poetry-letters of both Plath and Hughes and, not the least, for a reassessment of their legacy, and of broader issues of inheritance. Would this (not) be a critical endeavour? Might such work suggest ways of crossing disciplinary borders, of enabling the sort of interdisciplinary research that *Mosaic* fosters?

The question is sent, as a letter, a missive, to *Mosaic* readers, hoping that some, or many, of you will be spurred by it to contribute a submission to an upcoming special issue here announced: *Letters*. We are interested in receiving submissions that deal with philosophy's, literature's, or any other discipline's letters; submissions that open readers to the relevance and import of letters for understanding the critical work at hand; that bring letters to light; and/or that theorize the status of letters and their place in the studies undertaken by an academic institution, and by an academic journal. The spectrum is broad: we welcome, and encourage, your contribution to it.

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Derrida, Jacques. "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy." Trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. *Semeia* 23 (1982): 63-97. Print.

Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998. Print.

Kant, Immanuel. "Of an Overlordly Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" [*Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*]. 1796. Trans. L. Guillemit. Paris: Vrin, 1975. Print.