

# An Experiment in Letter-Writing

ELINA SALORANTA

*Jacob's Place 26/13 Aug. Thursday 1909<sup>1</sup>*

*Dear People!*

*I believe I have received all your letters and you presumably mine too. The last time I wrote cards to you from Mitau. That was when Jan left for a week in Riga to draw his altarpiece, as he said. Consequently I now have some peace and quiet again. I nevertheless think the solitude here is having an overly depressive effect on me. I have become so melancholic and nervous that I cannot tolerate anything. I frequently miss Father – especially at times like this – I loved him so unreservedly and he was always so good to me. I do not miss Jan in the slightest – I contemplate the future with him with nothing but dread.*

*He is surely sick – no normal person behaves like he does. But whatever it is that is troubling him – it is impossible to know. And nor does he himself believe in doctors. While he was in Riga he went to see a doctor friend, who examined him and said he has Magenkatharr<sup>2</sup>, and gave him Karlsbad water with large*

*amounts of some sort of powder. That did not make it any better. I think he most probably has a worm – or then there is something wrong with his nerves.*

*One day, for example, I had just got fresh butter from the Krahbant. – As soon as Jan put it in his mouth he started to feel sick, pronounced it bad butter and has not let it pass his lips in any form since, not even in food. – On the contrary he was aggrieved that I did not think it bad too. – With the best will in the world I could not detect anything wrong with it. – And yet I consider myself much more demanding with regard to butter than J. is.*

*Then when we were getting into the carriage to go to Mitau and Laila was wearing her white lace hat, Jan became enraged, insisted that he could not stand the hat, grabbed it off the child's head, crumpled it between his hands and threw it straight into a dirty puddle by the well. – No normal person behaves that way, there is actually something sick about it. Hardly a day passes without him yelling and criticizing us, usually for some trifle. – He is quiet for at most a few hours a day, i.e. when he is painting outside the home.*

*I have written to you about all this in the hopes that you might find some source of light for me. I cannot find any myself.<sup>3</sup>*

*Elli*

The above letter was written by Finnish singer Elli Forssell-Rozentāle (1871–1943) in the Latvian countryside somewhere close to Mitau (Jelgava) in August 1909. A century later, during the academic year 2018–2019, I read the letter at five research events<sup>4</sup> and asked people to write a reply to it from today's perspective. They had five to ten minutes to write the letter, and when it was over, I collected texts from those who were willing to share them. People also had a chance to reply to Elli by email to an address I had created for her: [elliforssell@gmail.com](mailto:elliforssell@gmail.com).

What led me to do such an absurd experiment? Firstly, I am interested in letters as a literary genre, a practice between speak-

ing and writing. Secondly, I am interested in participatory presentations as a collective way of producing knowledge. In other experiments preceding the letter-writing task, I had invited conference attendees to console a painting or to give a reply on its behalf.<sup>5</sup> I had also written a collaborative essay<sup>6</sup> based on emails and had begun struggling with a new epistolary text<sup>7</sup>, my own reply to Elli. So, in retrospect, I see the experiment as an attempt to ask for advice, just as Elli does in her letter. I was not, however, thinking about publishing the participants' replies, not until I read the first one and realized that Elli's concerns do not belong to the past. Since then, the work has been more than an experiment; it has become an emancipatory project.

In the exhibition *I Experience as I Experiment – I Experiment as I Experience*, visitors can engage with the project by leaving a note to Elli. They can listen to Elli's own letter on a video or read it in this publication together with nineteen anonymous, slightly abbreviated replies. After the exhibition, all notes and letters will be delivered to Elli's home in Riga. It is now a memorial museum dedicated to her husband Jan, a famous painter.<sup>8</sup>

Among Elli's letters there are many that touch me deeply, but the letter from August 1909 stands out because of its timeless, human nature. It even starts with the words 'Dear People', as if Elli were writing not only to her sisters and brothers but to all of humankind. What advice does she get from her 21<sup>st</sup> century pen pals? What advice would she get if the experiment were repeated in the next century?

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*Dear Elli,*

*Terribly sorry for the late reply. I've been quite busy, but a delay of 109 years is a bit excessive. I hope this response finds you well – I imagine it's quite hot in Latvia; it is here in Sweden. And I hope that you have found some sort of peace with your situation, however temporary.*

*Your description of Jan sounds just like my father behaves with us. Everything will be pleasant enough, but then something changes – he'll drop something, a piece of technology will malfunction, something will burn on the stove – and he'll lose his temper, fly off the handle, become paranoid and refuse to calm down. I've seen the toll it has taken on my mother, and I feel deeply for your plight.*

*Unfortunately, I have no advice for you, having found no solution of my own. Two things: as I tell my own mother, it is important to remember that you are not the cause of these outbursts. Jan has something unresolved within him, emotionally, and you should not carry blame or guilt for that, because it is wholly out of your control. You want a husband who is stable and gentle, and unfortunately Jan must want to change for the better.*

*In the meantime, take your peace wherever you can find it.*

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*Dear Elli,*

*I am sorry to hear you are struggling. Travel to Vienna and find a Dr Freud. His methods are far from perfect, but he would be able to help.*

*Best of luck,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*I don't know you and you don't know me. Also, I am not a close relative like those you addressed in your letter. Moreover, I cannot, from what you have written, fully understand your plight, your exact situation or the context of the experiences you describe. So, this is a difficult situation, and it is difficult to advise you to, as you put it, find 'some source of light' for you.*

*You say that Jan must be ill; I'm not sure if you mean that literally. Perhaps he is indeed ill, in which case the best course of action would be get him to see another doctor, if only for a second opinion, and preferably someone he doesn't know, and one who specializes in conditions of the mind.*

*But I feel that the problem may be psychic in the old sense of the word (that is: a problem Jan perhaps has in his soul). I note you say you miss your father because he loved you so much and was so 'good' to you. Parental love is a wonderful thing, and often – if one is lucky – it is nearly unconditional. Only very lucky people find that kind of unconditional love in a partner. So, to compare Jan (or at least Jan's love) to your father may be a little unfair.*

*I am also aware that I am writing to you from the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a hundred years after your letter. So, the power relations and expectations in marriage and family are different from what they were in your time. I am sure you had no access to marriage counselling, which is probably why you turned to your siblings for advice. But I don't believe that human nature changes much, and I will try to make a reading of your situation.*

*It is difficult to know how deep your love for Jan is, and maybe more difficult to know how much he loves you. I fear that perhaps Jan is out of love with you. If that is the case, it is of course very sad.*

*Above all, you must not let Jan's temper tantrums terrorize you. That is not acceptable. You cannot allow yourself to be abused by another person however much you may care for them, otherwise that situation will be very destructive to your own life and your sense of self. So, I urge you not to accept this situation, for your own sake and for Jan's also.*

*I wish you well and Happiness!*

*Dear Elli,*

*You say there is something sick inside him (Jan), but is that interpretation too individualistic and somatizing/naturalizing? You live in a heterosexual family situation, you are both talented people, with probably high-intensity kids. Is this working for all of you? I would say that sexual difference is something of a post-naturalist register, a social structure and symbolic, too. You claim you need help. This, too, is individualistic and somatizing/naturalizing. Seeing sexual difference as a social and symbolic fabric that keeps individuals and bodies confined – that is what I can offer. Who are your friends in your home town? Who do you talk to? Your neighbours? The women in the shop? A family member? You love your father, you say. Who else do you love and whose love could you bathe yourself in? I bet that person is a woman. A woman as a sister or a lover. I'd love to give you such a person. I hope you will find her soon, now that Jan is in Riga.*

*Best,*

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*My Dear Elli,*

*I feel for you, being so far away from us in this difficult time. Me too, I miss Father and wish he was here to help us when things get out of hand.*

*After reading your description about Jan's behaviour, I must say that I agree, he is not behaving like a normal person. But it is hard to figure out what you, or even I, can do about it. In my women's club, where I go once a week, we sometimes talk about our husbands and their behaviour. Sadly, I think that Jan is not alone in the way he acts. Men seem to have a longing to control, to show their strength and power by criticising and yelling. One of my friends fantasized that in the future this might be seen as a sort of violence – unjust and harmful – something that might even be treated with help of specialists.*

*But then again you say that he has already spoken to a doctor friend and tried the powder. Are you sure he took it? Perhaps he flushed it and lied to you about the powder not having any effect. Do you have any means of contacting the doctor to get more powder and perhaps mix it in a glass of cognac you could bring Jan at night?*

*Remember always that I love you, and if you want to come and visit, we have a spare room set up for you.*

*Love from your sister,*

*PS. About the butter: he was probably just making a scene to attack you. Please try not to think about it, he obviously knows nothing about buying and storing food.*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Thank you for your openness, your honesty and your confidence in writing to me and telling me with such clarity about your situation and your worries. Do you remember the time when you fell in love, when you found out that this painter, this very attractive man, wanted to marry you? I can still remember it like yesterday, the sparkle in your beautiful eyes when you told me about the two of you. I only knew him a little from before, and I couldn't have been happier for you to have found such a great love in your life. Remembering these feelings, I'm now very sad to hear how he has changed and turned into a completely different person. Maybe you are right, and it is indeed an unknown illness that has overwhelmed his character and makes him act so weird and aggressive. I wish I could come to you and help find out what is wrong with him. Maybe we could arrange a visit? And even if I most probably won't be able to change the situation much, I think the two of us could share so much of our latest experiences and stories.*

*Best wishes,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*It is easy to describe your partner as sick, but I think he is no more ill than anyone else. Actually, the problem is that he doesn't love you. You are not important enough for him, that is why he dares to criticize your food, for example. For a person who values you highly, your food would be delicious, even with the old butter.*

*Just admit that you don't mean much to Jan. He doesn't really care about you, and you cannot force him to love or respect you, because you cannot influence the feelings of another person. The only element that you can change is you yourself. Why should anyone respect you? Are you independent? Good looking, self-confident? What are your hobbies, who are your friends, are you interesting to Jan at all? Are you interesting to yourself? Don't think about his imagined sickness, think instead how to become a better person, but remember you should change only for your own goals. Jan might never appreciate that, and that is something you cannot change. You have to be independent from his opinions & behaviour.*

*Sincerely,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*I am writing to you from a remote island and I am here among friends, but in the last weeks I have been nervous and melancholy, so I think I understand your state of mind. And perhaps also Jan's.*

*I have no good advice to offer, but I wonder if this time apart will be beneficial for both of you. I have heard that you are very busy at this time of year, picking berries and making jams. I wonder if these familial duties can bring you some peace. Perhaps not.*



*Jan has his painting and his travels. What does he leave you? Loneliness and melancholy... Perhaps you could take a journey with Laila. Perhaps on a boat to St. Petersburg – I have heard it is a beautiful city and the sea air will freshen your mind and give your body some strength.*

*But I am not the person to give advice. I am struggling to control my feelings myself and waiting for the hopeful effect of the island atmosphere.*

*Yours,  
an anonymous friend*

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*Dear Elli,*

*I worry about you. It cannot be easy to cope with this uncertainty and the underlying violence. Whatever happens, please don't blame yourself.*

*Did you try to talk to him?*

*Did you ask if he noticed how sad Laila had become?*

*Did you consult his closest friend?*

*If I were you, I would try to empathize with his victims and put less focus on him.*

*So, next time he throws Laila's hat, run after it, brush it and tell her what a lovely hat it is and how sad you are that someone tried to destroy it.*

*If he refuses the butter, ignore him and give it to someone else in the room.*

*Yours,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Your letter made me very worried and I wonder how you are doing now. Jan's behaviour truly sounds bad. He is nervous, like so many seem to be – especially men. I remember many nervous*

*men from my childhood, my grandfather and others. It is devastating when you have to watch out all the time, and there is no one to protect you.*

*You should get out of there, for your own sake and for your children's – at least for a while.*

*Best wishes,*

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*Hi Elli!*

*I just heard about you for the first time. I heard about your marriage for the first time, but I have heard about many other marriages before this, and especially in recent times.*

*For example, I have learned that single people are more critical about their future spouses than those who are married. Single people say 'I wouldn't tolerate that' whereas married tolerate all kinds of things. Why?*

*There are, of course, happy marriages as well. But even in happy marriages people must bear hardships. In happy homes, too, if they exist. In happy families, if they exist. The longer a marriage lasts, the less likely it is to be purely happy.*

*Is it so? Try to cope.*

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*Dear Elli,*

*While married life is not always a bed of roses, it surely seems that there are some problems at the heart of your home. It seems as if Jan has some underlying physical condition which makes him irritable, but it seems, more importantly, that he has other psychological and behavioural issues which he needs to deal with. This behaviour towards Laila is bullying and unfair to the child, and it seems as if he is terrorizing you all with his bad humour. He needs to seek help for all your sakes as you also seem to be near to the breaking point.*

*I hope you can find a way through these issues to recover some serenity in your household.*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Thank you for writing to me. I don't know you very well, but what you describe reminds me of the relationship of a good friend of mine. I hope she won't have children with this person. I don't mean it would be the end of the world – but I guess it would be more difficult to get away. And in your case, in another time, perhaps even harder.*

*Would you like to come visit me in Gothenburg? Perhaps a trip would give new perspectives... You can stay with me, and please don't feel like you need to be a certain way or anything. We can do things, talk, or do nothing at all.*

*I want to say you seem strong, I don't want anyone to push you down. You have me, here in the future, as support, you need to get what you need in your life. Even if it breaks conventions. There are more people in the world who are on your side, but revolution is slow!*

*Sorry for writing so corny and clichéd, I didn't take time to formulate very well because I really wanted to reply just now...*

*Love,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*I wish you could just let Jan go. Nowadays a woman can have a room of her own. Although you might have to struggle, I believe it would be easier than enduring your husband's tyranny.*

*So, go ahead and leave, take your child and the hat from the puddle and come here. You can continue as a singer, and we might be able to find you work as a teacher, too.*

*Be brave, my friend, be brave.*

*Yours,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Unfortunately, I didn't receive your postcard from Mitau, and so I don't have any image of that place. I hope it's nice enough.*

*Leaving your own country and having to learn and adapt yourself to a new culture and language is, of course, something I've experienced for the last eight years. I too miss greatly some of my country, but mostly its people and my family. I get news from them, but not the whole story.*

*I'm sorry to hear about Jan. Have you consulted another physician? Perhaps you could put an inquiry to Dr Freud in Vienna.*

*Wishing you the best,*

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*Dear Unknown Friend,*

*As there are borders between us that are protected by people and time, it took some time until your letter reached me. Today is a wonderful and sunny day, which contrasts even more with the content of your letter. I am very sorry to hear that you and your daughter are left alone with the issue.*

*It seems to me that there is actually something wrong with Jan as he appears not to be able to control his behaviour and words anymore. Good doctors are rare, so the only hope for change is you. From the small clues I got from you, I would advise you to keep Jan as busy as possible. You mentioned that he likes to paint and that this is the only time you are free. So, keep him occupied by asking him to paint a subject which is far from home and hard to reach, even if he will be grumpy.*

*Yours,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*It is hard to say such things & questionable whether it is right to give such invasive advice – but – it is important for you to ask if you & Laila are safe around Jan, to consider how being there affects you both emotionally.*

*I have been in a situation likes yours & I was not safe – I had to leave. It saved my life. There must be a way for you to do so. Seek it – at least so that you can have a plan of action.*

*No one has the right to terrorize another person, even if he is sick. It is unacceptable that his sickness is channelled into abuse against you.*

*I know all this is hard to hear. Yet you must hear it. Tell it to yourself. Remind yourself that it is not okay. Look for the light in the direction of the exit. Trust you will find a life outside. Have faith – he does not control you.*

*Best,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Your friend Elina has asked me to write to you. This is hard, because I don't feel I have anything to offer you by way of consolation. Are you unable to leave him because of practical problems (money, children) or emotional one (you love him, need him) or because of faith, ethical reasons (it would be wrong to leave him)?*

*I'm afraid I really don't want to have to think about you because I suspect there is nothing I can say that would make any difference to you.*

*At times like this I think about Samuel Beckett's phrase to a lover whose husband died: 'the old earth turning'. The earth turns, the days and nights come and go.*

*When I was a baby and then a small child and well into my adulthood, I felt my mother's depression far too much. I never*

*knew my own sadness, only hers. I am full of her sadness and cannot/don't want to feel any more, especially the sadness of someone who is dead.*

*I'm sorry, but I am trying to write something that is truthful, as truthful and as self-knowing as I can be.*

*Perhaps there is some consolation in knowing that another person, someone you don't know, is trying to speak the truth about her experience.*

*With love,*

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*Dear Elli,*

*Thanks for your letter and your honesty. You describe the world as it is, in all its brutality. And yet you have the strength to look at it straight in the eye. Keep doing that, and you will survive. The light is within you, in your beautiful soul.*

*Best wishes,  
your friend from the future*

Translations:

Elli's letter was translated by Michael Garner.

Other letters originally written in Finnish are translated by me.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> At the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Latvia observed the Julian calendar, while Finland followed the Gregorian calendar. Elli's letter gives the date in both.
- <sup>2</sup> German for gastroenteritis.
- <sup>3</sup> The letter is from the private collection of Elli's descendant Antto Leikola. I have abbreviated the letter, but have not changed the sentence order.
- <sup>4</sup> The first event was a symposium of the Nordic Summer University on Fårö island, Sweden, 29.7.–5.8.2018. The second event, *Life and Fiction*, took place in Turku, Finland, 22.11.2018 and it was organized by Turku University's Centre for the Study of Storytelling, Experientiality and Memory

(SELMA). The third was a conference in Helsinki (*Connoisseurship in Contemporary Art Research* 29.–30.11.2018) that asked, among other things, what can be used as research material. The fourth and the fifth events took place at the University of the Arts Helsinki: one was a symposium on performance and feminism (Theatre Academy 20.3.2019), the other a small seminar related to music history (Sibelius-Academy 30.4.2019).

- <sup>5</sup> See my doctoral thesis *Genre pictures and experiments in writing* (University of the Arts Helsinki, Academy of Fine Arts 2017). The thesis has been published in the Research Catalogue (<https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/275593/275594>).
- <sup>6</sup> ‘Windows – a correspondence between Elina Saloranta and Myna Trustram’. In the anthology *Being There – exploring the local through artistic research* edited by Eduardo Abrantes, Luisa Greenfield and Myna Trustram. NSU Press 2018.
- <sup>7</sup> My reply to Elli – an essay titled ‘Pitsihattu likalätäkössä’ (A lace hat in a puddle of water) – was published in November 2018 in the anthology *Suo, kuokka ja diversiteetti* edited by Markku Eskelinen and Leevi Lehto (ntamo).
- <sup>8</sup> Janis Rozentāls (1866–1916) was one of the first professional painters in Latvia. The museum is located on Alberta Street in Riga in an apartment where Janis and Elli lived from 1904 to 1915.