Floating Worlds

The Letters of
Edward Gorey &
Peter F. Neumeyer

Edited by Peter F. Neumeyer
Sept. 16, 1968

Dear Ted

First, and above all, thank you for the splendid bit from Wordsworth. It has affinities to much underestimated minor 18th century people who are very good if read slowly enough—like Mark Akenside, or “The Seasons” James Thomson. The measured calm of Gray, with intimations of the “Intimations.” I didn’t know the lines, but am very fond of them now.

As for the Goosefish that choked to death on a large Codfish—marvelous too. And not even the name of the artist on it. Reminds me a bit of the brothers Albright, two weird painters who haunted my dreams when I was quite young.

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I have finished Do Not Fear a Visit to the Dentist, and another slightly disagreeable Donald story, but the first needs an alternative ending, and the second needs ageing. Both, however, should come to you in the next two weeks.

It dawned on me in the night, after you left, that of course you had done the haunting cover for Amerika. All those covers are quite an exhibit to look at lined up in a row. The Perry Miller ones become all the more peculiar in their lack of human beings.¹

These are just miscellaneous thoughts piled up at the end of the day. Let me say again, don’t take my letter regarding the end of Donald and the . . . as burdensome if you just don’t see it that way.

We do hope to see you soon. Of course any time you’re up here, you are welcome. And we should be down, camping in a friend’s winter-empty house, by mid-October, and will call on you then if you have time.

yours,

Peter

¹. During EG’s first visit to our house, I suddenly realized that he was the artist who had done the covers for a number of Doubleday Anchor paperbacks on my shelf. Not yet being particularly acquainted with EG, I hadn’t made the connection. When I did, I laid out all those books on our living room floor, including Franz Kafka’s Amerika, and books on American literary history by Perry Miller.
30.x.68, Wednesday evening

Dear Peter,

A few things enclosed, among them the versions of the Bede I have.¹

I have been feeling rather doom-and-gloom the past few days, so perhaps some of it may creep into this.

I’m slogging my way through the last drawings for the opera book, which should be done by sometime next week. Several days of pure awful blank will then ensue, they always do. I then thought of amusing myself for a day or two working on *Why We Have Day and Night*. So if I get to the Lear,² etc. at all it will have to be the week between the 11th and the 15th. Whatever day during the day is good for you is okay by me at this point. I won’t come to dinner, stay over, etc; I have intruded on your time much too much already.

As for your invitation for Christmas, I am very touched by it, but I won’t take you up on it.

If you actually do have lunch with Harry on Monday, if indeed that is when it was to be, try and prod him (a) about a blueprint of *Donald and the . . .* and (b) contracts for *Donald Goes Away*.

I’m sounding quite insufferable; I think I’ll stop.

11:15

Not exactly evening either. I took myself off, as a Cultural Duty, to see [Laurence] Olivier’s film of *Othello*. [. . .] Somehow the play came across as being terribly silly, perhaps because Mr Olivier chose to paint himself blue-black, stain the inside of his mouth a flaming red, and to play it more and more like a calypso number as the evening wore on.

On the way home I absently minded (you know what I mean) went through a stop sign in Hyannis so of course there was a police car to apprehend me. A soft answer turnethed away wrath, fortunately.

* * *

Several questions before I forget entirely. It may be too late. I mean I had them written down on something and now I can’t find it. Hm. One was about William Morris. What am I supposed to be reading? I picked up a Pelican of *Selected Writings and Designs* (lots of wallpaper) but in the front it says his collected works are in twenty-four volumes; surely not all . . . of . . . them . . . ? And which translations

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¹ EG and I had been talking about Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*, “The Conversion of Edwin,” which I had translated for him from the ninth-century Old English.

² Edmund Lear’s *The Dong with a Luminous Nose*, a sequel to his book *The Jumblies*. EG illustrated both.
of Rilke? There seems to be a collected in two volumes published by Hogarth, but the poetry volume is [translated] by Leishman, which I gather you did not think particularly good, or rather who, etc. I picked up the *Duino Elegies* translated by someone named MacIntyre, but I haven’t looked into it yet.

* * *

Thursday, pre-breakfast

Two other things I wanted to ask: Chekhov (no way of spelling his name looks right to me): whose translations? Are we all still feeling nasty to Constance Garnett? And Montaigne: ditto? The Florio (the name comes to me out of absolutely nowhere so it may very well be inexplicable in this context) translation, or is there some superior new one?³

Have you done any more thinking about Lionel making decoys? Not to press; it’s only that decoys run through my head. There may even have been one on the envelope. A metaphysical sentence.

How would you feel if we had to publish our books for adults rather than children? I foresee our having the same trouble that I do on my own, but maybe not.

I expect (my chicken egg intervened)—now I don’t know what I expected. Non-metaphysical sentence.

Ted

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³ The Florio translation of Montaigne would have been from the seventeenth century.
The Winter Flowers

It began snowing in the early afternoon.

Jane settled herself on the sofa with a novelette in a yellow paper cover.

The wind rose and the snow came down harder.

Jane lay enthralled by the perils the heroine was subjected to.

The clock struck for the first time that day; she started up from the midst of a trainwreck.

'I must go and shop for dinner' she said, drawn to the window by the curious glare.

The snow was far too deep for her to get to the village.

She read to the end of the novelette and then asked herself 'What shall I do about dinner?'

The kitchen yielded nothing but an unopened box of soda crackers in the cupboard.

Charles came in and said 'What are we having for dinner?'

'Soda crackers,' she said 'but I'll make a delicious white sauce to go over them'.

She took flour and water, and mixed some of each together on the stove.

George came in, stirred the sauce about, and said 'It's too thick'.

Jane added a quantity of water.

Anne came in as George was tasting it.

She took the ladle from him and said 'It's too thin'.

Jane added an amount of flour.

William came in as Anne was sampling it again.

He stuck his finger in it and said 'It's lumpy'.

Jane poured in water to dissolve the lumps, so that it was too thin once again.

She dumped in flour, so that it became a second time too thick.

This went on until there was so much white sauce, it filled every available receptacle.

It was still lumpy, but they sat down to dinner notwithstanding.

In the ensuing weeks white sauce appeared at least once, and often two or three times, at every meal, even breakfast.

The last of the sauce covered some ill-mashed turnips.

Just after the meal concluded Henry suddenly died.

It was Christmas Eve as it happened.

Jane, Anne, George, and William painted all the ornaments a dull black.

Charles went to the village for black candles.

Snow was falling again as they finished trimming the tree.
Dear Peter ["Peter" scratched out; two Chinese characters penned in],

Happy Massacre of the Innocents (the 28th, in case you’ve forgotten).

Thank you all so much for the Christmas stocking and the Shirley Temple (be still, my heart!) pitcher, which I am using to drink tea out of, the latter not the former. The cats were mesmerized for some minutes by the water flowers, as was I. I haven’t had any for rather more than a quarter of a century. (Ugh.) They also supplied the title for the enclosed story; your copy is not on carbon paper, or rather a carbon, because I couldn’t find any. If you think it is about something, I hope you will tell me what, because I haven’t the slightest idea. It began a couple of days ago when someone mentioned white sauce in my hearing and the ending came to me when I saw some ornaments painted black in the window of a chic boutique on Madison Avenue. The meal itself is, no doubt apocryphally, what was frequently supposed to be Sunday night supper at Radcliffe back in the late ’40s. So much for my scavenging muse.

Found on an ancient scrap of paper: Only that which changes remains true.

(Jung) (I do not think it applies to the endings of Donald stories.)

Sorry I have no news from Candida. Whether she is still down with the flu, or perhaps not even in town [...] I don’t know. Since she knows I’ve called a couple of times, I dislike seeming to badger her further, especially if she’s not well. I’ll let you know by phone as soon as I hear anything. Not to worry, at least I don’t think so.

* * *

I am come as Time, the waster of the peoples,
Ready for the hour that ripens to their ruin.

(Ch. XI, Bhagavad Gita)

Which reminds me that something must have happened to Thursday (but what?) for it is now Friday. Above is where I happened to have got to over my morning coffee in Mr Huxley’s Perennial Philosophy. I don’t know whether to recommend it to your attention or not. Or perhaps you’ve read it. If not, it’s Religion rather than Philosophy. If nothing else, it’s a great anthology, and Huxley himself is not intrusive. (I think it was Cyril Connolly who once said something to the effect that Huxley hits the nail on the head, and then hits it again and again and again.)

A small and sinister snow seems to be coming down relentlessly at present. The radio says it is eventually going to be sleet and rain, but I don’t think so; I think it is just going to go on and on, coming down, until the whole world . . . etc. It has that look.
Edward Gorey and Peter Neumeyer met in the summer of 1968. Gorey had been contracted by Addison-Wesley to illustrate *Donald and the . . . ,* a children’s story written by Neumeyer. On their first encounter, Neumeyer managed to dislocate Gorey’s shoulder when he grabbed his arm to keep him from falling into the ocean. In a hospital waiting room, they pored over Gorey’s drawings for the first time together, and Gorey infused the situation with much hilarity. This was the beginning of an invigorating friendship, fueled by a wealth of letters and postcards that sped between the two men through the fall of 1969.

Those letters, published here for the first time, are remarkable in their quantity and their content. While the creative collaborations of Gorey and Neumeyer centered on illustrated books, they held wide-ranging interests; both were erudite, voracious readers, and they sent each other many volumes. Reading their discussions of these books, one marvels at the beauty of thoughtful (and merry) discourse driven by intellectual curiosity.

The letters also paint an intimate portrait of Edward Gorey, a man often mischaracterized as macabre or even ghoulish. His gentleness, humility, and brilliance—interwoven with his distinctive humor—shine in these letters; his deft artistic hand is evident on the decorated envelopes addressed to Neumeyer, 38 of which are reproduced here.

During the time of their correspondence, Peter Neumeyer was teaching at Harvard University and at SUNY Stony Brook, on Long Island. His acumen and compassion, expressed in his discerning, often provocative missives, reveal him to be an ideal creative and intellectual ally for Gorey.

More than anything else, *Floating Worlds* is the moving memoir of an extraordinary friendship. Gorey wrote that he felt they were “part of the same family, and I don’t mean just metaphorically. I guess that even more than I think of you as a friend, I think of you as my brother.” Neumeyer stated, “Your letters . . . your existence has made something of this world that [it] hadn’t the possibility of before.”

Edward St. John Gorey (1925–2000) is famous for the bounty of books he wrote and illustrated, featuring his distinctive humor and astonishingly detailed crosshatch ink drawings. Gorey also was a playwright, an award-winning set and costume designer, and the creator of the animated introduction to the PBS series *Mystery!*

Peter F. Neumeyer (b. 1929) is the author, editor, or translator of more than a dozen books of prose and poetry for children and adults. His collaborations with Edward Gorey include *Donald and the . . . , Donald Has a Difficulty,* and *Why We Have Day and Night.*