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F o x I s l a n d .

October 9th 1918.

Sweetheart :-

It is bright starlight out of doors! Soon, soon, if only the weather holds clear and moderate my letters go to you and you come to me. You write to me continually do you not? Write, write, write. I do my best for you and I am busy beyond anything that you can picture. Think of my days here, cooking, sawing, and splitting wood, felling trees, clearing the forest, carrying water, reading to Rockwell, writing my diary, my letters; and beside all that the great work that I have come here for, that which should, and, in spite of all else I do, almost does, occupy all my thoughts. I'm sure quite rid of the fear that somehow, dear sweetheart, you'll grow careless. Think of the few steamers that come here and of the few times I go to Seeward, and justly

FIG. 1: Kent's log cabin on Fox Island. Ink drawing heading Kent's letter to Hildegard from Fox Island, Alaska, October 9, 1918. Rockwell Kent Collection.

HIS MIND ON FIRE:
*Rockwell Kent's Amorous Letters to Hildegarde Hirsch and
Ernesta Drinker Bullitt, 1916–1925*

JAKE MILGRAM WIEN

“A great piece of paper . . . is as stimulating as a great canvas; my thoughts become magnificent and brave.”

Rockwell Kent to Ernesta Drinker Bullitt, 1924¹

Rockwell Kent, voyager to and painter of remote places, conquered the desire brought on by the distance and silence of isolation through the writing of letters. Over the course of a lifetime, Kent would put pen to countless pieces of stationery, committing to posterity his innermost thoughts, some “magnificent and brave,” some not. Letter writing also provided Kent with a means of temporal escape to a romantic world of his own construct. For much of Kent’s midlife (his mid-thirties to mid-forties), the *letter of desire* occupied a strategic place in the arsenal of his heart.

The two primary recipients of his amorous letters during these years were, first, Hildegarde Hirsch (“Hildegarde”), and, several years later, Ernesta Drinker Bullitt (“Ernesta”). Against the backdrop of his weakening first marriage, Kent sent his *inamorata*² accounts of his frequent daydreams and nocturnal yearnings, some of which he characterized as “little interludes for love making.”³ Since 1995 these letters and cards, over 180 in all, have enriched the largely unmined materials that comprise the Rockwell Kent Collection of Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library (the “Rockwell Kent Collection”). Together with the original sources of his artwork—hundreds of preliminary sketches, drawings and proofs in the Rockwell Kent Collection—the handwritten correspondence contributes to an understanding of his larger artistic vision. The amorous

letters, in particular, provide reliable documentary evidence of the artist's daily life and intellectual sustenance and a map of his shifting emotional terrain. They are invaluable pieces of the puzzle that is Kent—a life and achievement no full biographer or art historian has attempted to reconstruct because the pieces are so numerous and scattered.

Some of the amorous letters are visual gems, stunning in their impeccable penmanship and often sprinkled with inventive, light-hearted pen and ink drawings. They are not uncharacteristic of the high standards this Columbia-trained architect and draftsman maintained. Most are on high-quality, watermarked stationery, a few accompanied by envelopes bearing canceled stamps. Their tender charm and intelligent wit partly account for their having been safekept to resurface some seventy to eighty years later. Though there is in Kent's seductive entreaties, as there is in the genre of the love letter generally, a dull predictability—a facility with which he composes his sweet talk, the monotony of the superlative, and the repetitive pleas for reciprocated physical love—the quality of spontaneity is pervasive. The intrigue with which he sends his secret letters and the delirious urgency with which he shares his inconsolable sensual feelings demonstrate the generally less self-conscious nature of the letters.

The letters paint an elaborate picture of Kent the ardent romantic in quest of the one, profound, timeless love. He articulated his aspirations with grandiosity: He hoped his love for Hildegard would contribute to the “love story of mankind” and would serve “as an inspiration to all lovers of the true and beautiful: Dante and Beatrice, Shelly and Mary Godwin, Wagner and Mathilde Wesendonck, Rockwell and his Hildegard.”⁴ The infinity sign would close a few of his letters to Hildegard, as would a reverse “E” joined with an “R” symbolizing Ernesta and Rockwell bound in love together (as well as Ernesta Regina) in his letters to Ernesta.⁵

Astonishingly, Kent found his one true and eternal love time and time again. Early in his first marriage, the sincerity of his quest was tarnished by the birth of a child out of wedlock,⁶ though Kent claims to have searched “hard” with Kathleen “for the Great Happiness.”⁷ After Hildegard and Ernesta came Frances and Sally, his second and third wives. And midway through his marriage to Frances came Salamina, his devoted Greenlandic housekeeper and companion, after whom he named his published Greenlandic memoirs of 1935.⁸

Kent's pursuit of the grail of perfection in love filled his life with passion just as paint filled the void of his canvas. But once having found his erotic fix, Kent initiated a cycle invariably turning toward disillusionment and

blame. His emotionally charged letters to his *inamorata* reveal a troubled soul afflicted with a tangle of desires, emotional imbalances, and feelings of inadequacy.

Letters to Hildegarde Hirsch

Most of the newly-acquisitioned correspondence—some 162 letters and cards—were written to Hildegarde, perhaps Kent's most enduring *inamorata*. Kent, then thirty-five years old and the father of four children, nonchalantly picked her up on the corner of 41st Street and Seventh Avenue in the summer of 1916. He memorializes this chance encounter in his autobiography, where he disguises her identity (in order to protect her) as "Gretchen."⁹ The young Hildegarde had come from Germany to New York City where, the letters reveal, she performed as a dancer in the Ziegfeld Follies,¹⁰ and on at least one occasion at the Apollo Theatre, where Kent sent her a gift.¹¹ During some of her stay in New York City, she shared an apartment with two German girls, including a Miss Kohler and, at times, Frieda, to whom Kent refers as "sister," perhaps Hildegarde's younger sister.

The provenance of the Hildegarde letters is intriguing. Upon her death around 1960, the letters and artworks were inherited by her nephew, who in the early 1980s sold them. (Hildegarde left no direct descendants; though she may have been in a marriage prior

to her meeting Kent, it apparently ended, and she never remarried.)¹² More than 160 of the Hildegarde letters were eventually purchased by collector Frederick R. Koch, "the reclusive scion of a Kansas oil family,"¹³ placed in his Sutton Place Foundation, and made available to researchers. Koch anonymously sold much of his Kent holdings, including the letters, at Christie's East on May 24, 1995. The letters then entered the Rockwell Kent Collection.

On the level of strict documentation, the letters provide a chronology of the nomadic existence of Kent and his family from 1916–1921. In New York he divided much of his time between his home on Staten Island (1262 Richmond Terrace, West Brighton), his studio apartment (No. 7—their "little house"), to which Hildegarde apparently had a key,¹⁴ his place of part-time employment at Ewing and Allen Architects or George S. Chappell Architect (101 Park Avenue), and, as of September 1917, his studio at No. 23 West 12th Street. His wife and young children moved from Staten Island to Monhegan Island, Maine, to the Connecticut shore, and to Arlington, Vermont, where they lived in a barn and cooked outdoors before their farmhouse was built.

The Early Letters, 1916–1918

Much of the early correspondence with Hildegarde is written on stationery headed by

a 3/4 inch square mark printed in black depicting a naked man hugging a resting deer. Kent created this mark especially for Hildegard, and the deer motif recurs on the Jewel Box and other artworks presented to Hildegard. He adored this stationery: "I love to lay a sheet of our paper before me and see us two clinging together in the starry night. Oh wonderful Hildegard!"¹⁵ Kent referred to Hildegard as the "half wild, only half conscious deer."¹⁶ This portrayal of the spirit life of animals confirms Kent's receptivity to folk themes and folk media (including reverse painting on glass) undergoing a revival in Europe (especially Germany) and New York. Kent's friend and fellow Germanophile, Marsden Hartley, also experimented with reverse painting on glass in 1916–1917.

That spirituality could be achieved through the physical beauty and solace of nature and through the adoration of a beloved is the fundamental theme unifying Kent's letters to Hildegard. To reach this higher understanding, Kent's religiosity had evolved away from ritual and convention.

Religion is not the church; it is the ardent, reverent spirit that is more or less in every human soul. . . . see with me how . . . any rule of conduct or life that denies us the love that God has given us is worse than false . . . I have tried and believed so devoutly! . . . For years I

prayed on my knees to the amusement and derision of whoever saw me. Then I went to Maine and, still in my heart a devout believer, came to know the little congregation there intimately. Finally I left the church, not through carelessness but deeply disturbed, and freed by my conscience to tell them in the church the heavy faults I found in their worship.¹⁷

Often closing with "May God and Rockwell be with you," Kent's letters to Hildegard remain prayerful and the mention of the higher authority frequent:

Hildegard . . . I am growing in wisdom, in strength, in love for you, and in the fear of God, to whom, for your sake and our happiness, I pray so fervently that nature, if there were no God, would, for very pity, make one to hear me and to bless us both. See! I send you the prayer I made the other night and put away.¹⁸

Another theme pervading Kent's letters to Hildegard is a profound identification with German culture. This is not surprising, as the young Kent was imbued with a passion for German language and literature, particularly its expression in poetry and song. His father had studied at a college in Germany, learned to love the German language, and raised his children to speak German. Kent bonded early on with Rosa, his German nurse,¹⁹ and when

he was thirteen years old, Kent traveled with his maternal aunt Jo to Germany, where they spent several weeks. Kent hoped to imbue his own children with Germanic culture; he brought to Alaska songbooks containing Volkslieder with words in English to teach to his young son.²⁰

America's anti-German fever after 1914 did not diminish the fires of Kent's Germanophilia or his "insane" passion for German women.²¹ Throughout his letters Kent devotedly incorporated the poetic lyricism of Heinrich Heine's German verse. Kent identified with Heine's fairy-tale fantasy and Romantic literary imagination provoking the soul to aspire to greater emotional depth and intensity. As with Kent's love letters, Heine's poems resonate with physicality and erotic ardor. Kent also seized any opportunity to mention to Hildegarde whatever German cultural leanings his acquaintances might have, and the instances that he would dine in New York at, for example, the Kaiser Keller.

Hildegarde became a model and a muse for Kent. In late 1915, a year prior to their initial encounter, Kent began submitting fanciful, often irreverent ink drawings to *Harper's Weekly*, *Puck*, and *Vanity Fair* to supplement his income as an architectural renderer. In these drawings, especially his outdoor idylls conveying the beauty and wonder of the natural world, Kent began to feature Hildegarde.²²

Kent's sense of artistic integrity rendered him incapable of taking his fashionable ink drawings to heart. He hid behind the alias signature, "Hogarth Jr.," to avoid sully his budding reputation as a great painter of land and sea. To Hildegarde, Kent mocked his own creations:

My drawing is finished and looks just as slick and commercial as if the maker of it had possessed not one atom of brains to trouble him. I look at it with pride and amazement—and shame. Oh God—that a man at thirty five—with all the wisdom and brains that I have—be making these fool things!²³

Again, Kent lamented:

I went to see Crowninshield—the arch enemy of all sturdy women—for he always urges me to make mine thin and long and very silly!²⁴

Yet Kent did take pride in having successfully gained commissions over his fellow artists/cartoonists. He boasts, for example, at "having beaten Boardman Robinson."²⁵

In late 1917 and into 1918 Kent used Hildegarde as a model in his reverse paintings on glass. The Rockwell Kent Collection contains numerous preparatory drawings in graphite for the glass paintings, many of which were encased in gilded frames containing vertical mirrors. Most of the glass paintings feature the golden-haired Hildegarde amidst



FIG. 2: "Mirror Mirror On the Wall, Who's the Fairest Of Them All." Preparatory drawing in graphite for reverse painting on glass. 1917–1918. Rockwell Kent Collection.

the verdant meadows and mountains of Vermont where "Hildegarten"—the couple's idyllic retreat—would have been. Hildegarte is also the protagonist in the fairy-tale manuscript Kent gave her in the winter of 1917, to which he makes brief reference as the "Hildegartenbuch."²⁶

Hildegarte preserved the bound thirteen-page holographic manuscript with ink drawings dated November 6, 1917—*The Jewel, A*

Romance of Fairyland. Her nephew inherited it and sold it in the early 1980s. In 1990 the Baxter Society of Portland, Maine, published it in facsimile.

The Hildegarte letters enrich our understanding of the sources of Kent's art, especially his reverse paintings on glass. Kent shares with Hildegarte his affinity for Maurice Maeterlinck's play *Péleas et Mélisande*, a story of young love and death that evokes "how profoundly

wonderful true love is.” He also refers to Maeterlinck’s essay “On Women” and his mystical notion of “true, pre-destined love.”²⁷ Many of the reverse paintings on glass include flying birds, perhaps inspired by Maeterlinck’s play *The Blue Bird*, which was widely published and read in the United States. Kent shared Maeterlinck’s dramatic intention to show the invisible and express the ineffable in an artistic fashion.

Character flaws surface throughout Kent’s amorous letters, most notably jealousy. Though he is aware of his possessiveness, Kent repeatedly asks for forgiveness for his bouts of temper and moodiness. “Make of the little tactless things I do as little as possible,” he writes Hildegarde.²⁸ He acknowledges his “over-sensitiveness” to her “flirtation” with other men on another occasion.²⁹ “I don’t justify the vagaries of my moods. I am ashamed of them,” Kent wrote to Hildegarde.³⁰ He believed that his jealousy was the result not of his low self-esteem but of his having too much love and romance for Hildegarde.³¹ He also confesses his “self-centered” nature and blindness “to the quiet things in others.”³²

Kent’s flair for the romantic included several references to children with which he and Hildegarde would be blessed. He fantasized: “Dream . . . of the dear children we will have”³³ and “may we have three children Tristan, Siegfried and Frieda, as beautiful

as Rockwell, Kathleen, Clara and Hildegarde.”³⁴ To the probable displeasure of his wife, Kathleen, Kent went so far as to give the familiar name of “little Hildegarde” to their fourth child, Barbara.³⁵

The Letters from Alaska, 1918–1919

Kent journeyed by train to Alaska with his young son, Rockwell III, and their trip is described in rich detail in some thirty-five letters and picture postcards dating from late July to December 1918. Even though Kent had been contemplating a sojourn in either Iceland or Alaska as early as 1916, he departed only in late July 1918.³⁶ This is perhaps why Kent, who had rented his house for a year starting in the late spring of 1917, relocated his family to a “little cottage in New London” Connecticut, “on the beach,” and found himself for much of August 1917–July 1918 in Manhattan.³⁷ From Monhegan Island in the summer of 1917, Kent had written to Hildegarde with the hope she would find them an apartment in Manhattan.³⁸

The anxiety of separation from Hildegarde spurred Kent to commence writing to her soon after he and young Rockwell boarded the westbound Canadian Pacific train. En route, Kent shared the unfolding adventure with shaky hand. From Vancouver the two reached Seattle, where they boarded a boat to Juneau, Alaska. Their arrival in Yakutat was

marked by a good degree of resourcefulness. With nowhere to sleep, the two were put up by the superintendent of the cannery. In darkness they ascended a hill to a cabin, where they encountered four sleeping Norwegian fishermen. There the two shared a plank only two and a half feet wide, with makeshift pillow and few blankets.³⁹ Clearly, Kent did not know his ultimate Alaskan destination. At first he thought it might be Seldovia, though the Swedish missionary in Yakutat recommended “Night Island” at the foot of mountains some fifteen miles from Yakutat.⁴⁰ Only after journeying to Seward did Kent determine Fox Island, with its secluded log cabin, “several peaks over a thousand feet high,” “unexplored forests and caves,” and “mysterious lakes” to be their winter home.⁴¹

With his son, flute, and paints, Kent reached Fox Island in late August, when he immediately set about to realize his dream. “I work with all my energy, with all my heart; I want success, I want greatness and fame, and I want somehow that these shall contribute to the happiness of you [Hildegarde] and Kathleen and my beloved family.”⁴² Kent wrote avidly of his new pioneer’s life in their new home, the desolate log cabin that previously had been inhabited by rabbits. The island’s only other inhabitant—Olsen, the old Swede—tended “two pairs of blue foxes and a nanny goat.”⁴³ Only a few weeks after having arrived on the island, with the motor for their

boat in disrepair, the Kents pulled themselves to Seward after four a half hours of hard rowing and blistered hands.⁴⁴

Kent kept an intimate diary of his observations and activities while on Fox Island, with the intention that it be bound as a future gift to his co-pioneering son Rockwell III.⁴⁵ The diary entries were sent to Kathleen and were published in 1920 as *Wilderness: A Journal of Quiet Adventure in Alaska* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, Knickerbocker Press, 1920). Kent’s aggressive letter-writing campaign to Hildegarde explains why the Kent of *Wilderness* is in constant anguish for the mail boat to arrive—to alleviate the ache of awaiting reply letters from his *inamorata* and to send on more letters to her!

In his first letters from Alaska Kent implores Hildegarde to join him. He plots for her to come as his wife. But he believes that, as his wife, Hildegarde would be called before the Seward draft board, so he suggests that she disguise herself as his sister.⁴⁶ By early December, even as he wears the ring she gave him, Kent has a change of heart and writes:

I have chosen to go back to Kathleen and to the children to leave New York and leave it forever maybe and go far into the country somewhere where no other people will be, to live on the least it can be done for and dedicate my time to work without end. I do this of my

own free will. I have no defense. I have not been urged or threatened by Kathleen of whose love I am far from being certain.⁴⁷

Kent's amorous letters provide no insight into any serious political convictions he might have held and seem to confirm—as does the art from his middle years—their absence. In his travels Kent seizes every opportunity to fraternize with Germans (“splendid fellows”),⁴⁸ but this is more out of cultural sympathy than defiance against the Allied war effort. As a dutiful citizen Kent presents him-self in Seward for “registration” for the draft (the age had just been increased to forty-five), deferring his physical examination for a future visit.⁴⁹

One learns from the letters to Hildegarde that the rolls of canvas Kent had asked her to send to him in Yakutat, Alaska⁵⁰ never reached him.⁵¹ This may explain why there are fewer Alaska oil paintings on canvas by Kent that date to 1918–1919 than one might expect, and of those that do exist, many may have been completed between Kent's return to New York in April 1919 and the opening of the exhibition of his Alaska paintings at M. Knoedler & Co. (“Knoedler”) in March 1920.⁵² A shortfall in canvas, together with the rotten weather, may account for the prodigious group of accomplished ink drawings Kent created on Fox Island, often inside by the light of a lamp. His prior painting trips

to Monhegan Island and his subsequent painting trips to Tierra del Fuego and Greenland did not produce a comparable group of ink drawings.

Though a half dozen letters to Hildegarde survive from 1919, all are written subsequent to the Kents' spring return from Alaska. A few convey the impression of an amicable disengagement and the return to Kent of clothing and belongings from their shared studio. Kent wrote his last letters to Hildegarde from his studio (at 139 W. 15th St.) and his family's new Vermont farmhouse (“Egypt”) in Arlington. Five letters from 1920 and a final one from 1921 conclude his correspondence with her.

**George Chappell, Carl Zigrosser,
Marie Sterner**

Of the many artists, writers, publishers, and galleries with whom Kent collaborated during these years, three in particular are mentioned with relative frequency in the Hildegarde letters. Humorist and fellow architect George S. Chappell was perhaps Kent's closest friend. The two shared an irreverent, literary spirit—Chappell composing satirical verse and Kent its visual counterpart in light-hearted, “Hogarth Jr.” ink drawings. *Harper's Weekly*, the *New York Tribune*, *Judge*, and *Vanity Fair* regularly published their collaborations.⁵³ On one occasion Chappell sent Kent a

check for \$2,000,⁵⁴ presumably for published “Hogarth Jr.” drawings.⁵⁵ The editor of *Vanity Fair*, Frank Crowninshield, once gave Kent a book to take to Chappell.⁵⁶ The two played tennis together,⁵⁷ and Chappell often acted as a go-between for Kent, who treated Chappell’s architectural office as a second home and address for reply letters from his *inamorata*.

Carl Zigrosser, Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Rare Books at the Philadelphia Museum of Art from 1941–1963, early on earned Kent’s respect as an intellect and, as director of Weyhe Gallery, became a pivotal promoter of Kent’s career as a printmaker. Kent contributed articles and artwork to “Zigrosser’s little magazine,” a reference to *The Modern School*, the progressive journal of the Francisco Ferrer Association that espoused principles of libertarian education.⁵⁸ Zigrosser wrote to Kent in Alaska “regularly and beautifully.”⁵⁹

Marie Sterner was the major catalyst for Kent’s success in the commercial arena. As gallery director of Knoedler, Sterner organized an exhibition of Kent’s Alaska ink drawings in early 1919 and another exhibition of Kent’s Alaska paintings in early 1920. Not only was she Kent’s dealer and devoted promoter; Sterner became as well his confidante, well versed in his “triangle” problems. Kent mentions more than once to Hildegarde how highly Sterner had regarded her.⁶⁰ Sterner’s departure “for Europe on May 1st,”

1920,⁶¹ is most likely the “voyage” over water alluded to in a small manuscript Kent dedicated to her in 1920 that was decorated with his ink drawings.⁶² Kent writes of Sterner’s Junior Art Patrons of America and his assistance toward organizing its inaugural exhibition in 1921. Kent boasted that one of his paintings occupied “the place of honor” and that all his paintings together “dominate the show”—a sight that naturally gave him great pleasure.⁶³

The Letters to Ernesta Drinker Bullitt, 1924–1925

The second group comprises some twenty-one letters written to Ernesta Drinker Bullitt that join a group of nine letters from Kent to Ernesta of the same vintage that are already in the Rockwell Kent Collection. There exist other, uncatalogued Kent letters to Ernesta, including four known to this author in the collection of John Deedy of Rockport, Massachusetts. All the known Ernesta letters date from late 1924 to early 1925.

Ernesta was of an altogether different nature from Hildegarde: wealthy, highly educated, cosmopolitan, and a published writer of distinction. She would marry two distinguished writers—first, the foreign correspondent William Bullitt, and later, the composer Samuel Barlow. Ten years Kent’s junior, she came from a distinguished

Philadelphia family. Her father at one time was president of Lehigh University and her maternal aunt, Cecilia Beaux, a leading portraitist.⁶⁴ In her mid-twenties Ernesta accompanied her first husband on his extended tour of Central Europe as a foreign correspondent, just prior to the United States entry into World War I.⁶⁵

In 1924, recently divorced from Bullitt,⁶⁶ Ernesta moved into Kent's orbit. How they met or the length of their relationship is somewhat of a mystery. Kent's career was on the rise, with his second autobiographical adventure, *Voyaging: Southward from the Strait of Magellan* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1924), recently published. He was at work on drawings for frontispieces for each of the twelve volumes of the 1925 edition of *Casanova (The Memoirs of Jacques Casanova de Seingalt)* and had just exhibited his Tierra del Fuego canvases at Wildenstein Galleries in the spring of 1924.

The Ernesta letters clearly point to many shared interests—the arts and design, horseback riding and jumping, dogs, and southwestern Vermont, where each had a country home.⁶⁷ Kent wrote most of his letters from Arlington, Vermont, to Ernesta who, during the week, lived and worked in Manhattan as an interior decorator.⁶⁸ Kent referred to their jointly undertaking a job to build and design a Vermont farmhouse for a “Mrs. Bingham.”⁶⁹ In another letter to Er-

nesta, Kent wondered aloud: “Do you think we’ll land the job? I have a notion that you’ll be an encumbrance to me!”⁷⁰

The tone of the Kent-Ernesta letters reflects a relationship, as Kent would assess it, of “equal” partners.⁷¹ Kent saw a kindred spirit in Ernesta—her weaknesses and strengths, her likes and dislikes, her loves and hates—all were his.⁷² Perhaps Kent admired most her independent, strong-willed temperament and her “fine disregard for established values.”⁷³ She insisted that Kent stop smoking and chided him for being a “loafer” in his work.⁷⁴ What Kent did not admire, however, was the propriety with which she conducted herself. Toward the married Kent she remained circumspect, eschewing his bohemian lifestyle and rebuffing his entreaties to taste “all the great grand stuff of the romantic freedom of today.”⁷⁵ She was reluctant to be seen in public with him, though Kent insinuates that their geographical proximity facilitated liaisons in the privacy of his Vermont studio. Soon after the correspondence began, Ernesta could not be moved to speak of “love” toward him, which prompted Kent to write, sarcastically, that she would feel “wild, passionate, not-to-be-restrained, devouring, and eternal LOVE” for him were he not to lack wealth, a good reputation, and the freedom to marry.⁷⁶ As Ernesta wanted no fingers pointed at her for precipitating his divorce from Kathleen, Kent reassured her that the plans for his divorce in

the south of France might escape detection but at any rate would “in no way [be] connected with” her.⁷⁷

The early letters to Ernesta reflect a head-over-heels infatuation for her:

Sweetheart, I cannot write. For nearly two hours I have sat here, abandoned to my thoughts of you. I am drunk with the memory of you—and the hope. “Ernesta,” “Ernesta!” I cry, as if my cry for you might bring you to me; and you, dear heart, dear sweet, sweet love of mine, are of my hands, my lips, my eyes, of every sense awakened into consciousness, and of my ardent spirit, the whole and last desire. Dear girl—I am enveloped by your loveliness.⁷⁸

He wrote of his worship of her⁷⁹ and that his “mind [was] on fire with thought of” her.⁸⁰ The cycle of hyperbole recurs: “I have no desire to work or to live but that my life and my work may be yours.”⁸¹ Again, “yet but for you I would never have known in all my life what could bring me happiness.”⁸²

To win Ernesta’s heart Kent ingratiated himself by taking care of her dog, “Wolfie,” and her horse, “St. Peter,” and by showering her with affectionate letters, gifts, and flowers. He also participated in exercises toward mutual self-improvement such as abstinence from smoking cigarettes. But as Ernesta retreated, Kent’s frustration mounted:

I fear that I have been carried away by my own ardour into reading a love for me even into the utter coldness of your letters. And, dear love, I am just suddenly ashamed. What is more disgusting than to be loved too much!⁸³

Kent respected Ernesta’s truthfulness, but his pride could not suffer her cold shoulder:

Ernesta . . . [f]or God’s sake be human; not, of course, by loving me, but by acting feelingly toward me, be it love or hate or indifference. I can’t bear your letters anymore.⁸⁴

Perhaps the most poignant episode of the Ernesta letters is the fairy tale Kent told her of a heart that, “because it was never given away,” abandons its owner and leaves her without one.⁸⁵

The one-sided relationship explains the brooding, melancholic nature of his letters, several of which were written in the span of a single day, and many at night. At times, Kent’s temper flared up such that he apologized the next day. Ashamed after a certain “debauch of the tea,” he sought Ernesta’s forgiveness.⁸⁶ His behavior bordered at times on the adolescent:

Yes I have smoked; once, but then wildly. It was yesterday. I was so unhappy! And like a child, I did it in defiance of you. I bought a pack,

smoked half of it: and then in disgust of myself I burned the rest.⁸⁷

As irony would have it, Kent was putting the finishing touches on his drawings for the new edition of *Casanova*. Despite the fact that he earlier had defended Casanova to Ernesta, he now grew disgusted with him.⁸⁸ He distinguished his behavior from that of Casanova who, Kent observed, had been swept “into the demoralization of heartless libertinage.”⁸⁹

The Open Marriage

Kent wanted to legitimize his extramarital activities by establishing what he called a beautiful relationship between his wife and the other woman in his life. This proclivity to enlarge his family began around 1910 with Janet, with whom he had fathered a child.⁹⁰ Just as he had wanted his wife, Kathleen, to get to know Janet and, some years later, Hildegarde, he wanted Kathleen to meet Ernesta, so that she could “have the faith” (as he had) “in the wisdom” of what he and Ernesta were doing. “It is horrible when people who have loved each other turn to hating!” Kent wrote to Ernesta.⁹¹ He did not want to divorce Kathleen in anger, but, rather, in understanding: “it is only out of the real affection between us that I would ask for my freedom.”⁹²

Marital fidelity was not Kent’s strong suit, and it was an issue which later in life strenght-

ened his bonds of friendship with the scholar and defender of civil liberties, Corliss Lamont. Lamont, one of the founders of the Rockwell Kent Collection, wrote about the open marriage in his autobiography. Extramarital sex for both the husband and the wife was to Lamont “a legitimate, life-enhancing activity.” He advocated “taking the lock out of wedlock.”⁹³

In considering marriage to Ernesta, as he did with marriage to Hildegarde, Kent pondered the future of his wife and children. He promised he would share his children with the barren Ernesta: “Certainly that I have children is like God’s special gift of atonement to you.”⁹⁴ He even wrote about dividing his children up, wondering aloud which of them Ernesta would want: “Barbara, my little pet, you’ll adore. Maybe it is Barbara that we may have.”⁹⁵

The Kent-Ernesta letters end as abruptly as they began. Kent’s 1955 autobiography makes no explicit mention of Ernesta,⁹⁶ though it conceals the identity of a love interest who might be Ernesta—“his little problem child” who would reenter his life with the intention of marrying him.⁹⁷ However, Kent describes his “problem child” as not “beautiful,” “quite plain,” infuriatingly moody (*her* initially unreciprocated infatuation with *him* causing her to smash china), and not yet divorced.⁹⁸ These characterizations run counter to the Ernesta of the Kent-Ernesta letters,

where Kent's infatuation with and devotion to this memorable woman are clearly demonstrated. Yet Kent's concomitant allusions to the wealth⁹⁹ of his "problem child" and her "wonderful old house in mountain country"¹⁰⁰ seem to point to Ernesta. Consciously or not, Kent may have altered the facts or fused his recollection of Ernesta with that of another of his contemporaneous *inamorata* in order to obscure the identity of each and to implicate himself in one less affair while still married to Kathleen.

The composer and writer Samuel Barlow knew both Kent and Ernesta. Kent's friendship

with Barlow predates 1924. Barlow and Ernesta married in 1929. During the summer of 1924 Kent paid a visit to Barlow's house in the south of France.¹⁰¹ Perhaps Barlow introduced the recently-divorced Ernesta to the soon-to-be-divorced Kent at that summer meeting. Kent began sending his amorous letters to her shortly thereafter. Or perhaps it was Kent who introduced Barlow to his future wife sometime in the late 1920s. What is certain is that Samuel Barlow remained married to Ernesta until her passing in 1981.¹⁰²

Notes

1. Letter from Rockwell Kent ("RK"), Arlington, Vermont, to Ernesta Drinker Bullitt ("EDB"), November 5, 1924. The Rockwell Kent Collection ("RKC").

2. The word *inamorata*, rather than *paramour* or *lover* or *mistress*, is used because it merely indicates that the recipients of Kent's letters were his love interests. Though Kent writes with the conviction of having been physically intimate with both women, the extent of intimacy is unclear, and the absence of reply letters from his *inamorata* further clouds this issue. Though chaste as an adolescent, according to the biography of David Traxel (p. 46), Kent did not shy away from creating a reputation as an amorous sort. For example, in 1914 Kent and/or his coauthor, Frederick Squires, identified by initials thirteen "loves of my lifetime" in the dedicatory page of their humorous book, *Architectonics, The Tales of Tom Thumtack Architect* (New York: The William T. Comstock Company, 1914).

3. Undated letter from RK to EDB, page beginning "After supper." RKC (acquired prior to 1995).

4. Letter from RK to Hildegard Hirsch ("HH"), January 3, 1917. RKC.

5. Letter from RK, Seward, to HH, September 24, 1918, and undated letter from RK to HH, headed by "Monday." Deedy collection.

6. See chapter 4 ("Rebellion") of David Traxel, *An American Saga: The Life and Times of Rockwell Kent* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980).

7. Letter from RK to Christian Brinton in the exhibition catalogue of M. Knoedler & Co., *Alaska Drawings by Rockwell Kent* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919).

8. Rockwell Kent, *Salamina* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1935).

9. Rockwell Kent, *It's Me O Lord* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1955), pp. 319–325.

10. Undated letter from RK to HH headed by "Tuesday morning," which begins, "My sweet and darling Hildegard: I wish you such happiness." RKC. HH performed in a

production number featuring Fannie Brice on July 30, 1917, at The New Amsterdam Theatre, New York City. Together with twenty-three other women—including a "Miss F. Hirsch" [Frieda, perhaps her younger sister]—"H. Hirsch" is listed in the program of the *Ziegfeld Follies* as a performer in the sixth scene, act 1 number, "The Episode of the Ziegfeld Follies Rag." In fact, Hildegard and Frieda Hirsch danced for the *Ziegfeld Follies* at the New Amsterdam Theatre as early as August 3, 1914. Nils Hanson, administrator of the Ziegfeld Club, kindly provided the author with this program information.

11. Undated letter from RK to HH headed by "Tuesday afternoon," which begins: "Now I can write you. . . ." RKC.

12. During their five-year relationship Kent gave Hildegard several gifts, including five reverse paintings on glass, a Jewel Box he carved and painted, a holographic fairy-tale manuscript called *The Jewel, A Romance of Fairyland*, and several small, enchanting watercolors that feature her. Kent refers to Hildegard's "first" marriage in a letter to her from Staten Island dated "April 13th." RKC. The "Frank" referred to in several of the letters, toward whom Kent feels little rivalry, at one time was apparently Hildegard's husband. This author is indebted to the research findings of Eliot H. Stanley contained in the companion volume he edited to the facsimile edition of *The Jewel, A Romance of Fairyland* (Portland, Maine: The Baxter Society, 1991).

13. *The New York Times*, May 21, 1995, H 35.

14. Letter from RK to HH, March 30, 1917. RKC.

15. Undated letter from RK to HH headed by "Saturday night." Author's collection.

16. Letter from RK, Monhegan, to HH, August 9, 1917. RKC.

17. Letter from RK to HH, December 30, 1916. RKC.

18. Letter from RK to HH, June 20, 1917. RKC.

19. *It's Me O Lord*, pp. 21, 270.

20. Letter from RK, Seward, to HH, September 20, 1918. RKC.

21. Undated letter from RK, Staten Island, to Miss Kohler, which begins: "My dear Miss Kohler."
22. Undated letter from RK to HH, headed by "Monday night," where Kent refers to an ink drawing of Hildegarde destined for *Vanity Fair*. Author's collection.
23. Letter from RK to HH, September 26, 1916. RKC.
24. Letter from RK to HH, June 7, 1917. RKC. Frank Crowninshield was the editor-in-chief of *Vanity Fair*.
25. Undated letter from RK to HH, headed by "Wednesday morning," which begins: "My dearest sweetest Love." RKC.
26. Undated Letter from RK to HH, headed by "Sunday afternoon," which begins: "My darling Hildegarde." RKC.
27. Letter from RK to HH, November 24, 1916. RKC. Maeterlinck, the Belgian philosopher-dramatist who received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1911, was a favorite subject of the literary forum of the Ferrer Center, a meeting ground for Kent and others, including Carl Zigrosser. In his memoirs, Zigrosser specifically recalled a lecture there by Leonard Abbott on *Pelleas et Mélisande*. See Zigrosser, Carl, *My Own Shall Come to Me*, privately printed in Haarlem, Holland, 1971, p. 70.
28. Letter from RK to HH, November 23, 1916. RKC.
29. Letter from RK, Staten Island, to HH, "April 13th." RKC.
30. Letter from RK to HH, June 12, 1917. RKC.
31. Letter from RK to HH, October 31, 1917. RKC.
32. Undated letter from RK to HH, headed by "Thursday night 8:30." RKC.
33. Letter from RK to HH, November 23, 1916. RKC.
34. Letter from RK to HH, July 26, 1917. RKC. Kent names their future children "little Frieda and Tristan and Masanissa" in an undated letter from RK to HH, which begins: "My own dear Hildegarde:—In two hours." RKC.
35. Letters from RK, Monhegan Island, to HH, August 8 and 9, 1917. RKC.
36. Kent refers to Iceland in his letter to Hildegarde, April 13, 1917. RKC.
37. Letter from RK to Miss Bessie Noseworthy, the Kents' maid in Brigus, Newfoundland. Reproduced in *The Kent Collector*, XVI.3.17.
38. Letter from RK, Monhegan, to HH, August 8, 1917. RKC.
39. Letter from RK, Yakutat, Alaska, to HH, August 1918. RKC.
40. Ibid.
41. Letter from RK, Fox Island/Seward, to HH, September ? [sic], 1918. RKC.
42. Letter from RK, Fox Island, to HH, October 15, 1918. RKC.
43. Letter from RK, Seward, to HH, August 27, 1918. RKC.
44. Letter from RK, Fox Island/Seward, to HH, September 1918. RKC.
45. Letter from RK, Fox Island, to HH, October 7, 1918. RKC.
46. Letter from RK, Seward, to HH, September 20, 1918. RKC.
47. Letter from RK, Seward, to HH, December 2, 1918. RKC.
48. Letter from RK, Alaska, to HH, August -, 1918. RKC.
49. Letter from RK, Fox Island/Seward, to HH, October 15, 1918. RKC.
50. Letter from RK, Seattle, to HH, August 2, 1918. RKC. Letter from RK, aboard S.S. *Admiral Farragut*, to HH, August 21, 1918. RKC.
51. Letter from RK to HH, April 15, 1919. RKC.
52. At Knoedler, Sterner exhibited fifteen of Kent's good-sized Alaska paintings on canvas along with twenty-two paintings of lesser scale, many on wood panels.
53. Chappell lived in Pelham with his wife and four children, including a daughter Jean (b. 1912). Letter from RK to HH, June 7, 1917. RKC.
54. Letter from RK to HH, October 5, 1917. RKC.

55. Under the alias “Hogarth Jr.,” Kent continued to collaborate with Chappell well into the 1920s, when their spirited novella *Rollo In Society: A Guide for Youth* was published (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1922).

56. Letter from RK to HH, June 7, 1917. RKC.

57. Undated letter from RK to HH, which begins “My own dear Hildegarde:—In two hours.” RKC.

58. Letter from RK, Monhegan, to HH, October 17, 1917. RKC. Zigrosser had become editor of *The Modern School* by June 1917 and had sought Kent’s ink drawings for the cover design, head, and tailpieces, “and a whole alphabet of decorative initials.” See Zigrosser’s autobiography, *My Own Shall Come To Me*, privately printed in Haarlem, Holland, 1971, p. 80.

59. Letter from RK, Fox Island, to HH, December 26, 1918. RKC.

60. Undated letter from RK to HH, which begins “Time flies. . . .” RKC.

61. Letter from RK to HH, April 24, 1920. RKC.

62. The 1920 manuscript—“A Rosary Of Prayer That Will Follow Her Over Land And Sea Forever”—forms part of the special collections at Princeton University Library, together with a first edition of *Wilderness*. Presumably, Kent gave both in gratitude to Sterner in 1920. Princeton graduate Daniel Weinreb kindly shared with me his research findings toward an as yet unpublished facsimile edition of “A Rosary.”

63. Letter from RK to HH, May 12, 1921. RKC. This is the latest letter from RK to HH in RKC and was written to her in Germany, where she was visiting her family.

64. Beaux’s portraits of Ernesta as a youth are in the collections of several museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (*Ernesta, Girl in White*) and the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Ernesta’s sister, Catherine Drinker Bowen, won the National Book Award for her autobiographical account of her accomplished family, *Family Portrait* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1970). Chapter 8 (“Ernesta”) reveals that Ernesta’s extraordinary physical beauty was largely responsible for some fifty marriage proposals by the time she was twenty-two years old. Ernesta studied as a teenager at a conservatory in Paris.

65. Her diary of this tour, written during the summer of 1916 and published in 1917 as *An Uncensored Diary From the Central Empires* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page & Company), demonstrates her depth and breadth of culture. She converses ably on refugee issues, infant mortality rates, suffrage, and women’s rights as factory workers. She also reveals a pungent taste for the macabre, the humorous, and the political. The author acknowledges his indebtedness to John Deedy, who not only shared his Ernesta letters with the author but also brought to his attention newspaper clippings and books by and about the Drinker family.

66. Bullitt divorced Ernesta in 1923 to marry Louise Bryant, John Reed’s widow. (They divorced in 1930.) He became head of the Bureau of Central Information of the U.S. Department of State and its specialist on the Russian Revolution. In 1933 he became F.D.R.’s ambassador to Moscow.

67. Ernesta had a country house with an upstairs apartment in Ashfield. Letter from RK to EDB, dated November 15, 1924. RKC. “Egypt,” Kent’s home near Arlington, had a studio-cabin, his private space, well above the family house overlooking the neighboring Mt. Equinox, which he frequently rendered in his Vermont paintings.

68. The obituary for EDB in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, November 18, 1981, refers to her “flourishing business as an interior decorator” and her “travel and fashion articles” for *Vogue* and *Atlantic Monthly*. Ernesta lived at 132 E. 19th Street and worked at 2 West 47th Street.

69. Undated letter from RK to EDB, letter begins “Monday.” Deedy collection.

70. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by “Tuesday” and begins “Ernesta, I love you so that I can hardly bear it!”

71. Ibid.

72. Letter from RK to EDB, November 15, 1924. RKC.

73. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by “Monday.” Deedy collection.

74. Undated letter from RK To EDB, headed by “Tuesday afternoon.” RKC.

75. Letter from RK to EDB, November 2, 1924. RKC.

76. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Friday" and beginning: "I say, my darling." RKC.

77. Letter from RK to EDB, November 16, 1924. RKC.

78. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Tuesday night" and beginning: "Sweetheart—I can write you nothing." RKC.

79. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Wednesday" and beginning: "Ernesta my Beloved: suddenly I am quite ashamed of my unworthiness." RKC.

80. Undated letter from RK to EDB, which begins: "Ernesta darling—it is madness—but I cannot sit here with my mind on fire with thought of you—and not write to you." RKC.

81. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Arlington. Sunday." and beginning: "My darling." RKC.

82. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Tuesday" and beginning: "Ernesta, my Beloved: Do not be unhappy about me." RKC.

83. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Saturday night" and beginning: "Ernesta—my darling—I have bravely put off writing you. . . ." RKC.

84. Undated letter from RK to EDB, headed by "Sunday" and beginning: "After breakfast." RKC.

85. The story of the runaway heart appears in an undated letter from RK to EDB, which begins: "And about your heart?" RKC.

86. Undated letter from RK to EDB. Page begins: "After supper." RKC.

87. Undated letter from RK to EDB headed by "Tuesday" and beginning: "Ernesta, I love you so that I can hardly bear it!" RKC.

88. Letter from RK to EDB, dated "Arlington—Nov 4th." RKC.

89. Ibid.

90. In his unsuccessful attempt to incorporate Janet and their newborn son Karl into his household with Kathleen,

Kent is remembered as saying: "I tried to do what Shelley would have done." Traxel, *David*, op. cit., p. 65.

91. Letter from RK to EDB, November 16, 1924. RKC.

92. Letter from RK to EDB, Arlington, November 14, 1924. RKC.

93. See chapter 14 ("Marriage With Variety") of *Yes to Life*, rev. ed. (New York: Crossroads/Continuum Publishing Group, 1991).

94. Letter from RK to EDB, Saturday, November 16, 1924. RKC. Ernesta, who died childless, was apparently unable to bear children.

95. Ibid.

96. In fact, the only explicit reference to Ernesta in any book by or about Kent is the attribution of ownership to her of his 1919 painting—*Summer, Alaska*—reproduced in both *Rockwellkentiana* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1933) and *Rockwell Kent* (New York: American Artists Group, 1945), where Ernesta is, respectively, "Mrs. Ernesta Drinker Bullitt" and "Mrs. Samuel Barlow."

97. *It's Me O Lord*, p. 409.

98. *It's Me O Lord*, pp. 400–1, 409.

99. *It's Me O Lord*, p. 402. Kent's "problem child" was under the care of a psychiatrist only the "very rich" could afford.

100. *It's Me O Lord*, p. 409.

101. *It's Me O Lord*, p. 385. Kent does not say whether Barlow owned or rented the "spectacular" house.

102. Ernesta's obituary, as recorded in the *Gloucester Daily Times*, Gloucester, Massachusetts, November 18, 1981.