Epistolarity

The great feasibility of letter writing must have produced—from a purely theoretical point of view—a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing or even in a series of letters, where one letter reinforces the other and can refer to it as a witness.

Franz Kafka, *Briefe an Milena*
INTRODUCTION

When I first began reading epistolary novels, there was little visible critical or artistic interest in the letter form. It was commonly assumed that the form was a historically limited, archaic one, describable in terms of its “rise and fall.” The last decade, however, has seen the development of a new critical interest in letter fiction and a clear revival of the form by creative writers. Demonstrably, the epistolary novel is a hardy species that continues to produce lively strains in various parts of the world. Recently, writers of as diverse sensibilities as Michel Butor in the “half-dead letters” (“missives mi-vives”) of Illustrations III (1973), the three Marias in Portugal who coauthored the feminist New Portuguese Letters (1972), and Bob Randall in his popular American suspense novel The Fan (1977) have reinvented the letter form for equally diverse readerships. Although historically speaking the epistolary genre peaked in eighteenth-century Europe, producing such classics as Montesquieu’s Lettres persanes, Richardson’s Pamela and Clarissa, Rousseau’s La Nouvelle Héloïse, Smollett’s Humphry Clinker, Goethe’s Werther, and Laclos’s Les Liaisons dangereuses, the letter’s potential as artistic form and narrative vehicle has been explored by writers of many nationalities and periods—from Ovid in the Epistulae Heroidum to Saul Bellow in Herzog.

Such well-known works present obvious diversity in style and content; yet they reveal a surprising number of similar literary
structures and intriguingly persistent patterns when read together with other examples of the epistolary genre. These structures—recurring thematic relations, character types, narrative events, and organization—can in turn be related to properties inherent to the letter itself. In numerous instances the basic formal and functional characteristics of the letter, far from being merely ornamental, significantly influence the way meaning is consciously and unconsciously constructed by writers and readers of epistolary works.

In the following chapters I use the concept of a work’s "epistolarity" (working definition: the use of the letter's formal properties to create meaning) as a parameter for reading epistolary literature. At this point the notions of "epistolarity" and "meaning" must remain partially vacant terms, since the framework in which they acquire cumulative value is constituted by the analyses that follow. It should be clear, however, that the concept of epistolarity is primarily a frame for reading. A work’s epistolarity cannot be scientifically measured. It can only be argued by an interpretative act, which involves the critic’s description of a letter novel’s epistolarity as much as the novelist’s or novel’s actualization of the letter’s potential to create narrative, figurative, and other types of meaning.

Epistolary novels make meaning in a variety of ways. The production of meaning may be directly dependent on the epistolary form of the novel or it may depend on the multitude of other factors that make novels such complex artifacts. Conversely, novels that at first appear not to be epistolary may in fact create meaning through the literary structures particular to the letter or the letter form. By concentrating on epistolarity I am focusing on those occasions, wherever they may be found, when the creation of meaning derives from the structures and potential specific to the letter form. In following this strategy I am seeking to offer interpretative approaches to individual works (including many not traditionally called “epistolary novels” and excluding many that traditionally have been), as well as a reading of a genre as a whole. Within the field of phenomena susceptible to “interpretation” I include not only the more covert, “obscure,” and problematic aspects of complex epistolary works but also the overtly
exploited conventions that structure letter fiction as narrative and make it possible to specify the epistolary novel as a genre.

Epistolary literature has only recently become the object of close critical scrutiny, but it has already proven a fertile field for a variety of approaches different from mine. Literary historians who investigate the origins and fortunes of the letter genre necessarily contribute to our general understanding of the rise of the novel itself, since epistolary narrative is primarily a product of that formative era in which the novel staked out its claim to status as a major genre. Moreover, the unusual phenomenon of storytelling through letters has been in itself sufficiently intriguing to attract attention from those followers of Henry James, Percy Lubbock, and Wayne Booth who are interested in narrative technique. More generally, the letter's multivalency—as a linguistic phenomenon, as a real-life form, as an instrument of amorous or philosophical communication—has appealed to critics with other interests and approaches.

Prior to the last decade, the very few studies of the epistolary genre were primarily historical in nature. As early as 1933 Godfrey Singer attempted to trace the history of the genre from its origins to the twentieth century in his thesis *The Epistolary Novel*. Although Singer’s book contains a potentially interesting chapter on early American novels, his work on the whole remains superficial and unfortunately unreliable enumeration of items. Much more thorough research with a serious historical perspective is available in Charles E. Kany's *The Beginnings of the Epistolary Novel in France, Italy, and Spain* (1937), which Kany wrote to rectify the notion that the epistolary form was a late-seventeenth- and early-eighteenth-century English creation. Kany traces the origins of the genre back to classical times, follows its progress through the Middle Ages, and terminates with Boursault’s works in the mid seventeenth century, after establishing the previously unrecognized importance of Spanish contributions to the genre. F. G. Black’s study *The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century* (1940) and R. A. Day’s subtle account of the pre-Richardsonian period *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (1966) continue Kany’s
historical work for England. Most recently, Laurent Versini, in *Le Roman épistolaire* (1979), has embraced the genre's chronology from ancient Greece to the present in a relatively short but highly informed and informative survey, which concentrates on France.

Such studies, though useful in providing perspective and bibliography, are essentially unifunctional. They inform us of the existence of certain works, but they do not suggest models for reading them. Far more interpretative, though also historical in approach, are the chapters that Vivienne Mylne devotes to epistolary works in her study *The Eighteenth-Century French Novel: Techniques of Illusion* (1965). Mylne’s point of departure is Georges May’s theory that the development of the eighteenth-century novel was significantly influenced by hostile contemporary criticism. Building upon this theory, Mylne examines the narrative techniques that novelists developed in order to create an illusion of reality and authenticity, in response to criticism’s accusations of unrealism and the public’s distrust of fiction. Consequently, in her chapters on letter novels—a form in which fiction conventionally masquerades as a real-life product—she examines the advantages and pitfalls of the letter as an instrument for creating the illusion of reality. When analyzing individual works, Mylne often deals with problems and techniques arising from the letter form itself, pointing out inconsistencies and implausibilities that violate the code of verisimilitude as well as identifying some effective uses of the form.

Mylne’s interest in the epistolary genre is of course secondary to her larger thesis concerning the representation of reality in the eighteenth-century French novel, just as Tzvetan Todorov’s discussion of the letter in the first chapter of his study of *Les Liaisons dangereuses* is subordinate to his interest in building a poetics of literary discourse in general. Nevertheless, the brief chapters of readers such as these are often more attentive to the particular properties of the letter form and more suggestive of interpretative models than the major studies of literary historians like Kany, Day, and Black. It is precisely the subordination of individual analyses to a larger goal that transforms Mylne’s and Todorov’s books into useful instruments for further research. Mylne not only tells us what a handful of eighteenth-century
novelists have done with the epistolary form but suggests how to deal with the problem of verisimilitude in any letter narrative. In the same way Todorov, by attempting to fit *Les Liaisons dangereuses* into the larger perspective of literature as a system of communication, is able to identify much of what is particular to the letter in Laclos's novel as a specific instance of communication.

Laclos's monumental example of the epistolary genre has in fact been instrumental in attracting critical interest to the form itself. No one interested in interpreting *Les Liaisons dangereuses* can fail to examine the central role of the letter in creating meaning. Jean-Luc Seylaz devotes part of his excellent study *"Les Liaisons dangereuses" et la création romanesque chez Laclos* (1958) to Laclos's exploitation of the form's resources, as does Dorothy Thelander to a lesser extent in *Laclos and the Epistolary Novel* (1963). It remained for Laurent Versini to examine the relationship of Laclos to his generic predecessors, as he does with admirable thoroughness in *Laclos et la tradition* (1968). Since Versini's approach is largely historical, his premise being that *Les Liaisons* constitutes "à la fois le sommet et la liquidation de la littérature épistolaire" (p. 251), in discussing Laclos's numerous predecessors he makes many illuminating comments on the evolution of epistolary techniques.

Several recent studies of works other than *Les Liaisons* have emphasized their epistolary aspects. Such exemplary analyses as those of Testud, Kearney, and Duchène confirm the importance of approaching meaning as a function of form in interpreting the letter work. Although studies of other individual letter novels occasionally appear, few critics have addressed themselves exclusively and explicitly to the ways in which letters create meaning from a general or generic perspective. In 1962 Jean Rousset broke the ground for synchronic generic studies of this type with his seminal chapter on the letter novel in *Forme et signification*, in which he briefly explores the potential of the epistolary instrument, sketches a simple typology, and presents illustrative interpretations of three works. François Jost likewise has made a significant contribution in his article "Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle" (1966). Distinguishing between two fundamental uses of the letter, Jost outlines a
typology of epistolary narrative. On the one hand, he identifies the "static" or "passive method," characterized by the "lettre-confidence," in which the letter merely reports events and the writer and receiver play a passive role. This method is contrasted with the "active" or "kinetic method," characterized by the "lettre-drame," in which the action progresses through the letters themselves, which provoke reactions or function as agents in the plot. Each of the two major types has three subsets, based on the number of correspondents; Jost’s description of the six fundamental epistolary types suggests several properties of the letter and the ways they have been exploited. Today, over a decade later, Rousset’s and Jost’s articles, preliminary and brief though they may be, remain unique in their formalist approach to the epistolary genre as a whole.

A concept of form in a new meaning had now come into play—not just the outer covering but the whole entity, something concrete and dynamic, substantive in itself.—Boris M. Eichenbaum

Whether under the tutelage of the New Critics, the recently rediscovered Russian formalists, or the popular Marshall McLuhan, we have come increasingly to appreciate that form can be more than the outer shell of content, that the medium chosen by an artist may in fact dictate, rather than be dictated by, his message. The enterprise that Jean Rousset undertook in Forme et signification—"saisir des significations à travers des formes"—can describe the activity of the writer as well as the reader of literature. The writer who chooses to construct a novel in letters may find his material growing out of his chosen form and not vice versa. If the exploration of a form's potential can generate a work of art, it can also contribute to our understanding of that work.

Such has not, however, always been the assumption of critics of the epistolary novel. Frank G. Black's observation is a case in point:

The reader of fiction does not wish to be reminded over frequently of a device which exists for the sole purpose of conveying the story. [An] inappropriateness is felt in this novel [Gunning, Memoirs of Mary] and in others where the letters—their loss, concealment, forgery, and so on—become motives in the plot. One dislikes the
apparent confusion of method and matter. Though skill in particular cases qualifies the statement, it would seem that in letter fiction the epistle should be kept as a means of presenting the story and not be unduly obtruded as an agent in the narrative.\(^{15}\)

Such restrictive tastes could lead us to dismiss the work of Joyce, Proust, Pirandello, and Brecht, as well as Richardson and Laclos.\(^{16}\)

Black assumes that the epistle is chosen “as a means of presenting the story.” His statement gives primacy to plot, which the letter should merely function to relate. Yet as any reader of letter narrative should know—particularly those familiar with the French tradition (Crébillon, Rousseau, Laclos)—often relatively little “happens” independently of the letters. Although Clarissa’s and Pamela’s “story” might well have been told (albeit in a different way) without letters, Laclos’s method is his matter; not only are the physical letters primary agents in the plot, but the entire psychological action in the novel advances through the letter writing itself.

Black did not, of course, set out to define “epistolarity” in his work on the late-eighteenth-century letter novel. Yet his assumptions about the form subordinate it to an esthetic value—suppression of the acts that produce the narrative—which reflects a taste more heavily influenced by the nineteenth-century novel’s mimetic esthetic than the eighteenth century’s novelistic values. If we are to understand epistolary literature more fully and appreciate its art, some inquiry into its particular modes of communication is in order.

The chapters that follow represent an effort to approach epistolary literature on its own terms. Underlying this method are two assumptions related to the observations at the beginning of this section: (1) that for the letter novelist the choice of the epistle as narrative instrument can foster certain patterns of thematic emphasis, narrative action, character types, and narrative self-consciousness;\(^{17}\) and (2) that for the reader of epistolary literature, the identification of structures common to letter novels can provide (and expose) important models and perspectives for interpretation of individual works.

An inductive survey of a wide range of letter narrative has led me to focus on six key aspects of the epistolary genre because of
their power to subsume or emblemize a number of the letter’s properties and to ground readings of a variety of works. Each of the chapters of this study explores one of these six aspects as an independent approach to the entire genre; many of the same works are therefore treated in several chapters. In choosing these six I have not restricted myself to purely technical or formal aspects, as do Jost and Rousset. I have been at least as concerned with thematic constants, recurring character types, and patterns of narrative organization in epistolary literature as with the narrative techniques particular to it. In so doing I hope to be laying the ground for a more serious consideration of the epistolary form as a genre rather than merely as one type of narrative technique.

In each chapter generalizations grow out of concrete analyses of texts; the dual objective of defining “epistolarity” and interpreting literature is maintained by deriving each parameter of epistolarity from a variety of examples and validating its usefulness as an interpretative tool by more extended consideration of individual works.

My choice of texts has necessarily been eclectic, based on neither historical, national, nor esthetic considerations but rather on a work’s instructive manifestation of epistolarity. Both my own field of expertise and French predominance in the genre (see Jost’s bibliography) have led me to concentrate somewhat more on the French corpus. I hope that whatever disproportion has thereby resulted will be balanced by the fact that the French territory is less charted than its British counterpart and yields (for reasons that should become apparent) more insights into epistolarity as I have defined it.

1. The authors known as the three Marias (Maria-Isabel Barreno, Maria-Teresa Horta, and Maria-Fátima Velho da Costa) were inspired by both the form and content of Guilleragues’s influential Lettres portugaises (1669) to write their Novas Cartas portuguesas in order to demonstrate how little the isolation and alienation of women in Portugal had changed over three centuries. Bob Randall, who uses nothing but letters to create suspense quite cleverly in The Fan, declared in a television interview that he thought he had invented the epistolary novel. Indeed, the writers who have recently taken up the letter form have done so with the enthusiasm of a new discovery. Jacques Derrida is the latest to renew ties energetically with this ancient genre; the epistolary section
Envois (pp. 5–273 of La Carte postale, which appeared in 1980) participates fully in the conventions of letter fiction. Envois offers, moreover, a richly provocative meditation on telecommunication, on the experience of “en-voyage” (sending messages—envois—while traveling), in which the post card and the “postal effect” become dynamic metaphors for Derrida's complex concepts of writing, dissemination, and différence.

2. See, for instance, Bertil Romberg's chapters on the letter form in her Studies in the Narrative Technique of the First-Person Novel, or E. Th. Voss, Erzählprobleme des Briefromans. (For complete publication information on these and other pertinent works that I cite, please refer to my Selected Bibliography.) Although James experimented with the epistolary form as author, leaving us the two short stories “The Point of View” and “The Bundle of Letters,” he never addressed himself to the genre as critic. Neither Lubbock in The Craft of Fiction (London: J. Cape, 1921) nor Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961) deals specifically with the genre, although their approach is evident in Romberg's chapters.

A number of German dissertations on the letter novel appeared in the 1960s: N. Würzbach, “Die Struktur des Briefromans und seine Entstehung in England” (1961); D. Kimpel, “Entstehung und Formen des Briefromans in Deutschland” (1961); W. Gauglhofer, “Geschichte und Strukturprobleme des europäischen Briefromans” (1968), and H. Picard, “Die Illusion der Wirklichkeit im Briefroman des 18. Jahrhunderts” (1971). In spite of the titles, these dissertations typically analyze a limited number of works, but they do deal with more general questions of narrative technique, largely within the tradition of analysis of “Erzählldistanz” (narrator's relationship to story) defined by Käte Friedemann (Die Rolle des Erzählers in der Epik [1910]), Käte Hamburger (Die Logik der Dichtung [1957]), and Franz Stanzel (Die typischen Erzählssituationen im Roman [1955]).

3. In addition to numerous isolated studies of the letter (as distinct from letter narrative), there has been a regular seminar on “The Familiar Letter in the Seventeenth Century in England” at Modern Language Association meetings in recent years. In France the Société d'Histoire Littéraire de la France organized a colloquium on “La Lettre au XVIIe siècle” in 1977 (papers published in the Revue d’histoire littéraire de la France, Nov.–Dec. 1978), and critics like Duchêne, Beugnot, and Bray have regularly dialogued with each other on the problematic relationship of reality and art in real and literary correspondences.

4. In Le Dilemme du roman au XVIII e siècle (1963), Georges May identifies and examines the effects of the dilemma that criticism created for the French novelist: the impossibility of avoiding simultaneously criticism's accusations of invraisemblance and its attacks on immoralism.


6. Thelander's title is somewhat misleading. Her short study serves more as an introduction to Laclos than to the epistolary novel.

7. Versini actually examines Laclos's relationship to a variety of preceding traditions: dramatic and thematic as well as epistolary.

8. Versini's more recent study, Le Roman épistolaire (1979), provides clearer historical perspectives than the more diffuse thesis of Laclos et la tradition. It is, moreover, a highly readable book, the best place to begin for a sense of the epistolary novel's history.

10. Jean Rousset, "Une Forme littéraire: le roman par lettres," chapter four of his Forme et signification. A considerably shorter version of the chapter (without the individual analyses and bibliography) was serialized under the same title that year in the Nouvelle Revue Française 10 (May–June 1962): 830-41, 1010-22.

11. The same article, revised, appeared in Jost’s collection Essais de littérature comparée (1968), 2:89-179, with a bibliographical appendix (pp. 380-402). This appendix contains 520 entries and includes almost all of the major (as well as most of the minor) epistolary works of world literature from classical times to the mid twentieth century; it has been my single most useful bibliographical tool. Other helpful listings are: for France, Yves Giraud’s Bibliographie du roman épistolaire en France des origines à 1842. Martin, Mylne, and Frautschi’s Bibliographie du genre romanesque français, 1751–1800, and Versini’s bibliography in Laclos et la tradition; for England, the lists in Black’s The Epistolary Novel in the Late Eighteenth Century and Day’s Told in Letters; and for Germany, the bibliographies in Voss’s and Kimpel’s dissertations.

12. Vivienne Mylne makes a similar distinction between “memoir-letters” and “event-letters” (p. 151) and points out the analogy between these and two types of scenes in plays.

13. In 1976 the Association Internationale des Etudes Françaises devoted a full day of its annual meeting to a colloquium on “Le Roman par lettres.” All seven of the communications dealt with one or two individual works, with an rather than with the epistolary novel. The papers and discussion are published in the association’s Cahiers, no. 29 (1977), pp. 131-241 and 348-59.


15. Black, p. 58.

16. Other readers, schooled by Shklovsky or the modernists, would of course attribute esthetic value precisely to that “laying bare of the device” (Shklovsky’s term) which Black deplores and which Shklovsky illustrates in his own epistolary novel, Zoo, or Letters Not about Love, which has recently been widely translated (1923; English translation, 1971).

17. I would not argue, however, as M. Roelens has in “Le Texte et ses conditions d’existence,” that the letter is a “forme nécessitante” whose adoption is a servitude determining all aspects of a work. Roelens reads Les Liaisons in terms of a rigid logic whereby conformity to the esthetic of verisimilitude leads to the choice of the letter, which subordinates all aspects of the novel (psychology, ideology, and so forth) to the necessity of bringing the novel into existence. Although this reading is seductive, it is nonetheless reductive as an absolute claim for Laclos’s novel and is less applicable to other epistolary works.

18. I have accordingly assumed that anyone led to read this book will have sufficiently comparatist interests to read French. French texts are quoted only in the original; for other languages translations are given. The spelling in all quotations from eighteenth-century and earlier editions has been standardized and modernized; punctuation, however, has not been altered.