CHAPTER ONE

EPISTOLARY MEDIATION

Given the letter’s function as a connector between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver, the epistolary author can choose to emphasize either the distance or the bridge. When Ovid began to explore the letter’s narrative potential in the *Epistulae Heroidum*, he was already aware of both aspects of the letter’s intermediary nature. Many of the *Heroides* are fictional letters from abandoned heroines, who repeatedly bemoan the distance separating them from their lovers. Even lovers on good terms, when they are obliged to communicate by letter, lament the instrument’s inadequacy. “Mittit Abydenus, quam mallet ferre, salutem, / si cadat unda maris, Sesta puella, tibi” (“he of Abydos sends to you, Maid of Sestos, the greetings he would rather bring, if the waves of the sea should fall”), writes Leander to Hero, when a storm prevents him from crossing the Hellespont.¹ The very hand that usually bears him across these waves is now reduced to constructing an inferior bridge: “at quanto mallem, quam scriberet, illa [dextra] nataret” (“but ah! how much rather would I have it swim than write” [v. 21]).

Other Ovidian letter writers choose to deemphasize the gulf in favor of the letter’s power to span it. Phaedra, who cannot communicate with Hippolytus by speech because of both her own modesty and his hardheartedness, places all her hopes in the epistle:
inspicit acceptas hostis ab hoste notas.
Ter tecum conata loqui ter inutilis haesit
lingua, ter in primo destitit ore sonus.
qua licet et sequitur, pudor est miscendus amori;
dicere quae puduit, scribere iussit amor.

Even foe looks into missive written by foe. Thrice making trial of
speech with you, thrice hath my tongue vainly stopped, thrice the
sound failed at first threshold of my lips. Wherever modesty may
attend on love, love should not lack in it; with me, what modesty
forbade to say, love has commanded me to write. [Phaedra Hipp­
plyto, vv. 6–10]

Paris in his letter to Helen, like Phaedra, confesses his love and
tries to persuade the object of his passion to reciprocate. The
letter in both cases is seen as facilitating a union: “Iamdudum
gratum est, quod epistula nostra recepta / spem facit, hoc recipi
me quoque posse modo” (“Long now have I had cheer, for your
welcoming my letter begets the hope that I also may be likewise
welcomed” [L. 16, Paris Helenae, vv. 13–14]). Helen’s response,
which begins with a protest but ends with a suggestion of capitula­
tion, demonstrates the letter’s usefulness as a tool for seduction.

Ovid claimed that the Heroides constituted a new literary
genre; whether he was in a strict sense right or not, these
Epistulae were to have a long line of descendants. From the
Lettres portugaises in the seventeenth century to Montherlant’s
Les Jeunes Filles, epistolary heroines and heroes have em­
broidered with frequency on themes already present in Ovid.

In fact, the letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its
emphasis on separation and reunion. The lover who takes up his
pen to write his loved one is conscious of the interrelation of
presence and absence and the way in which his very medium of
communication reflects both the absence and presence of his
addressee. At one moment he may proclaim the power of the
letter to make the distant addressee present (the “je crois te parler”
of so much French fiction) and at the next lament the absence of
the loved one and the letter’s powerlessness to replace the spoken
word or physical presence (the theme throughout Leander’s letter
to Hero). A scriptomaniac like Andrée Hacquebaut, in
Montherlant’s quartet of novels Les Jeunes Filles, writes
paradoxically to Pierre Costals that separation draws people
closer ("l'éloignement rapproché" [vol. 1, p. 115]) because letters permit an intimate, interiorized communion ("dans votre silence je vous recrée et vous retrouve, tel que je vous ai aimé" [vol. 2, p. 26]), and yet Andrée laments at another date that letters serve only to increase the distance between two people (vol. 2, p. 50). The metaphor of the letter as a chain connecting two lovers is concretized in an unusual image in the Lettres d'une Péruvienne of Mme de Graffigny. Zilia, captured by the Spanish, communicates with her fiancé Aza through Peruvian letters—quipos— which are none other than knotted ropes that can be passed back and forth between the two: "les mêmes noeuds qui t'apprendront mon existence, en changeant de forme entre tes mains, m'instruiront de ton sort" (L. 1), "ces noeuds, qui me semblaient être une chaîne de communication de mon cœur au tien" (L. 17). The letter is here literally a chain of communication, one whose physical shape metamorphoses according to the sentimental forces acting upon it.

THE SEDUCTION NOVEL

An entire plot tradition, the novel of seduction through letters, is built around the letter's power to suggest both presence and absence, to decrease and increase distance. Typically, in such works as Crébillon's Lettres de la marquise, Mme Riccoboni's Fanni Butlerd, Dorat's Les Malheurs de l'inconstance, or in the présidente-Valmont plot of Les Liaisons dangereuses, the letter is an insidious device used by the seducer to break down his victim's resistance. The seduction (Paris-Helen type in the Heroïdes), with its emphasis on the letter as bridge, is followed by abandonment (Dido-Aeneas type in Ovid), with its appropriate stress on the letter as emblem of separation. These thematic emphases (rapprochement-separation) and the letter's relationship to them (bridge, emblem of distance) are not quite so neat, however, as our bipartite division of the seduction novel may imply. Even a work given over entirely to the abandonment part of the usual seduction-abandonment plot, such as the Lettres portugaises, will not emphasize the theme of separation exclusively. The Portuguese nun, who usually feels so cut off from her lover that she resents even the letter's good fortune of "falling
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into his hands” (L. 1) when she herself cannot, can at one point look upon the letter as making her feel her lover's presence rather than his absence: “il me semble que je vous parle, quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent” (L. 4). Similarly, in novels that develop the seduction plot, whereas the seducer regards the letter as his arm for overcoming the barrier between him and his lady, the lady paradoxically regards the letter as an extension of this barrier, as her weapon of protection. Each time the présidente de Tourvel breaks her vow of silence to respond to Valmont, it is by way of self-defense. The letter affords her a greater distance and perspective from which to justify herself. A correspondence is less dangerous than private conversations, “ces entretiens particuliers où, par une inconcevable puissance, sans jamais parvenir à vous dire ce que je veux, je passe mon temps à écouter ce que je ne devrais pas entendre” (L. 90). The présidente's letters, moreover, are always requests for further separation, asking Valmont to assume a more distant position, and consequently in her eyes function doubly as bulwarks.

Claude-Joseph Dorat's *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance* should serve as an exemplum of the subtle ways in which the letter mediates seduction. Dorat's novel represents a particularly complex confluence of seduction motifs present in other epistolary novels; moreover, in its title, characters, and plot it strongly prefigures *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, presenting a présidente-like figure, the marquise de Syrcé, who succumbs to the comte de Mirbelle only after a long and valiant epistolary resistance. A brief summary of this lesser-known eighteenth-century work, published in 1772, ten years before *Les Liaisons*, will make the parallels with Laclos's novel clearer.

The duc de***, so far unsuccessful in his attempt to seduce the marquise de Syrcé, decides to seduce her “par procuration” (L. 6). He chooses as his proxy the comte de Mirbelle, a promising but as yet unformed libertine, whose current affair with Lady Sidley is beginning to bore him. Most of the novel is devoted to Mirbelle's long but ultimately successful epistolary seduction of Syrcé, who attracts him at first only by the strength of her resistance, but with whom he winds up falling in love. The duke meanwhile tries (unsuccessfully) to seduce Lady Sidley through letters sent behind
Mirbelle's back. When Sidley discovers Mirbelle's infidelity, she retires to a convent. Syrcé confesses her sins to her mother and dies in childbirth. Recognizing the duke as "le bourreau de Madame de Syrcé, de Sidley, le mien" (pt. 2, L. 48), Mirbelle kills him in a duel and goes off to expiate his sins in solitude.²

The scene of the marquise de Syrcé's defeat and the circumstances surrounding it, like the parallel episode in Les Liaisons, are based on the letter's dual mediatory aspect. Mme de Syrcé, like the présidente de Tourvel, has just fled from the dangerous presence of her pursuer. She continues to receive his letters, however, and, unlike the présidente, reads them and responds. In a curious letter to Mirbelle, she describes in pastoral terms the labyrinth that is her customary afternoon retreat:

J'oubliais un labyrinthe presque magique: il faut ma prudence pour ne pas m'y égarer. [. . .] Les routes en sont bordées d'un double rang de rocaillies, où serpente une eau vive sur un sable colore. Les statues n'y représentent que des fictions, car ce sont des femmes qui cèdent, et je n'aime point cela. On consacre nos faiblesses, où sont les monuments érigés à nos vertus? c'est le tort des hommes non le nôtre. Où en étais-je? je n'en sais rien — Dieu me préserve de mettre de l'ordre dans ce que j'écris! Je me dépêche d'arriver à la grotte charmante qui termine le labyrinthe. Quand on y est, il semble qu'on soit séparé de l'univers; on y marche sur les roses, et on en est couronné. J'y vais souvent, surtout quand le soleil se couche. L'attrait y mène, l'enchantement y retient, on y rêve à ce qu'on veut.

A propos de rêves, il faut que je vous raconte celui que j'ai fait. [She continues with a description of her dream of loving a sylph.][Pt. 1, L. 41]³

In a candid style quite different from the controlled, ordered, formal style of the présidente (who nonetheless discloses her underlying emotions to Valmont in her letters), the marquise de Syrcé gives herself totally away to Mirbelle (who, being more emotional and less intelligent than Valmont, would never be able to perceive the real sentiments of a less frank mistress than Syrcé). The marquise naively divulges everything—from her emotional state to the time and place she can be located—while consciously believing (as she writes to her confidante Mme de Lacé) that her flight and her letters will keep Mirbelle at a safe distance. The "égarement" of her writing reflects her erotic state, and the
labyrinth is a convenient emblem for both. The “où en étais-je?” of the letter will be echoed in the “où suis-je?” of the seduction scene, as Mirbelle records it:

ce voluptueux dédale Quel objet! quel moment! à travers une charmille, je l’aperçois lisant une Lettre, et cette Lettre était une des miennes! [...] son sein n’avait d’autre voile qu’une gaze légère que le zéphyr dérangeait. [...] Je m’enhardis, la porte du sanctuaire s’ouvre, je paraîs aux regards de la déesse: elle jette un cri, sa main tremblante abandonne la Lettre qu’elle tenait. [...] Elle ne songe pas] à réparer le désordre de sa parure. [...] “Je suis l’amant que vous avez rêvé Oui, oui, reconnaissiez un Sylphe à mon respect.” [...] “malheureuse!” dit-elle, “où suis-je” Elle retombe sans force et sans couleur sur le lit du gazon. [...] un voile de verdure enveloppa la pudeur; le Sylphe devint homme, et l’homme devint un Dieu.

The letter from Mirbelle that the marquise is holding is an ambivalent intermediary between the two lovers. It is almost simultaneously the breach in the bulwark that facilitates the conquest, having predisposed the marquise to amorous reverie, and the bulwark itself, insofar as it is one of the last protective coverings to fall; not coincidentally, the wind brushes aside the veil covering her breast at almost the same moment that she drops the letter.

The présidente de Tourvel succumbs to her much more aggressive and calculating seducer in circumstances governed by a strikingly similar epistolary mediation. Although Valmont invades her retreat with her permission, he enters Tourvel’s house only on the pretense of returning her letters to her. In Dorat’s novel Mirbelle’s letter (and the preceding revelatory letter from Syrcé about the labyrinth) is instrumental in facilitating his victory; in the Liaisons scene, however, it is less the content of the letter than its physical aspect (the letter as object rather than the letter as message) that serves as catalyst. The turning point of the scene occurs when Valmont offers his collection of letters to the présidente, attributing to the package itself an ultimate signifying power that the individual letters never had: “Et tirant de ma poche le précieux recueil: ‘Le voilà, dis-je, ce dépôt trompeur des assurances de votre amitié. Il m’attachait à la vie, reprenez-le. Donnez ainsi vous-même le signal qui doit me séparer de vous pour jamais’ ” (L. 125). The concerned présidente of course
refuses to transform the letters, which she has nevertheless always naively regarded as instruments of "éloignement," into the "signal" for final separation; they remain instead what Valmont has always intended them to be: distance breakers instead of distance makers.

As a mediator of desire in the communication process, the letter functions on two figurative levels. On the one hand, as we saw in Dorat, the epistolary situation in which one writes to an absent lover fosters the generation of substitute images of the lover (e.g., the sylph that Syrcé dreams of and that Mirbelle decides to incarnate). On the other hand, as we saw in Laclos, the letter as a physical entity emanating from, passing between, and touching each of the lovers may function itself as a figure for the lover (rejection of the letters is the "signal" for rejection of the lover). Applying Jakobson's terminology somewhat loosely, we might distinguish these two types of figures so frequently fostered by letter writing as *metaphoric* (a metaphor of the lover is generated by the epistolary situation, which conjures up interiorized images and comparisons) and *métonymic* (the letter itself, by virtue of physical contact, stands for the lover).\(^8\) Both types of figures have a long history in epistolary literature. The letter as lover (metonymy of the self) appears any time the letter is perceived as having the virtue of "falling into his hands when I cannot" (*Lettres portugaises*); in the hands of some lovers, what Saint-Preux designates as "un vain papier [qui] me tenait lieu de toi" may even become a fetish in sexual fantasies. Mr. B's, Lovelace's, and Valmont's rape of their women's private correspondence prefigures their attempted violations of their persons. The letter's figurative function as generator of metaphors, on the other hand, assumes importance in epistolary literature any time the substitute image or illusion of a lover created during absence is confronted with his presence; epistolary romantics frequently try to become each other's illusions or lament the difference between the image created by letters and the real lover. In both cases the fundamental parameters of the epistolary situation act in specific catalytic and inhibiting ways upon the seduction process.

The seduction novel provides a privileged situation for emphasizing the letter's ambivalence as intermediary. The mar-
quise de Merteuil devotes an entire letter (L. 33) to an argument against the epistolary approach to seduction, citing the slowness of letters, the time for reflection and refusal that they allow the victim, the difficulty of writing what one does not feel, and the general inferiority of long-distance love to actual presence. In a rebuttal letter (L. 34) Valmont justifies his approach with the argument of necessity (since the présidente refuses to talk to him he has no choice), but in an earlier letter he has suggested a more interesting reason: “J'ai beau me rappeler mes heureuses témérités, je ne puis me résoudre à les mettre en usage. Pour que je sois vraiment heureux, il faut qu'elle se donne; et ce n'est pas une petite affaire” (L. 6). If Valmont chooses to write rather than act, it is partly for the same reasons that Pierre Costals, Montherlant’s latter-day Valmont, chooses to write Solange when she has reacted totally passively to him: “En fait je vais lui écrire. Par cette lettre, je retourne la situation, la mets au pied du mur. J'ai abattu ma carte, à elle d'abattre la sienne” (Les Jeunes Filles, vol. 1, p. 184). Both seducers use the letter to force their women into a more active posture, to elicit a response in both the epistolary and the sexual sense, in which she must reveal and give of herself.

The epistolary romance thus differs significantly from the libertine affair, in that it takes more time and forces the seduced as well as the seducer to play a more aggressive role. It would be difficult to imagine a long sequence of “lettres galantes” exchanged by the same two lovers; the novel that Fontenelle entitles Lettres galantes de monsieur le chevalier d'Her***, in fact, is a collection of letters addressed by the chevalier to numerous women, not one of whom receives more than four or five letters in sequence. An instructive contrast to Valmont’s affair with the présidente is provided by the marquise de Merteuil’s escapades with Prévan and the chevalier de Belleroche, or even by the vicomte’s own libertine exploits with Emilie, Cécile, and the vicomtesse de M***: each of these is the affair of one or two evenings and can be told only in “bulletin” form by the aggressor. Valmont’s affair with the présidente, on the other hand, is conducted by means of a real exchange of letters and takes four months. Merteuil constantly rebukes Valmont for taking so much time, in repartees that contrast her own approach with Valmont’s divergence from
libertine etiquette and accuse him of having fallen in love. Whether Valmont is actually “in love” with the présidente or not is an open question; that he has invested significantly more emotion in this affair than in his usual ones is not. Moreover, the fact that Valmont conducts this particular romance through letters, whether by choice or necessity, is bound up with his emotional involvement.

The pure epistolary romance would be exactly the opposite of the libertine affair; by definition, it would be platonic. Crébillon’s *Lettres de la duchesse de *** au duc de **** provides an unusual example of a uniquely epistolary romance (the duke and duchess glimpse each other only once during the entire exchange), but the typical romantic correspondence serves rather to punctuate and further an affair that is going on between the letters. If the letter in Crébillon’s *Lettres de la duchesse* becomes an emblem of the physical and psychological distance between the duke and duchess, in *Lettres de la marquise de M*** au comte de R***, by the same author, the letter is an instrument of rapprochement, at least in the first half of the novel. What is common to both novels, however, is that the use of the letter to mediate the romance entails an increased emphasis on psychological nuance and the details of everyday life.

The epistolary romance is a slow-motion affair, in the same way that an exchange of letters is a dialogue *ritardando*. It follows that stress will be thrown off events and onto psychology. What we observe in the letters of the marquise de M*** or in the Tourvel-Valmont exchange are the vicissitudes of a heart or the subtle interplay of conflicting personalities. In each case the use of the letter as the vehicle of seduction produces erotic and psychological effects that may surprise the seducer as much as his victim. The libertine Valmont begins to savor slowness, becoming “moins pressé de jouir” (L. 57); Dorat’s rake Mirbelle winds up falling in love with a woman he had intended merely to conquer. In a not dissimilar fashion, Crébillon’s marquise, Dorat’s Syrécé, and Laclos’s Tourvel are surprised to find that correspondence has served less to preserve than to erode emotional indifference. For both the calculating seducer and his virtuous victim the vehicle for detachment can operate insidiously to produce attachment, which perhaps unconsciously motivated the continuation
of the correspondence all along. The letter is an ambivalent instrument and as such lends itself to a correspondent's self-deception.

The seduction novel is not the only type concerned with the effects of epistolary mediation. Of the four novels that we shall now examine, not one portrays a seduction via letters, and only one presents an epistolary romance. All, however, are built around the letter’s power to connect or to interfere.

**CLARISSA**

*Clarissa* is certainly one of the most distinguished examples of the seduction novel. Yet the conquest of Clarissa by Lovelace does not take place via correspondence; only 6 of the 537 letters composing Richardson’s novel are exchanged between the heroine and her tormentor. It is true that Clarissa, in traditional epistolary fashion, does begin her relationship with Lovelace through letters, in which she tries to reconcile him with her family, but the reader sees these only occasionally and indirectly, when Clarissa inserts or quotes from them in her letters to Anna Howe. The novel, as François Jost has pointed out, differs from *Les Liaisons* in being composed primarily of “lettres-confidence,” letters written to confidants, rather than “lettres-drame” written to the adversary. The letter in *Clarissa* is thus neither a primary instrument of seduction nor a means for holding the seducer at a distance. Once Clarissa has fled her father’s house with Lovelace, she is his prisoner, and the seduction scenes leading up to the rape take place in closed rooms. Yet this novel, more perhaps than any other, emphasizes epistolary mediation.

Let us examine Clarissa’s reasons for writing Lovelace those first letters that we rarely glimpse. She writes originally at her relatives’ request, to ask Lovelace questions regarding his European travels. After the duel between her brother and Lovelace, her parents forbid her to continue the correspondence, but she writes secretly, having determined that serious violence might occur if she did not try to placate Lovelace. Clarissa’s letter writing from the very beginning serves a mediatory function; she writes to reconcile Lovelace to her family, just as she will later hope to be reconciled herself to her family through Lovelace: “If the circumstances of things are such that I can have no way for
reconciliation with those who would have been my natural protectors from such outrages, but through you (the only inducement I can have to stay a moment longer in your knowledge), pen and ink must be at present, the only means of communication between us” (8 June, to Lovelace).

Clarissa's pen and ink will more than once be her only means of communication. While still in her parents’ house, she is reduced to communicating with her relatives and her suitor Solmes through letters, having been locked up in her room and forbidden “to come into their presence” (6 March). When she exchanges her parents’ prison for Lovelace’s, and even after her escape, she is afraid to intrude into her relatives’ presence bodily but sends instead an epistolary way-paver (29 July). It is only in the letter to be sent posthumously that Clarissa can write her father: “With exulting confidence now does your emboldened daughter come unto your awful presence by these lines, who dared not but upon this occasion to look up to you with hopes of favour and forgiveness” (9 September). Similarly Lovelace, when told after the rape that it would be “death immediate” for Clarissa to see him, writes her a penitent letter, calling it “a more pardonable intrusion, perhaps, than a visit would be” (7 August). The supplicant letter in Clarissa thus typically mediates and mitigates a forbidden contact.

Frequently, particularly at the end of Richardson’s novel, one character “comes into the presence” of another by letter only, and not necessarily through a letter addressed to that person. Thus a kind of double mediation occurs when Mrs. Norton shows to Clarissa’s family the letter Clarissa sent Mrs. Norton. Only then does the family begin to believe that Clarissa is really ill. They are not sufficiently convinced to repeal their curse, however, viciously blaming their own emotional reaction to the letter on Clarissa’s talent for writing and moving the passions (31 August). If Clarissa dies in solitude, it is because only those who actually see her (Belford and Morden) are convinced of her illness. Even Anna Howe, who never makes it to Clarissa’s bedside, cannot believe Clarissa’s dire condition on the basis of letters alone: “But methinks your style and sentiments are too well connected, too full of life and vigour, to give cause for so much despair as the staggering pen seems to forbode” (5 September). The rhetorical
thrust of such moments is clear: the letter is a poor substitute for
direct contact. By mediating reality, it screens the immediacy of
Clarissa’s plight.

The letter already constitutes a mediation between sender and
receiver, but Richardson complicates this kind of interference
with additional mediatory devices. Clarissa’s correspondence
with Anna Howe is frequently intercepted and even forged by
Lovelace. After her escape from him, few of her letters to her
family are answered directly. When she writes her mother, her
Uncle John responds for the mother; Clarissa then writes her
Uncle John, but her Uncle Antony replies for him; when Clarissa
writes her Uncle Antony, her sister answers brutally.

In this novel where so little direct communication takes place,
the letter writer himself assumes an important mediatory role.
Clarissa requests Anna Howe’s “epistolary mediation” (term
actually used by Clarissa) on many occasions: between Clarissa
and Lovelace’s aunts (27 July), between Clarissa and her family.
Even Belford abandons his role of simple confidant toward the
end of the novel to assume a much more active mediatory one.
When circumstances bring him into direct contact with the dying
Clarissa, he experiences what is essentially a doubting Thomas’s
conversion; subsequently he will serve in multiple fashions as
mediator between sinner and saint. From 16 July on, Belford
remains close to Clarissa, serving as Lovelace’s only means of
communication with her. Lovelace, frequently dissatisfied with
such indirect means, demands “pardon from her lips, which she
has not denied me by pen and ink” (31 August) but is foiled in his
efforts to storm Clarissa’s retreat. Belford actually serves Clarissa
as intermediary better than he serves Lovelace. As Clarissa’s first
disciple he ultimately transmits both the information for her story
(handling over Lovelace’s letters to her) and the story itself (when
he becomes executor of her estate and protector of her memory).
Belford will perform one final mediatory act, when he attempts to
keep distance between Lovelace and Clarissa’s avenging angel,
Colonel Morden, in order to reconcile them (3 October).

Clarissa also tries to intervene between Lovelace and her cousin
Morden. In posthumously delivered letters to Lovelace (24
August) and to her cousin (included in Belford’s of 21 September)
she begs the former to repent and the latter not to take vengeance.
These letters actually fulfill Lovelace’s earlier dream of Clarissa’s “sweet mediation,” as Lovelace had transcribed it:

At that moment her cousin Morden, I thought, all of a sudden, flashed in through a window with his drawn sword. Die Lovelace! said he.

I was rising to resent this insult, I thought, when instantly my charmer, with that sweet voice which has so often played upon my ravished ears, wrapped her arms round me. O spare, spare my Lovelace! and spare, O Lovelace, my beloved Cousin Morden! Let me not have my distresses augmented by the fall of either or both of those who are so dear to me!

At this, charmed with her sweet mediation, I thought I would have clasped her in my arms: when immediately the most angelic form I had ever beheld, all clad in transparent white, descended in a cloud, which, opening, discovered a firmament above it, crowded with golden cherubs and glittering seraphs, all addressing her with: Welcome, welcome, welcome! and, encircling my charmer, ascended with her. I lost sight of her, and of the bright form together. And then, the floor sinking under me I dropped. [22 August]

Lovelace in his dream mistakes the mediating Beatrician Clarissa for a human figure, just as he later interprets literally Clarissa’s promise to write him “from her father’s house.” Clarissa’s “letter from her father’s house” is precisely the Beatrician plea for repentance that is sent to Lovelace posthumously, inviting him “to follow me, as soon as you can be prepared for so great a journey” (24 August). If the dream sequence typifies the thematic emphasis on mediation and intercession in this novel, the posthumous letter foreshadowed by the angelic dream figure exemplifies the extent to which Richardson uses the letter’s mediating property to reinforce his thematic emphasis.

*Clarissa* is constructed as a tragedy of indirect communication. Anna Howe’s anguished letter to Charlotte Montague articulates the powerlessness of the letter writer: “I wrote to her [Clarissa] the very moment you and your sister left me. . Having no answer I wrote again. But judge my astonishment, my distraction, when last night the messenger, returning posthaste, brought me word that she had not been heard of since Friday morning! And that a letter lay for her at her lodgings which came by the post; and must be mine! . Lord, have mercy upon me! What shall I do! I was a distracted creature all last night!” (18 July). The unopened
letter, the intercepted letter, the forged letter, the deceitful letter, letters that arrive too late (relatives’ messages of forgiveness posted the day of Clarissa’s death), letters to parents written while still in their house: all of these compose the novel of a heroine who, if she writes at all, is using the only form of communication left open to her. The use of letters in Clarissa serves to emphasize the estrangement and isolation of the title character, such an indirect device being emblematic of the psychological and physical barriers separating her from her family, Lovelace, and friends.\textsuperscript{11} From the beginning of the novel to the end, Clarissa writes from a situation of solitary confinement and avails herself of the prison letter as the only instrument that could, and yet fails to, free her.

In Richardson’s puritan novel the moral landscape is clearly divided into three domains: heaven, the world, and hell. Clarissa’s banishment from Harlowe Place, her descent into Mrs. Sinclair’s infamous house, and her ultimate return to her “father’s house” retrace, albeit ambiguously, the biblical myth of man’s pilgrimage from Eden to paradise.\textsuperscript{12} Direct communication between these three worlds is emphatically forbidden; the landscape that emerges is one of zones of sacred space from which “sinners” are excluded. Clarissa’s invisible father sits within an inner room, a holy of holies from which he sends out directives of banishment via the son and the mother. Throughout the novel Clarissa abortively seeks communication with the father. As the sacred space is displaced from Harlowe Place to Clarissa’s body and she is increasingly isolated within inner rooms, mediatory efforts diversify and multiply. Communication between Clarissa and the world, between Clarissa and Lovelace, must be effected via an elaborate system of transmission and intercession, of which the letters are emblematic. Richardson increasingly uses letters to emphasize the moral distance between sender and receiver and to underline the difficulties of communication between the sacred and the profane. Alternately viewed as sinner and saint, Clarissa is prevented from bridging the gap between herself and the world. Interceding letters trace the history of that gap but are powerless to span it. They can record, but not affect, The History of Clarissa Harlowe.
MITSOU

If *Clarissa* dramatizes in many ways the abortiveness of indirect communication, *Mitsou, ou comment l'esprit vient aux filles* portrays the failure of direct contact. Only twenty-four of the ninety pages of Colette's novel are in epistolary form; the rest is composed of narrative, description, and primarily dramatic dialogue. Yet the epistolary passages inform the entire work, since *Mitsou* depicts an epistolary romance that breaks down when it is no longer mediated by letters, as we can see by reviewing Colette's organization of her narrative.

Sections 1–3 (three “scenes” in dramatic style) present Mitsou, a melancholy, simple showgirl, who is briefly introduced to a Blue Lieutenant in her dressing room and begins to correspond with him. Little by little in section 4 (epistolary), Mitsou and the soldier grow to love each other through letters. The Blue Lieutenant admires Mitsou's simple, frank style and replies in the same fashion. When he returns home on leave, however, in sections 5–8 (dramatic), their first meeting is awkward. The more sophisticated Robert is repelled by Mitsou's apartment; in the restaurant Mitsou makes social blunders and they discover their tastes are different. Mitsou is shy and Robert becomes her lover reluctantly. The following day (section 9, dramatic and epistolary), expecting Robert, Mitsou receives instead a long letter from him informing her that he had to leave suddenly. In an equally long reply (section 10, epistolary) she analyzes the real reason for his leaving.

The above analysis of this simple story, told by Colette in a whimsical, almost Giralducian style, should suffice as a background for analyzing the role of the letter in the novel and the images that Colette creates to describe that role. In letters Mitsou and Robert must remain at the “vous” level, for “Le premier tu est un cri irrépressible, et on ne crie pas dans une lettre” (p. 96). The letter both maintains and bridges a physical gap across which the two can gradually reveal to each other their inner selves and their daily existences before the shock of physical contact would render such spiritual communication impossible. “Ah! chère, chère Mitsou,” writes Robert as he is getting to know Mitsou through her letters, “que tout me plaît en vous, et surtout ce souci qu'ont vos
When they meet in the flesh after their correspondence, “pas encore habitués aux nuances de leurs voix” (p. 118), they can only experience a malaise. To understand Mitsou, Robert must actually translate her spoken words into epistolary form: “la phrase que vient de prononcer Mitsou, il lui semble qu'il la lit et la relit, là-bas, dans un lieu dépouillé. ‘Je n'ai jamais été amoureuse, à présent je la [sic] suis. ‘Elle aurait sans doute mis un z à été. Que j'aime ce z’ ” (p. 137). Robert relies even more heavily than Mitsou on the letter as a mediator, however. Just as he needs the covetous glances of others in the restaurant to move him toward her, he goes through the motions of sexual love to accomplish an image of masculinity rather than out of personal desire.\(^{13}\) Analyzing his situation when he awakens just before dawn, Robert recognizes that “c’est que j’ai cessé, en la voyant, d’être amoureux de Mitsou” (p. 167). Still troubled by the strength of his feelings for her, however, he realizes that “trop tôt, le hasard a fouillé un sillon où dormait vivante, mais non complète et frappée d’impuissance, la larve onduleuse de mon amour futur” (p. 170).

In his farewell letter to Mitsou, Robert returns to the “vous” form, after having used the familiar “tu” throughout their evening together. The Blue Lieutenant confesses in this figuratively rich letter that, erotically speaking, he prefers the slow rhythm of a correspondence to the accelerated one of the love affair: “Je n'ai pas encore quitté cette habitude chère et énervante d'attendre longtemps—quatre jours chaque fois—la chute d'un de vos voiles et l'écho d'une de vos paroles. Ce dialogue, attardé aux obstacles de la route, m'avait donné de vous une idée de langueur et de nonchalance; je l'ai perdue cette nuit, entre des bras dont l'étreinte explicite et rythmée—plus vite, encore plus vite—éperonnait ma hâte” (pp. 177-78). Robert continues to find epistolary metaphors for his erotic state, as he expresses the desire to reflect upon the discrepancy between images of Mitsou on two different “sheets”: “Je ne sais pas quand je reviendrai. Je ne sais pas si je reviendrai. Il faut seulement m'écrire, Mitsou. Cynique à mes heures, je vous avoue que je meurs de la curiosité de confronter, maintenant que je les ai l'une et l'autre froissées

lettres de me peindre votre existence morose et claire, et vide comme une mansarde neuve!” (p. 105).
contre mon coeur, Mitsou sur batiste et Mitsou sur papier. Je ne baisse que vos mains, ma chérie, et j’éloigne sagement, amèrement de moi, pour un temps, le souvenir de tout votre corps sensible" (pp. 178–79).

Mitsou responds in an equally colorful letter that she too felt that she had developed a great deal through their correspondence, but that the actual sight of him made all her “petals curl up”; she still loves Robert enough to try to “become his illusion” (p. 187). Less platonic than he, however, she reproaches him for trying to jump “à piéjoints [sic] par-dessus notre rencontre d’hier” (p. 184), suggesting that if he will grant her “la confiance et la bonne amitié de votre corps, peut-être qu’une nuit, à tâtons, tout doucement, elles m’amèneront enfin jusqu’à vous” (p. 187). Mitsou feels the same need for slowness (“tout doucement”) that the epistolary romance offers, but for her the slow rhythm must now take place in a physical context (“à tâtons”).

The mediatory property of the letter makes Colette’s novel more than a simple variation on the old myth that “wit” comes to girls through love or sexual initiation. To be sure, Colette probably borrowed her subtitle from La Fontaine’s verse tale “Comment l’esprit vient aux filles,” in which the village simpleton is sent to a lascivious monk to get some “sense” and quickly learns the art of ruse. Mitsou, like the Agnès of Molière’s Ecole des femmes or Arlequin of Marivaux’s Arlequin poli par l’amour, starts out as the empty mind (“empty as a new attic” is Colette’s image) to be schooled by love, and like them learns to lie to hide her affairs. The key experience in Mitsou’s development, however, is not simply the birth of desire but the experience of writing about that desire. Not only love, but letters and writing are an “event” in Mitsou’s life; she has never experienced either before. Mitsou begins her exchange with Robert naively; ironically he initially interprets her candid remarks as sarcasm and responds in kind, whereas she initially prefers not to try to decipher his ironies but to “look at his lovely handwriting” instead (p. 84). Only gradually do they become skilled readers of each other’s letters, and Mitsou makes the most dramatic progress.

Throughout the novel Colette uses natural imagery of growth (seeds, buds, larvae) to emphasize that Mitsou is in early stages of
development. Perhaps the key image, although a less obvious one, is the mirror. When Robert and Mitsou first meet, their images appear fleetingly in Mitsou's music hall mirror together: they look like twins. Later, when Mitsou is speaking to her middle-aged lover, l'Homme Bien, she realizes that while she has just spoken the truth about Robert, it sounds like a falsehood; she makes this discovery while glancing at her image in the mirror. In the course of her exchange with Robert, Mitsou begins not only to write letters but to see how she is being read: letters become the mirrors in which she develops awareness of how her self and her language appear to others. In short, the experience with Robert marks not only the birth of desire but a developmental phase for the childlike Mitsou, in which she first confronts a variety of mirror images and develops a sense of her self concurrently with a sense of language. Mitsou also discovers the disparity between the self as seen from the outside (in the physical mirror) and the self as seen from the inside (in the letter as mirror). This discovery is not fully brought home to her until the physical encounter with Robert, during which Robert does not recognize the Mitsou of the letter in the Mitsou he sees. Only at that point does it become clear that epistolary mediation has functioned differently for the two letter writers and has produced unforeseen effects. Mitsou, who has physically desired Robert since the first brief meeting, suggests that the correspondence, by mediating the expression and deferring the realization of her desire, has deepened it into "love" (p. 108). Whereas epistolary mediation reinforces and develops Mitsou's desire, for Robert it appears the sole creator and sustainer of desire.

Concurrent and strikingly parallel to Mitsou's development is an evolution in authorial voice. This voice, present in all of the nonepistolary sections, shifts point of view radically during the course of the novel. The author who speaks directly to the reader in the first three sections prior to Mitsou and Robert's letter experience views Mitsou ironically and disdainfully, from the outside, with the same snobbism that Robert will later express. After the long epistolary section, this authorial voice will be submerged. The narrator who tells of Mitsou and Robert's night together will alternate between Mitsou's and Robert's percep-
tions of each other. In other words, the vision is no longer that of the ironic exterior observer but continues the essential technique of the epistolary section. The experience of composing the epistolary section has seemingly mediated and interiorized the author's vision. Letter writing is a consequential event in this novel, and not only for Mitsou, who acknowledges it as such. The letter's mediation acts subtly, not only in the ambivalent ways it bridges the distance between lovers, but also in the gradual and cumulative way it operates upon the narrator's Erzähldistanz.

The idea of making love through letters is subject to many colorations, some contradictory, in the hands of various epistolary novelists. If the parents of Restif de la Bretonne's latter-day Abelard (Le Nouvel Abélard, 1778) decide to have their son court his Heloise through letters only, without ever seeing her, it is because they share the Blue Lieutenant's belief that relationships can best be developed slowly and at a distance. Abelard, however, does not recognize Heloise when he meets her for the first time, although—unlike Robert—he loves the girl he sees, and fears he is in love with two different women. Andrée Hacquebaut, Montherlant's most persistent writer of unanswered fan mail to Pierre Costals, justifies her monologue in illusionistic terms reminiscent of Mitsou: "dans votre silence, je vous recrée et vous retrouve, tel que je vous ai aimé" (Les Jeunes Filles, vol. 2, p. 26). Correspondence for young girls, Montherlant points out very early in the first volume of the same quartet, can be "un ersatz d'homme" (vol. 1, p. 62). The same Andrée who praises epistolary re-creation complains to Costals that perhaps if she had not given so much of herself to him in her letters he would have loved her, and she would not feel like an "empty envelope" (vol. 2, p. 50). The advantages and pitfalls of l'amor de lonh, which Denis de Rougemont sees as the essence of romantic love, are nowhere better analyzed than in the epistolary mode, as Mitsou illustrates.

MADEMOISELLE LA QUINTINIE

Just as Mitsou maintains the ambiguity of epistolary mediation while tending to stress the power of absence (rather than presence) to draw humans closer, Mademoiselle La Quintinie maintains that ambiguity with the opposite emphasis on the letter
as an obstacle between people. If *Mitsou* presents mediation in a favorable light, George Sand’s work is emphatically the novel of antимediation.

Almost half of *Mademoiselle La Quintinie* (publ. 1863) is composed of letters written by Emile Lemontier to his father, M. Honoré Lemontier, confiding in him his nascent love for Lucie La Quintinie and the vicissitudes of their courtship. Since Emile has been raised by his father in the best of the Enlightenment tradition, his idealistic vision of marriage as a total union of ideals and beliefs encounters a significant stumbling block in Lucie’s religious mysticism. When the priest Moréali makes several mysterious appearances at Lucie’s estate, Emile begins to be jealous of “l’image du prêtre entre Lucie et moi” (L. 2, p. 42) and suspicious of “le rôle du prêtre entre les époux” (L. 2, p. 43). Emile’s father presents his argument against priestly mediation in terms more consonant with his Enlightenment ideal: “jamais plus d’ombres, toujours plus de lumière entre Dieu et l’homme” (L. 3).

Meanwhile we begin to see letters to Lucie from Moréali, complaining that she has written him too rarely, arguing that her possible marriage with Emile may endanger her salvation, and asking her to receive him in disguise. Lucie opposes such dissimulation and points out furthermore that “entre Dieu et moi je n’ai jamais pu apercevoir le diable” (L. 10, p. 106).

As Lucie and Emile make slow, subtle, but definite progress toward reconciling their differences, the obstacles to their marriage become more and more external. Moréali begins a series of machinations to prevent the marriage of the girl who (it is now revealed) had been the most promising student in the convent school he directed; considering Lucie his “spiritual” daughter, Moréali has destined her to head the nuns’ convent of a new austere order founded by Father Onorio. Moréali sends for Father Onorio and the two prevail upon Lucie’s father, General La Quintinie, to intervene. The plot now briefly resembles that of *Tartuffe*, with the general playing the role of Orgon.

Although this novel is not as epistolary as some (the last tenth of the novel is in the third person, and many of the letters themselves are given over to straight narration), the use of letters is consonant with the chosen theme. If we consider this theme to be essentially a debate between the forces of priestly mediation
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(Onorio, Moréali, General La Quintinie) and the antimediatory Enlightenment forces (Emile, his friend Henri, Lemontier), we note that the letter in the hands of the former is an instrument of dissimulation, of mystification and concealment, often used to avoid direct confrontation between two people living close together, whereas the letters written by the group opposing priestly mediation are candid reports exchanged between persons separated by physical distance only. Emile learns through one of Lucie’s convent friends halfway through the novel that when Moréali was director of the convent, “si quelqu’une avait un petit secret à lui confier, elle lui écrivait, et il répondait d’assez longues lettres, fort belles” (L. 24, p. 189). Moréali maintains his relationship with Lucie through letters, complaining that she does not write often enough; these letters moreover are full of mysterious affectations and suggestions of deceit. Emile and Lucie, significantly enough, never write each other, but explore each other’s ideas in lengthy conversations, recognizing that “pour que nos idées arrivent à se fondre, il ne faut pas qu’on nous sépare” (L. 14, pp. 144-45).

Moréali, on the other hand, continues to use letters as barricades. He tries to prevent Emile from pleading his case to the general in person by insisting on carrying instead a message from Emile to Lucie’s father and bringing Emile a letter in response. Emile refuses, demanding direct confrontation: “le fils de mon père ne sera jamais éconduit par une lettre” (L. 25, p. 211). At the end of the novel, when the priest insists on reading a letter addressed by Lucie’s dying mother to her husband, invoking his role as the mother’s confessor, Lemontier is horrified: “le prêtre reparaissait toujours debout et omnipotent entre la femme et le mari, même au delà de la mort” (p. 330).

Father figures in this novel, like letters, constitute either an arbitrarily imposed obstacle to direct contact or a freely chosen, occasional resource to facilitate communication. Although Henri’s father, in his capacity as counselor and friend, is called a “père spirituel” (L. 19, p. 152), he differs radically from Père Onorio or Moréali. His mediation is conducted directly in a triangle with “deux époux attirés vers lui d’un commun accord par une égale confiance” (L. 17, p. 153) and with the ultimate goal of self-effacement: “lorsqu’il ne les verrait pas venir à lui, il
remercierait Dieu de ce qu’ils n’ont pas besoin de lui” (p. 153). The priests, on the other hand, insist on maintaining a triangle of indirect communication, in which one participant is always kept in the dark, just as Lucie’s father (another of the many father figures vying for authority in this paternity case) refuses to understand that anyone could love his daughter and “s’adresser à elle-même au lieu d’aller demander aux autorités civiles ou militaires l’autorisation préalable” (L. 18, p. 166).

From beginning to end Mademoiselle La Quintinie sheds an unfavorable light on all institutionalized forms of mediated communication but principally on priestly intercession. This novel, in contrast to Mitsou, does not present a single letter that serves to draw the correspondents closer (even Emile and his father do not improve upon their previously established close relationship through letters). On the other hand, letters do often serve to separate people, to stave off direct confrontation, to cloud issues. Epistolary mediation in George Sand’s novel tends to share, and reinforce, the same unflattering coloration that characterizes all imposed intervention—paternal or ecclesiastical—in this work. Mademoiselle La Quintinie is thus in many respects an intriguingly atavistic nineteenth-century novel, adopting a favored eighteenth-century form—the letter—in order to develop Enlightenment themes.

HERZOG

When we turn to a more recent fictional occurrence of epistolary mediation, in Saul Bellow’s Herzog, we must speak of mediation in new terms. Whereas until now we have spoken of the letter as connecting two persons, in Bellow’s novel the addressees never even receive Herzog’s letters. Whether written on paper or merely mental, all but three of these letters are never mailed. We can hardly speak in our accustomed fashion of mediation between Herzog and the dead or shadow figures to whom he writes.

From the beginning of Herzog it is evident that the past is to play an important role in the novel. In the first few pages terms like “formerly” appear frequently: “his friend, his former friend, Valentine” (p. 8); “his ex-wife Madeleine” (p. 8); “he was a formerly handsome man” (p. 10). The novel has hardly an-
nounced its time and setting as summer in the Berkshires when we are immediately plunged into a flashback—the preceding spring in New York. Formal flashbacks, which establish a new novelistic time, and frequent use of the past anterior tense to transport us briefly into an earlier past, set the tone of a novel whose time pattern will not come full circle to the summer in the Berkshires until just before its conclusion.

Moses Herzog's preoccupation with the dead is an important aspect of his concern with the past. He views himself as a "survivor" and seeks the meaning of his survival among the dead: "To realize that you are a survivor is a shock. At the realization of such an election, you feel like bursting into tears. As the dead go their way, you want to call to them, but they depart in a black cloud of faces, souls" (p. 96). On his trip to Europe he saw "everybody but the dead. Whom perhaps I was looking for" (p. 87). In order to capture the dead, to justify himself to the dead, to discover himself through the dead, Herzog writes letters. From the first paragraph of the novel we understand the role the epistolary form is to play:

If I am out of my mind, it's all right with me, thought Moses Herzog.

Some people thought he was cracked and for a time he himself had doubted that he was all there. But now, though he still behaved oddly, he felt confident, cheerful, clairvoyant, and strong. He had fallen under a spell and was writing letters to everyone under the sun. He was so stirred by these letters that from the end of June he moved from place to place with a valise full of papers. He had carried this valise from New York to Martha's Vineyard, but returned from the Vineyard immediately; two days later he flew to Chicago, and from Chicago he went to a village in western Massachusetts. Hidden in the country, he wrote endlessly, frantically, to the newspapers, to people in public life, to friends and relatives and at last to the dead, his own obscure dead, and finally the famous dead. [P 7]

These introductory paragraphs summarize the episodes that will form the temporal base of all but the last chapter of Herzog. The first eight chapters deal with four days in the life of Moses Herzog, from the day in June when, after a checkup with Dr. Emmerich, Herzog decides to get away from his problems to Martha's Vineyard until the day of his return from Chicago to his house in the Berkshires. Although these four days constitute the
only continuous time in the novel, they account for only part of the total narrative time. More than half the novel is given over to random flashbacks, as they occur in Herzog's head, inspired by various incidents during the four days.

Almost all of these flashbacks are preceded by what we might call "epistolary seizures" on the part of Herzog. Typically, Herzog picks up the pen to begin a letter ("Dear Zelda," for example); after a few sentences or paragraphs we travel back with him to the time that person suggests (in this case to March in Chicago, when he conversed with Aunt Zelda in her suburban kitchen). Fragments of the letter being written may alternate with memories for several pages. A complete list of all the occurrences of the pattern "letter/flashback" would account for half of the narrative:

p. 40: "Dear Tennie, I went to see Simkin Flashback to visit to Simkin, who tells him ex-wife Mady's mother Tennie is hurt. Visit to Tennie. Flashback to Moses' boyhood. (Pp. 40-46)

p. 47: "Dear Zelda, Of course Flashback to conversation with Mady's Aunt Zelda. (Pp. 47-56)

p. 56: Letter to friend Asphalter. Flashback to March visit to Asphalter, who gives him letter from girl who babysits for Mady. (Pp. 56-61)

pp. 61-68: Series of philosophical letters and flashbacks.

p. 69: "So, Edvig Flashback to visits to Dr. Edvig, psychiatrist, where they discuss Mady's religion. Flashback to marriage with Mady. Flashback to incident when Mady insisted Herzog go to church with her. Letter to Edvig questioning Mady's "religion." (Pp. 69-84)

p. 88: "Shapiro, I should have written sooner Flashback to Shapiro's visit to Moses and Mady's place in Ludeyville. (Pp. 88-99)

p. 100: "Sandor! Last time we were in touch Flashback to autumn when Sandor and Bea looked after him after Mady threw him out. (Pp. 100-16)

p. 161: “Dear Nachman” Flashback to his boyhood friendship with Nachman. Flashback to Herzog family life when Moses was a boy. (Pp. 161–85)

p. 207: “Dear Sono” Flashback to life with his Japanese mistress who had warned him against Mady. (Pp. 207–16)

The next one hundred fifty pages are concerned more with the events of the third and fourth days of the primary time level: Herzog’s night with his current mistress Ramona, his visit to a courtroom, and, primarily, his trip to Chicago to see his daughter Junie in the hope of gaining her custody. During these pages we see very few letters and even fewer flashbacks (the principal incursions of the past being Herzog’s memories of his mother’s death and his father’s remarriage).

The pairing of epistolary seizures with flashbacks alerts us to the function of the letter in Bellow’s novel. The epistolary medium here is a “medium” in the spiritualistic sense; it is the intermediary through which Herzog reestablishes contact with the shades of his past: “I’ve been writing letters helter-skelter in all directions. More words. I go after reality with language. Perhaps I’d like to change it all into language, to force Madeleine and Gersbach to have a Conscience. and I’ve filled the world with letters to prevent their escape. I want them in human form, and so I conjure up a whole environment to catch them in the middle” (pp. 332–33). In every case the writing of a letter is the means through which Herzog “haunts the past” (p. 177). Herzog’s letters serve as a bridge to the past even when he writes to the living. In the letter to Spinoza Herzog himself becomes conscious of the lack of difference between his dead and living addressees: “It may interest you to know that in the twentieth century random association is believed to yield up the deepest secrets of the psyche. He realized he was writing to the dead. To bring the shades of great philosophers up to date. But then why shouldn’t he write the dead? He
lived with them as much as with the living—perhaps more; and besides, his letters to the living were increasingly mental, and anyway, to the Unconscious, what was death?” (p. 225). In Herzog’s incoherent, unfinished, unmailed letters, it makes little difference whether the addressee is a real shade or merely a shadow figure.

The passage just quoted points to a second function of Herzog’s letter scribbling. Not only does the letter serve as an approach to Herzog’s past, but it also has a quasi-psychoanalytic function. The very “random association” about which Herzog wishes to inform Spinoza is an accurate description of Herzog’s incoherent epistolary style. Herzog’s scrawling resembles automatic writing. He himself speaks in the above-quoted passage of the role of the “Unconscious” in his writing as he does elsewhere:

He had letters to write. He was busy, busy, in pursuit of objects he was only now, and dimly, beginning to understand. His first message today, begun half-consciously as he was waking up [P. 128]

He knew his scribbling, his letter-writing, was ridiculous. It was involuntary. His eccentricities had him in their power. [P. 19]

If Herzog writes in the first place, it is less out of a desire to communicate with his past than out of a need to justify himself. His flashbacks are full of allusions to the things he never said: “His mother had instructed him. ‘You must never say’ ” (p. 33). His letters and reminiscences are an outpouring of repressed feelings, confession, and self-apology, “putting into words what he had often thought but, for the sake of form, or something of the sort, had always suppressed” (p. 398). In Bellow’s novel, letters serve the same function for a post-Freudian hero that the epistle served for Ovid’s Phaedra: what modesty has forbidden one to speak, passion impels one to write.

Letters serve a cathartic function for Herzog that often verges upon the role of opiate or crutch: “He dreaded the depths of feeling he would eventually have to face, when he could no longer call upon his eccentricities for relief” (p. 19). But the letter, as Geraldine Portnoy writes to Herzog, can also “give one a chance to consider—think matters over, and reach a more balanced view” (p. 127). In fact, by the end of the novel it becomes clear that Herzog’s scriptomania is a temporary insanity and has actually
been a tool for recovery of greater stability. Through his letters Moses pieces together his past and vents his pent-up emotions. It becomes clear that almost all of them are addressed, indirectly, to the one character to whom Moses Herzog never actually writes a single letter: his ex-wife Madeleine. Only after he has physically confronted Mady in Chicago can he return to himself, find peace, and begin life anew.

The “unfinished business” motif runs throughout Bellow’s novel. Herzog leaves his friends at Martha’s Vineyard a few hours after he has arrived, explaining “Have to go back. Unfinished business” (p. 124). When he thinks of marrying Ramona, he remembers that “he was not through with love and hate elsewhere. Herzog had unfinished business” (p. 86). His letters and writing are emblematic of that unfinished business; Herzog somehow cannot seem to turn his current research into books, for lack of a “focus” (p. 11) and his discontinuous, incoherent, unfinished, unmailed letters are part of the same syndrome. So much have the letters become identified with “unfinished business” that when Ramona responds to Herzog’s excuse not to go out, we appreciate the pun:

“I shouldn’t go out—I have a lot to do—letters to write.”
“What letters! Business?” [P. 190]

Herzog’s “business letters,” though not of the type Ramona imagines, are only one aspect of the uncompleted “assignment” (p. 283) that Moses feels responsible for but cannot seem to define. Only in Chicago can he finally exorcise the “love and hate” that have kept him from functioning so far. In Chicago Herzog performs two significant acts that are the logical conclusion of the letters he has been writing all along. If Herzog’s letters have revealed his obsession with Madeleine, his confrontation with his ex-wife in Chicago ends in a feeling of relief, and Moses finally wills his own separation from her.

A second logical conclusion to Herzog’s letter writing is his conversation in Chicago with his old friend Luke Asphalter. Early in the novel (pp. 56–61) Herzog had taken up the pen to write Asphalter out of concern that Luke had become too close to his monkey Rocco. When he stays with Luke in Chicago, Moses discovers that Luke is obsessed by some of the same problems as
he: love and hate, repressed feelings, death; in an attempt to cure his depression, Luke is doing an exercise prescribed by Tina Zokóly in which he pretends he has already died. Moses sympathizes with Luke but gently upbraids him for self-ridicule and self-punishment to the point of anguish and bitterness. His long speech to Luke terminates with the following self-discovery:

When the preachers of dread tell you that others only distract you from metaphysical freedom then you must turn away from them. The real and essential question is one of our employment by other human beings and their employment by us. Without this true employment you never dread death, you cultivate it. And consciousness when it doesn't clearly understand what to live for, what to die for, can only abuse and ridicule itself. As you do with the help of Rocco and Tina Zokóly, as I do by writing impertinent letters. . . . I feel dizzy. Where's that bottle of Cutty Sark? I need a shot. [P. 333]

For once Herzog exhibits strength; instead of asking advice, he gives it. This is the first long speech of Herzog's that is coherent, that makes sense. Whereas he had not been able to finish the earlier letter to Luke (let alone mail it), Moses now is able to carry his thought through to recognition of the illusory role letter writing is playing in his own life. He realizes this only out of his concern for another person, however; in the midst of his first instance of other-directedness, he makes the most important discovery about himself. We might say that the earlier letter to Luke, which tapered off into soliloquy, has become a real communication, completed and delivered in a context of dialogue. Herzog reacts out of genuine solicitude for Luke, and in helping Luke confront problems he begins to pull out of his own mire.

After these recognition scenes in Chicago, Moses returns to Ludeyville. The time of the novel comes full circle as we follow Herzog through the last chapter. In Ludeyville he writes three letters (to Luke, Ramona, and his son Marco), which he posts and which we read. We are also given excerpts from a rash of unmailed letters. "Thus began his final week of letters. He wandered over his twenty acres of hillside and woodlot, composing his messages, none of which he mailed" (p. 387). These are Herzog's final exorcisms. Significantly enough, he can now briefly address Madeleine and her lover Gersbach: "Dear
Madeleine—You are a terrific one, you are! Bless you! What a creature! To put on lipstick, after dinner in a restaurant, she would look at her reflection in a knife blade. He recalled this with delight. And you, Gersbach, you’re welcome to Madeleine. Enjoy her—rejoice in her. You will not reach me through her, however. I know you sought me in her flesh. But I am no longer there” (pp. 387–88). Herzog feels “a deep dizzy eagerness to begin” (p. 392). Death, even his own, no longer troubles him; as he looks at the middle-aged body in which he has heretofore felt uncomfortable, he acknowledges that it will die but also that he is “pretty well satisfied to be, to be just as it is willed, and for as long as I may remain in occupancy” (p. 414). As he putters about, tidying up the summer house that Mady had left in a mess, he wonders

what further evidence of his sanity, besides refusing to go to the hospital, he could show. Perhaps he’d stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming, in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. . As he stretched out, he took a long breath, and then he lay, looking at the mesh of the screen, pulled loose by vines, and listening to the steady scratching of Mrs. Tuttle’s broom. He wanted to tell her to sprinkle the floor. She was raising too much dust. In a few minutes, he would call down to her, “Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There’s water in the sink.” But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone.


On this note Bellow’s novel terminates.

Herzog’s “dizziness” (pp. 333, 392) is that of the scales reestablishing their equilibrium. The letter writing of the first half of the novel is emblematic both of what has thrown Moses “off-balance” and of the introversion necessary to maintain one’s sense of balance. Counterweighing the letter writing is the half of the book in which Herzog confronts the outside world and people directly.

Letters in Bellow’s novel, metaphorically speaking, serve a psychotherapeutic function. Herzog’s epistolary style of free association enables him to recall his past, to bring to the conscious level repressed emotions. In many cases we could speak analogically of a transference taking place within the letters, the shadow figures addressed in them being substitutes for the real objects of the repressed feelings. But just as the visits to the
psychiatrist's office have achieved maximum usefulness when the patient can give them up, so Herzog's abandonment of his scribbling at the end of his novel constitutes a declaration of mental stability. Letters in *Herzog* are both symptoms of the neurosis and the means for the cure.

Epistolary mediation in *Herzog* is a mediation with the subconscious and with the past. As we have noticed, letters frequently serve as transitions to flashbacks. They are Herzog's "madeleines," his "instants privilégiés," the medium through which he resurrects and reconstructs his past—a past that extends through his marriages back to his boyhood and even back to the Jewish extermination of World War II: "These personal histories, old tales from old times that may not be worth remembering. I remember. I must. But who else—to whom can this matter?" (p. 184). Herzog's preoccupation with memory is Proustian in nature but actually shares more with that of Resnais's characters in *Hiroshima, mon amour*. Wolfgang Luchting's comments on Resnais's film are equally applicable to Bellow's novel:

*Proust*’s two main themes are, first, the time that destroys; second, the memory that conserves. *Resnais* treats these themes, too, but the other way round: first, for his protagonists, memory destroys; second, time restores. *Proust* is interested in memory. *Resnais* studies forgetting.

Resnais does not wish the past to reside in the present, he pushes it back into its own realm. Proust celebrates the past, searches it, makes it into the present, and lives in it.

Proust, although he knew of course as well as Resnais that the past cannot be revived except in memories, prefers the memories and finds his redemption in them. Resnais believes one can keep on living only by forgetting.

Whereas Proust celebrates the past, Bellow and Resnais resurrect the emotions of the past to exorcise them. Only after the past has been conquered and classified as past can Herzog begin anew. The epistolary medium through which Moses conjures up the shades and shadows of his past is more than a "psychic" medium; it is the instrument through which he arrives at self-knowledge and regains sanity. Epistolary mediation in *Herzog* is both psychic and psychotherapeutic.

The letter's mediatory role in epistolary narrative derives precisely from its position as a halfway point, as an "either-or."
“neither-nor” phenomenon. As an instrument of communication between sender and receiver, the letter straddles the gulf between presence and absence; the two persons who “meet” through the letter are neither totally separated nor totally united. The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all. In seduction correspondence is an intermediate step between indifference and intimacy; on the other side of seduction it is an intermediate step between conquest and abandonment. The same seducer who uses the letter to engage his victim at the beginning of a relationship may substitute the letter for his actual presence when he wishes to disentangle himself.

Even in Herzog the letter derives its mediatory function from its “halfway” nature. The letter writer writes in the present to a person whom he remembers from the past; as a transition to flashbacks in Herzog, the letter is intermediate between present and past. As a psychotherapeutic device the letter is both the symptom of the neurosis and the instrument for its cure, but it lies halfway between neurosis and cure; to regain total sanity Herzog must give up message writing.

Because of its “both-and,” “either-or” nature, the letter is an extremely flexible tool in the hands of the epistolary author. Since the letter contains within itself its own negation, epistolary narrators regularly make it emphasize alternately, or even simultaneously, presence and absence, candor and dissimulation, mania and cure, bridge and barrier.

1. Letter 18, Leander Heroni, vv. 1–2, of the Heroides. Both the original and the translations from Ovid are taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition of Heroides and Amores.

2. See Howard Jacobson’s recent study Ovid’s “Heroides” for a detailed, insightful discussion of Ovid’s originality.

3. All paginations refer to the edition listed in the Selected Bibliography. Wherever the author or editor has numbered or dated the letters, I use the letter number (e.g., L. 1) or date to identify material quoted.

4. The units of seduction-abandonment may be repeated, as in Crébillon’s Lettres de la marquise, where the count reseduces the marquise after a period of neglect.

5. Those familiar with Les Liaisons dangereuses will immediately notice the similarities between the two seduction novels. The number of correspondents in each novel is limited (seven principal correspondents and five secondary in Les
Liaisons, six main and four minor correspondents in Malheurs). Although there is hardly a one-to-one analogy between the characters of Les Liaisons and those of Les Malheurs, many of the functions and relationships of Laclos’s characters are present already in Dorat’s work. When Merteuil at the beginning of Les Liaisons seeks revenge on Gercourt through either Valmont’s or Danceny’s corruption of Gercourt’s fiancée, she is proposing the same kind of “seduction by proxy” that the duke plots at the beginning of Les Malheurs: to strike at the marquise de Syrce through Mirbelle. Mirbelle’s tutorial relationship to the duke anticipates Danceny’s relationship to Valmont, but his affair with Syrce is more comparable to Valmont’s with the présidente, particularly since Syrce follows a passion curve so similar to that of Mme de Tourvel. The marquise de Sycrè, like the présidente, has two confidantes—Mme de Lacé and her mother; the mother, like Mme de Rosemonde (whom the présidente moreover regards as a “mère”), makes her entrance close to Sycrè’s defeat and sends a letter praising her daughter’s virtue (pt. 2, L. 13—parallel to Rosemonde’s L. 126), which arrives ironically just after her daughter’s fall. In both novels we find a chassé-croisé of romances: Merteuil and Valmont switch partners with Cécile-Danceny, just as Sycrè and the duke switch with Lady Sidley-Mirbelle. It is surprising that Laurent Versini, who has explored in such detail Laclos’s debt to his predecessors (Laclos et la tradition), should mention Les Malheurs de l’inconstance only in passing allusions without noting the high instance of parallel structures in the two novels.

6. In passages that already contain auctorial ellipses, my own ellipses are indicated by brackets.

7. Pt. 1, L. 43. It would be hard to overlook the erotic overtones of the sylph image as used by both lovers. In Sycrè’s letter every detail describing the labyrinth that leads to the grotto-paradise evokes forbidden sexual pleasures, and the dream of loving a sylph that she naively recounts is a thinly veiled expression of subliminal desire. Mirbelle of course quickly perceives this. His reuse of the image in his letter is more openly suggestive of the male stages in the sexual encounter: “Je m’enhardis, la porte du sanctuaire s’ouvre. Le Sylphe devint homme, et l’homme devint un Dieu.”


9. Within the large corpus of criticism devoted to Richardson, relatively little discussion has focused on the novelist’s use of the epistolary form. In 1951 the distinguished Richardsonian A. D. McKillop devoted a short article to analysis of “Epistolary Technique in Richardson’s Novels.” More recently Anthony Kearney related technique to subject in an impressive article that goes a long way toward establishing the thematic significance of Richardson’s formal choice—“Clarissa and the Epistolary Form.” The general consensus, however, continues to be that Richardson is less an “epistolary” than a “dramatic” novelist; cf. Ira Konigsberg, Samuel Richardson and the Dramatic Novel (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1968) and Mark Kinkead-Weekes, Samuel Richardson, Dramatic Novelist (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973). It is not my intention to enter into a debate over taxonomy, since these descriptions of the novelist’s technique are hardly mutually exclusive, each accounting for different sets of characteristics. I merely wish to illuminate further some epistolary aspects of Richardson’s novel that have not been brought out in
previous studies, stressing as my argument in this chapter the extent to which thematic emphases in Clarissa, as well as in a variety of other novels, grow out of the mediatory property of the letter. To do so I shall build upon, rather than challenge, previous interpretations.


11. Clarissa’s letters are thus much more motivated than those of Pamela, who far too often “scribbles” out of habit only and continues writing even after she has rejoined society.

12. One must emphasize the extent to which Richardson displaces the biblical myth. Clarissa’s banishment from her father’s house carries all the marks of Adam’s banishment from Eden, but only from Clarissa’s point of view. Harlowe Place—where daughters and marriages are handled in mercantile fashion—is clearly as much a “Harlot Place” as Mrs. Sinclair’s hellish world.

13. Those familiar with René Girard’s work Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque will note that in Colette’s novel the theme of mediation as Girard has identified it (mediated desire) coincides with the particularly epistolary phenomenon that we have been analyzing in this chapter (mediated communication). That is, the letter here is accomplishing the same function as a mediating figure in the triangle of desire that Girard studies. Robert can desire Mitsou only indirectly, through the intermediary of the letter.

14. The mirror image appears frequently in Colette’s work, but it is usually linked with narcissism. See, for instance, Joan Hinde Stewart’s article “Colette: The Mirror Image,” which deals chiefly with the relation between solipsistic writing and female identity in Colette’s partially epistolary novel La Vagabonde (1911). In the same article Stewart deals relatively briefly with Mitsou, arguing that La Vagabonde better illustrates the epistolary “form’s suitability for the development of questions of self image” (p. 199). I would argue, on the contrary, that the solipsistic, specular use of the letter in La Vagabonde is fundamentally nonepistolary and dramatizes in its very nonepistolarity the heroine’s refusal to address the other and move beyond diaristic, narcissistic writing. What is striking in Mitsou’s use of the mirror image, on the other hand, and more closely related to the choice of the letter form, is its nonnarcissism. Mitsou’s and Robert’s letters, desire, and even their specular glances are addressed to the other, not turned uniquely back upon the self; the self is progressively discovered and developed through the other, in an exchange that is more arguably and profoundly epistolary.

15. Neither I nor the students with whom I have read Mitsou would agree with Elaine Marks, who finds the subjective, epistolary sections much less successful than the objective presentation of the narrative in this novel (Colette, p. 102). I contend that the exchange between Robert and Mitsou involves much of the subtle interplay between perception of self and other that characterizes the most interesting epistolary writing. These letters are perhaps less easily readable than the third-person sections (and an inquiry into the readability of letters at various historical moments would be in itself an interesting topic), but they repay close analysis in terms of the epistolary tradition and effectively modify even the “objective” presentation during the course of the novel.


17. Bellow’s novel is not, of course, an epistolary novel in the traditional, strictly formal sense. As in Mitsou the epistolary sequence alternates with other
narrative forms, yet the use of the letter is so inseparable from the thematic emphases of these works and is so based on the mediatory property particular to the letter that both novels merit treatment in this chapter, all the more so since criticism of these works has disregarded their epistolary aspects. In fact, I hope that my discussion will ultimately show that, though novels like Mitsou and Herzog would have to be classified as "mixed forms" in terms of narrative technique, they arguably are epistolary novels in a more specifically generic sense (see my Conclusion).

18. Yet Herzog's letters are not to be confused with diary entries or even stream-of-consciousness narration. The existence of a real addressee, whom Herzog perceives as "other" than himself, is a distinction that is crucial to interpretation of the novel, as we shall see in chapter 2.

19. In Bellow's text, all epistolary material is italicized.