CHAPTER TWO

OF CONFIDENCE AND CONFIDANTS

In chapter 1 we examined one set of thematic emphases and character types in epistolary literature that derive from a property inherent to the letter. We shall now turn to an even more visible characteristic of the letters that typically compose epistolary narratives—their confidentiality—which structures the thematics, character relations, and narrative action of letter novels to a remarkable degree. The confidant that the letter novel appropriated from classical theater is exploited in particular ways in narrative. In specifying the confidant’s functions, this chapter will bring out a number of the conventions that give epistolary literature its generic coherence. Moreover, after detailing the conventional ways in which these functions organize letter narrative, we should be in a better position to analyze the more subtle ways in which a writer like Laclos works with or against them.

With or without the aid of a computer, we cannot fail to notice the frequent conjunction in French epistolary fiction of the themes of “confiance” and “confidence.” Clifton Cherpack was the first to yoke the two terms as a critical construct; in his review of J.-L. Seylaz’s analysis “Les Liaisons dangereuses” et la création romanesque chez Laclos, Cherpack faults Seylaz for neglecting the confiance-confidence theme in Les Liaisons, asserting that only the marquise de Merteuil’s hunger for the confiance and confidences of her cohort can account for the fact that this archproscriber of compromising messages should confide in
anyone at all. Far from being limited to Laclos alone, the theme that Cherpack finds in *Les Liaisons* is present to a greater or lesser degree in countless letter novels and seems to derive from their epistolary nature itself, from the very fact that correspondence is essentially a private affair. Expressions such as *(se) confier, (se) fier, confidence,* and *confiance* form a family from which French letter writers borrow constantly, just as the confidant(e) is a stock role in this type of narrative.

**THE CENTRALITY OF CONFIDENCE**

In order to make a *confidence*, as epistolary characters so often do, one must have *confiance* in the *confident*. If *confidences* constitute part of the epistolary medium (letters written to confidants being one of the fundamental vehicles of epistolary narrative), the loss and winning of *confiance* are part of the epistolary subject. A necessary first step in seduction, countless protagonists tell us, is gaining the confidence or becoming the confidant of the person to be seduced. "Je ne suis encore que sa confidente; mais sous ce voile de l'amitié, je crois lui voir un goût très vif pour moi," writes Merteuil of Danceny (L. 113). Lovelace calculatedly inspires Clarissa's trust with his famous "Rosebud" letter.

Often the seducer wins, loses, and regains the *confiance* of his victim during the course of the plot; the présidente de Tourvel, Mme Riccoboni's Fanni Butlerd, and Crébillon's marquise de M*** all realize at one point that their lovers have betrayed their trust, withdraw their *confiance*, but are reseduced. In *La Nouvelle Héloïse* there are likewise two important stages of *confiance*, but here the second is radically different from the first. The first stage is characterized by many of the *confiance* themes of the seduction novel; Saint-Preux pleads with Julie, "prends confiance en un ami fidèle . daigne te confier aux feux que tu m'inspires" (pt. 1, L. 5). In reciprocally confiding in each other at the very beginning, each asks the other to strengthen him, to help him resist in parallel letters (1:1, 4). *Confiance* is assumed to be a source of strength, yet it has the same result as in the seduction novel: leaning upon each other, the lovers fall into the very abyss that they fear, and they will blame their fall on the same "aveugle confiance" (1:7) cited by
Fanni Butlerd, Crébillon's marquise, or the présidente de Tourvel.

The second stage of the novel presents us with a new vision of confiance, in keeping with Julie's status as a "new" Heloise. If too much confiance is seen as the source of the lovers' fall in the first half of the novel, too little is viewed as an impediment to their redemption in the second half. The same Claire who called Julie d'Etange's misfortune "l'effet d'une téméraire confiance" (1:30) criticizes Julie de Wolmar's lack of faith in herself when Wolmar wants to leave his wife alone with Saint-Preux: "Je te reprochais alors ta confiance comme je te reproche aujourd'hui ta frayeur" (4:13). Wolmar's strategy consists precisely in overwhelming Julie and Saint-Preux with his trust in order to prove to them that they are worthy of it. The Saint-Preux who had abused "la confiance d'une mère" (3:7) is given a second chance by the fatherly Wolmar; confiance is a test for Saint-Preux and Julie that they had earlier failed but now pass. As Saint-Preux proves his trustworthiness, he is initiated into the salon d'Apollon—"l'asile inviolable de la confiance une sorte d'initiation à l'intimité" (5:2)—and becomes worthy of the "confiance" (5:1) that Edouard wants to accord him concerning the conduct of Edouard's personal affairs. The untenable lovers' intimacy of the first half of the novel gives way to communal intimacy; private confession becomes semipublic and communal with the omnipresent Wolmar presiding, just as the intimate correspondence between Saint-Preux and Julie has vanished in favor of letters that could be read by other members of "la petite communauté."

Too much or too little confiance, extremes to be avoided in La Nouvelle Héloïse, are perceived as the source of ills in numerous other epistolary works. The incestuous marriage at the end of Restif de la Bretonne's Le Paysan perverti results from Zéphire's and Mme Parangon's having failed on several occasions to confide in each other the name of their children's father. On the other hand, the key element in Ursule's corruption in Restif's La Paysanne pervertie is her initiation into Mme Parangon's confidence and her reading of confessional letters from Mme Parangon to Edmond. Likewise, the défaut de confiance theme generates much of the plot of Mme Riccoboni's Lettres de Sophie
de Vallière, whereas the misfortunes of Mme Riccoboni’s Fanni Butlerd and Richardson’s Clarissa derive from their having trusted their lovers or themselves too much. Any of the latter heroines might lament with Aphra Behn’s Sylvia, after she loses her virginity: “Where got I so much Confidence?”

THE EPISTOLARY CONFIDANT

The confidant who inspires, wins, or loses trust is an essential figure in epistolary literature, called into existence by the need of every letter writer to have a “friendly bosom” into which he can “disburthen his cares,” as Smollett’s Lydia Melford so often expresses it to her friend Laetitia Willis in Humphry Clinker. So important is the confidant that François Jost has based his cogent typology of epistolary narrative on the criterion of two possible types of addressees, confidant or antagonist, distinguishing thereby between the narrative technique of La Vie de Marianne, Clarissa, and Lettres persanes as opposed to, respectively, Lettres portugaises, Abelard and Heloise’s correspondence, and Les Liaisons dangereuses.

Confidants also play an important role in the theater, however, a role so similar to that of their epistolary counterparts that it is tempting to assume that there is nothing uniquely epistolary about the figure. Indeed, Merteuil’s and Valmont’s frequent recourse to theatrical imagery in Les Liaisons, their tendency to see themselves as confidants in a play, encourage us in this assumption. A schematic analysis of the function of the confidant in general should help us to understand better the role of the epistolary confidant and in what ways he might differ from his dramatic counterpart.

The Passive Confidant: Information Receiver

At what we might call the “degré zéro de la confidence,” the confidant fulfills his minimal, passive, twofold function: he listens to confessions, he listens to stories. Often at the beginning of both play and letter narrative he has the vital function of triggering the exposition. What he hears is an account of past events; this narrative-connected role, obviously unsustainable in the dramatic medium, continues throughout the text to be part of the epistolary confidant’s raison d’être. Absent by definition, he
cannot witness the events to which the dramatic confidant is most often third party; they must be told to him. The only sustained role shared by epistolary and theatrical confidants at this minimal passive level, therefore, is that of sounding board to the hero's sentiments. Even here, however, we must make a distinction: the theater can do without the confidant, in monologue, whereas the letter cannot; moreover, as a tangible document the confidential letter is subject to being "overheard" by anyone at any time, with all of the resulting consequences.

**The Active Confidant**

The confidant is rarely a purely passive listener. Even in letter narrative that includes no letters from the confidant, his voice is heard within the hero's letters through quotation or paraphrase. There are varying degrees to his activity, according to whether he merely contributes information relevant to the hero's story or actually influences it.

**Information Contributor**

In both epistolary narrative and the theater, the confidant's voice constantly relieves that of the hero; he asks questions, fills in parts of the exposition, gives advice. The confidant may also be a source of new information unknown to the hero. On the stage as well as in the letter novel he may report events that he, but not the hero, has witnessed. Thus Julie in Corneille's *Horace* tells her mistresses the outcome of the battles, and Anna Howe gives Clarissa an account of a visit Lovelace made to her. Whereas this new information in an epistolary work usually takes an extended narrative form, in the theater it consists more often of brief announcements of marriages, deaths, arrivals. Such announcements, moreover, can produce a peripeteia in the plot, which the epistolary confidant's messages do less frequently, because of his usual absence from the center of the action.

**Independent Agent**

An even more active role is played by the second category of confidants, who not only listen to, comment upon, and relate part of the hero's story, but actually influence it. The counselor whose advice is taken, particularly the evil counselor, would figure in
this category (Oenone of *Phèdre*, Narcisse of *Britannicus*). This more enterprising type of confidant usually has a well-delineated personality, independent from the hero's; after listening to the hero's plight, he decides either to help him attain his goal or to hinder him. The confidant who betrays the hero's confidences (Narcisse in *Britannicus*, Euphorbe in *Cinna*) and the servants of comedy who both run and steal the show are the logical extension of this role.

When the confidant becomes such an important agent in the plot as to be a protagonist or antagonist in his own right (from Corneille's "Suivante" to Beaumarchais's Figaro), we begin to question whether he is actually still functioning as a confidant. If our examples in the preceding paragraph have been drawn from the theater, it is because at this level it becomes increasingly difficult to speak of epistolary and dramatic confidants in parallel terms. When the confidant takes over as *meneur du jeu* in the theater, his role becomes increasingly independent of the *confiance-confidence* relationship, whereas the epistolary confidant's continuing importance, even in his most active moments, derives precisely from this relationship. Even in Marivaux's *Les Fausses Confidences*, for example, we never see Dorante actually confide in the much more active valet Dubois (unless, significantly enough, it is in Dorante's *letter*, which Dubois arranges to have stolen and read in public at the end of the play). It is from the trumped-up *confidences* made by Dubois himself, rather than from those he receives, that Dubois, like Scapin, derives his importance. Similarly, Narcisse in *Britannicus*, double agent though he may be, tells Néron secrets about Britannicus that are more of his own creation than his master's. Furthermore, if he can betray Britannicus's love for Junie to Néron, or the fact that the two young lovers are meeting secretly (act 3, scene 6), it is because of what he has *seen*, not heard. The physical presence of the theatrical confidant determines his role as strongly as physical absence does for his epistolary counterpart. The dramatic confidant, originating in the "suite" of the hero, derives his power from following the hero around.

The epistolary confidant, on the other hand, derives his importance from the friendship of the hero, a friendship that is
emphasized throughout and whose formation may even be portrayed. If the action-oriented theater has little time after the exposition for the confidant to listen to the sentimental effusions of his friend (he tends rather to witness them as they take place between protagonists), the epistolary confidant will spend much of his time doing just that. Moreover, whereas the primary source of the dramatic confidant’s power is his advisory capacity, the epistolary confidant derives additional power and perhaps his most essential role from the mere fact of receiving letters—as those most epistolary of all confidants, the marquise de Merteuil and the vicomte de Valmont, demonstrate all too well. The duke who is the corruptor-friend of Dorat’s comte de Mirbelle (in Les Malheurs de l’inconstance) insists that as soon as Mirbelle seduces the marquise de Syrce, “il est essentiel que je sois instruit” (pt. 1, L. 37), just as Merteuil wants the présidente’s first letter after her fall. The epistolary confidant is most fundamentally an archivist.

It is therefore the passive rather than the active aspect of the confidant that is the more epistolary quality; indeed, the very activity that the epistolary confidant engages in depends on his having received confidences or on his effort to obtain them. In the theater the confidant, as he develops, tends to abandon his confidential role to become another protagonist or antagonist. Cliton, for example, Dorante’s valet in Corneille’s Le Menteur, talks too much himself, and particularly at ill-advised moments, to remain a mere confidant, and Dorante lies to him as well as to others. Dorante promises twice to make Cliton the unique “secrétaire” of his heart and “dépositaire” of his secrets, but when Cliton uses Dorante’s refrain for the third time in the play, “A moi, de votre coeur l’unique secrétaire, / A moi, de vos secrets le grand dépositaire!” (act 4, scene 3), he is only acknowledging his loss of this role.

If the theater, more frequently than the letter novel, tends to develop the confidant into an antagonist, the letter form tends to develop the antagonist into a confidant. The exchange between lovers can rarely be prolonged without their beginning to make confessions to each other and to tell each other anecdotes about their daily existence. Thus Crébillon’s marquise de M*** keeps the count apprised of the developments in her husband’s love
affair and her own reactions to it, and Saint-Preux writes Julie of his experiences in Paris.

The epistolary confidant shares much more with his classical theater counterpart than he differs from him. What differences there are arise from three obvious differences between the two media:

1. The information that the confidant receives, as well as that which he supplies, is more likely to take a long narrative form in the narrative medium.

2. Historically, conventions and bienséances work for the presence of the confidant as a third party to meetings between protagonists (lovers) in the classical theater, against it in the epistolary novel; and communication with an absent confidant of course differs immensely from communication with a present one. Even in meetings between lovers, the bienséances work against their making confidences or confessions to each other on stage, whereas the letter between lovers originates precisely in order to circumvent that bienséance for purposes of intimate, private communication.

3. The tangible, documentary nature of the letter is the most fundamental source of difference and makes the epistolary confidant more important as information receiver than as information supplier (the source of the theatrical confidant’s influence). Because the letter writer hesitates to make a confidence that can at any time through interception or misuse become an arm against him, and because the confidant wishes to overcome this hesitation, the theme of confiance will be emphasized more frequently in letter narrative than in the theater.

A CHANGE IN CONFIDANT

The epistolary medium, more than the theater, continues throughout to use the confidant in his most characteristic capacity—as receiver (rather than transmitter) of confidences. Perhaps for this reason, a change in confidants can often signal an important moment in the epistolary hero’s development. As many readers of Laclos have already noticed, both Cécile and the
présidente drop one confidante (Sophie, Mme de Volanges) in favor of another (Merteuil, Mme de Rosemonde) at crucial and parallel points; both women switch to more indulgent confidantes at the moment that they perceive themselves as having lost innocence.

The inverse of this change occurs in *Les Malheurs de l'inconstance*. At the beginning of Dorat’s novel, the marquis de Mirbelle confides to the duke the background of his secret affair with Lady Sidley. Mirbelle’s honest friend Gérac enters shortly afterward as a rival confidant to the libertine duke. As long as Mirbelle’s sentiments toward his new love interest, the marquise de Syrcé, are of a libertine nature, he continues to confide more in the duke than in Gérac. When he recognizes that his sentiments are those of love, however, he abandons the duke and confides in Gérac exclusively: “je ne me confierai qu’à vous, à vous seul dans l’univers” (pt. 1, L. 43). The account of his garden seduction of Syrcé is thus addressed to Gérac rather than to the duke, who had requested the first news. By refusing to confide in the duke and choosing only a trustworthy friend, Mirbelle—unlike Danceny and Cécile—keeps his affair within the private domain.

Mme Ehe de Beaumont’s marquis de Roselle rejects his sister as a confidante at the beginning of *Lettres du marquis de Roselle* because his sister has censured him. Soon afterward he declares Valville (in a letter to same) to be his unique confidant, this libertine being the only one to whom Roselle can speak of his love for the opera dancer Léonore. Throughout the novel Roselle’s proper but well-meaning sister tries to win back his confidence; she finally succeeds in the second half by confiding her brother to a surrogate confidante, Mme de Narton, who gains Roselle’s confiance and provides him with a well-brought-up girl to replace Léonore. The movement from sister to Valville and back to sister (through Narton) traces the stages of Roselle’s development.

The conflict between relatives and libertines for the trust of a young man likewise organizes the first half of Restif’s *La Malediction paternelle*. N***’s libertine associations and marriage merit him a break with his family and a curse from his father; subsequently, N*** can confide only in his libertine friends, whom he transforms into surrogate “frères” and “soeurs.” If N*** changes confidants so frequently (from his sister to his successive libertine
friends Loiseau, Zoé, Regnault, and “l’Américain”) it is because all of them seem touched by the father’s curse—most die almost as soon as they become his confidants. His first confidante, his sister, outlasts the others but dies, as if by contamination, reading a letter from N*** Libertine confiance, Restif’s novel seems to suggest, is tenuous and can never replace that of the unified family.

In each of the above examples, the choice or change of confidant is an integral part of the novel’s signifying system. In classical theater, protagonists tend to keep the same confidants, who function to witness and intervene in the ongoing action. In the letter novel, however, where the confidant is not already part of the protagonist’s entourage, and where confidential communication is more difficult and dangerous, the very formation and dissolution of confidential ties become part of the action and acts of communication become moral choices.

These choices are not without moral ambiguity. As Tourvel turns from Volanges to Rosemonde, she annexes both an indulgent listener and a superego: “ainsi engagée à vous dire tout, je m’accoutumerai à me croire toujours en votre présence. Votre vertu remplacera la mienne. Jamais, sans doute, je ne consentirai à rougir à vos yeux, et retenue par ce frein puissant, tandis que je chérirai en vous l’indulgente amie confidente de ma faiblesse, j’y honorerai encore l’ange tutélaire qui me sauvera de la honte” (L. 102). Valmont’s need for his confidante Merteuil is surprisingly similar to Tourvel’s bond with Rosemonde. Valmont often writes to Merteuil to distract himself from Tourvel, to regain his libertine control. By returning to Merteuil as monitor of his actions, by thinking himself “in her presence,” he strives to maintain the libertine identity that he associates with her, just as Tourvel sees in Rosemonde an indulgent “guardian angel” of her virtue. The confidant in both of these cases is perceived by the writer as an alter ego who will help prevent alteration of his own ego; yet this confidant who ostensibly is chosen to inhibit forbidden desires actually allows the writer the pleasure of speaking of them. Merteuil’s wry description of the motivation behind Cécile’s confessions to God is readily applicable to Valmont’s confidential relationship with the marquise or the présidente’s with Rosemonde: “Tourmentée par le désir de s’occuper de son amant, et par la crainte de se damner en s’en
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occupant, elle a imaginé de prier Dieu de le lui faire oublier, et comme elle renouvelle cette prière à chaque instant du jour, elle trouve le moyen d'y penser sans cesse" (L. 51). In epistolary narrative more regularly than in the theater, confidants are chosen, not given. The choices as well as changes of confidant reflect the letter writer's own shifting values, selves, and self-perceptions.

ECLIPSE OF THE CONFIDANT

If the turn toward a particular confidant can be an important articulation in the narrative structure, those moments when there is no confidant at all, rare though they may be, are likewise privileged. In narrative composed exclusively of letters, occasionally there may appear “fragments” written by one character to no particular official addressee (although they usually find their way into someone's hand). These are those points of high tension, of tragic isolation, in Clarissa, Les Liaisons, La Nouvelle Héloïse, or Delphine, when Clarissa (immediately following her rape), the présidente (after Valmont’s desertion), Saint-Preux (forcefully separated from Julie by Edouard), and Delphine (after her sacrifice of Léonce) enter a state of shock. Traumatized, these writers close in upon themselves and let their inner turmoil pour out incoherently onto the paper. Delphine’s comment in her first fragment could apply to all of the above characters' situations: “Je suis seule, sans appui, sans consolateur c’est à moi seule que je parle de ma douleur quel triste confident que la réflexion solitaire!” (pt. 5, frag. 1). Let us now focus briefly on each of these moments.

The only letter in Les Liaisons that does not have a specific addressee, letter 161 (“La Présidente de Tourvel à ”), is addressed alternately to everyone. The présidente’s “tu” changes both tones and identities—from husband, to Valmont as deceiver, to Valmont as lover. Her “vous” is alternately Mme de Rosemonde and Mme de Volanges. In her desperation, the présidente fears a Valmont who is “il,” throws herself into the arms of a Valmont who is “tu,” and bids adieu to a Valmont (now “vous”) who is tormenting her. The présidente's pronouns are as protean and confusing as the images that Valmont has alternately presented to her.

In Clarissa the scraps of paper that the heroine writes upon,
tears up, and throws away are incomplete efforts to confess her fallen state, to articulate her feelings of guilt, betrayal, and anguish—to Anna Howe, her father, her sister, and Lovelace. The rambling incoherent nature of these messages, the eclipse of Clarissa’s real confidante in favor of a series of shadow confidants to whom she can neither complete nor mail her thoughts, all translate the depths of mental isolation into which Lovelace’s crime has plunged the heroine.

As Saint-Preux is being sped away from Julie in Edouard’s stagecoach (pt. 2), his distracted state is similarly revealed by the short, elliptical sentences he jots down, addressed alternately to friends who are “vous” or to a “tu” who is Julie—internalized rather than real addressees. In Delphine’s fragments (written, like those of Saint-Preux, in the stagecoach that is speeding her away from the one she loves), the heroine likewise responds in her imagination to people to whom she could not actually write what she is thinking: “Thérèse, que m’écrivez-vous? Je voudrais lui répondre; mais non, je ne pourrais lui dire ce que je pense, ce serait la troubler” (Delphine, pt. 5, frag. 7). Alternating between “vous” and “elle” for Thérèse, between “tu” and “il” for Léonce, Delphine reflects in her fragments the same frustrated desire to communicate that Saint-Preux expresses when he moves from “tu” to “elle”: “Tu m’as chassé avec barbarie, je fuis plus vite que le vent. Ah! l’air emporte mes plaintes! et cependant je fuis! Je vais vivre et mourir loin d’elle vivre loin d’elle!” (La Nouvelle Héloïse, pt. 2, frag. 3).

In each of these four instances the impulse to communicate with the accustomed confidant persists, but is constantly frustrated by the eclipse of the addressee or by the proliferation of fragmented images of addressees. A hallmark of the resulting interior monologue is pronoun ambiguity (the présidente’s use of the same pronoun for different unidentified persons) or alternation (“vous”-“elle,” “tu”-“il” for the same person), which translates the writer’s inner confusion. At such points in letter narrative, the sudden disappearance of a real confidant emphasizes the mental isolation of a traumatized epistolary hero who continues, even in his imagination, to address an unseizable and unreachable addressee.

What is merely a brief interlude in Les Liaisons, Clarissa, La
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Nouvelle Héloïse, or Delphine becomes the basis for all of the hero's epistolary efforts in Bellow's Herzog. Herzog's trauma, unlike that of the others, constitutes a lengthy mental crisis, reflected in his case not by the temporary eclipse of a confidant but by a long anguished search for one. Like Clarissa and the others, he turns to a series of shadow confidants, scribbling fragmentary, unmailed letters that reach out toward an "other" not yet real. This shadow confidant, in spite of being addressed as "Dear Luke" or "Dear Zelda," is a part of Herzog's traum, yet is different from Herzog's own "self." Herzog's epistolary stream-of-consciousness is so "other"-directed as to have its logical culmination in the three real, mailed letters at the end of the novel, posted to Ramona, Luke, and Marco, whom Herzog can now confront directly. Moses' earlier unmailed letter to Luke expressing concern for Luke's health, for instance, has its parallel in Clarissa's unposted fragment to Anna, "But say are you really ill?" (Clarissa, 16 June). Moses Herzog is entirely in the tradition of earlier traumatized epistolary heroes and heroines insofar as his scribblings reflect a state of shock (caused in this case by his divorce), mental isolation, and a frustrated desire to pour out confused deep feelings of guilt, betrayal, and even concern for the person addressed, to an addressee who remains "other," however internalized a confidant he may be.

EPISTOLARY CONFESSION: The Fatality of Confidentiality

If the point signaled by a switch in confidants or the sudden disappearance of this figure constitutes an important articulation of letter narrative, no less marked a moment is that of confession. Correspondence, whether between friends or lovers, is often carried on secretly, thus making any letter a potential disclosure if it falls into the wrong hands, even when its subject matter does not constitute a particularly secret revelation to the intended recipient. Conspiratorial letters, for instance, are the basis of Thornton Wilder's Ides of March (1948), a historical novel composed of chain letters supposedly circulated among the group that plotted the assassination of Julius Caesar. The truly confessional letter, containing a disclosure to the addressee, is thus shrouded in double secrecy. Secrets are a frequent source of suspense in letter fiction, their imminent revelation often being
announced long before actual disclosure. In Mme Riccoboni’s *Lettres d’Adélaïde de Dammartin, comtesse de Sancerre*, Adélaïde refuses three times to satisfy a friend’s curiosity about her past before finally ceding. Mme Riccoboni delights in this fairly mechanical suspense technique, postponing until the end of *Lettres de Juliette Catesby* Milord d’Ossery’s confessional letter explaining the mysterious actions described at the beginning, while Juliette reproaches him throughout for his lack of *confiance* in her. The end of a novel is an obvious locus for confessional letters; *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, *Mademoiselle La Quintinie*, Mme Elie de Beaumont’s *Lettres du marquis de Roselle*, and Nodier’s *Adèle* all close with confessions that have been duly anticipated. In countless letter novels suspense is thus transferred from the level of *action* (the adventure novel’s mode of suspense) to the epistolary mode’s essential level of *communication*.

Rousseau is no less fond of this suspense technique than Mme Riccoboni, although more inventive in multiplying both the secrets and the excuses for postponing their revelation. When Julie forbids her lover to ask about her secret activities to unite them (pt. 1, L. 33, 46), lest he cause them to fail, Saint-Preux agrees to respect “un si doux mystère l’aimable secret” (1:34). Although the reader may guess that these plans have to do with Julie’s pregnancy, he does not have his suspicions confirmed and learn the details until her confessional letter (3:18). Much is made of the “fatal secret” that prevents Julie from being totally happy in marriage; Saint-Preux is forced to interrupt his letter to Edouard just before revealing it, yet the next letter that Edouard receives does not mention it. Only later do the two determine that the letter in which Saint-Preux had actually revealed the secret has gone astray, and Saint-Preux writes anew. Meanwhile, the disclosure has been postponed for some eighty pages of the novel.

Even confessions that are not delayed for such long intervals are usually heralded by the letters that precede them. Thus Julie’s admission of love at the very beginning of the novel (“Il faut donc l’avouer enfin, ce fatal secret trop mal déguisé!” [1:4]) is preceded by stalling messages and a final note: “Je suis obsédée, et ne puis ni vous parler ni vous écrire jusqu’à demain. Attendez” (pt. 1, billet 3). Such announcements, like the pointing finger of John the Baptist, emphasize the importance of the revelation that
follows (cf. the pairs pt. 3, Ll. 17 and 18; pt. 5, Ll. 9 and 10; pt. 6, Ll. 11 and 12). In the case of these letter pairs, the epistolary form’s potential to delay communication—even for brief intervals—promotes a thematics of secrecy.

Secrets, particularly in La Nouvelle Héloïse, are often fatal. “Ce fatal secret” is Julie’s term for her love for Saint-Preux as well as Saint-Preux’s expression for Julie’s disclosure of Wolmar’s atheism. Confessional letters and indeed all secret correspondence are likewise tinged with fatality. Julie and Saint-Preux realize from the very beginning that having once written each other of their love, they cannot stop writing. Saint-Preux refers to his first letter as “cette fatale lettre” and observes in his second letter, “Je n’écrirais point celle-ci, si je n’eusse écrit la première.” When Julie takes up the pen for the first time she remarks, “de ce premier pas je me sens entraînée dans l'abîme.” The very continuation of their correspondence reflects the fatality of their passion.

In many an epistolary seduction novel, letters are the instrument of destiny. The woman who receives a letter and responds, be she Crébillon’s marquise, Mme Riccoboni’s Fanny Butlerd, Dorat’s Syrê, or countless others, is taking a first step along a fatal path. Typically, she protests constantly that she should not write, and threatens repeatedly to cease the correspondence. But to the reader who turns the page and finds another letter, each letter appears a link in a fatal chain, at the end of which the writer must recognize, as does Crébillon’s marquise, that, “A force de vous écrire que je ne vous aimais pas, je vins enfin à vous écrire que je vous aimais” (L. 40). Confessions of love, whether the result of a long epistolary exchange or the beginning of it, reveal the energy that forges the links together.

If we move from the seduction plot to other types of confessional or confidential exchange in letter narrative, we find the same apparent determinism operating. Any confidential exchange is motivated by psychological need, and the letter writer’s own emphasis on that need (from Lydia’s reiterated desire to “disburthen her cares” to Merteuil’s and Valmont’s impulse to provoke each other’s admiration) often makes the confidential bond appear a bondage. To be sure, the continuation of correspondence constitutes a practical narrative necessity for the
epistolary novelist, but his characters also charge the chain of communication with psychological necessity whenever the desire for self-expression, self-justification, revelation, or admiration becomes a major propelling force behind the narrative. The more confidential and secret the relationship between writers, the more dangerous and necessary the maintenance of their tie becomes; the confidential relationships in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* prove to be the most fatal liaisons of all, when the most confessional of the letters are exposed at the end.

CONFESSOR VERSUS CONFIDANT

In works where the theme of confession is important, it is not surprising to find the priestly confessor figure. What is more interesting to observe in epistolary fiction is the way in which the confessorial role is metaphorically combined with or played off against the confidential role. Restif’s “paysan perverti,” Edmond, is corrupted by two libertine friends, Gaudet and le Père d’Arras. The latter, with his built-in confessorial role, is easily able to win also the confidence of the naive Laure and her mother as their *directeur de conscience*. Edmond borrows from religious vocabulary to describe even his letters to his friend Gaudet: “c’est une confession que je te fais, comme je la ferais au Père d’Arras, entends-tu bien?” (L. 40). Interestingly enough, in Restif’s synthesis of the *Paysan* and the *Paysanne*—*Le Paysan et la paysanne pervertis*—he combines also the roles of Gaudet and d’Arras into a single priest-confidant, le Père Gaudet d’Arras.

The ecclesiastical confessor and the secular confidant are emphatically opposed in George Sand’s *Mademoiselle La Quintrinie*. This novel, which was analyzed in chapter 1, is a serious treatment of an old fabliau theme: “le mari confesseur de sa femme.” Here, however, the fiancé Emile, rather than donning an ecclesiastical frock to learn Lucie’s secrets, wins her *confiance* on purely secular grounds and even divests the priest in her life of his confessorial role. Within his own secular domain, Emile is not averse to borrowing from religious vocabulary to describe the relationship of *confiance-confidence* that can be established between two people. He and Lucie use the expression “nous confesser l’un l’autre jusqu’au fond de l’âme” (L. 14); after
Moréali's first "confession" to Emile, Emile "absolves" the priest (L. 25).

Although ecclesiastical and secular confession are not distinguished on the metaphorical level in the novel, their difference is maintained on the ideological plane. In letter 17 Emile differentiates clearly between institutionalized, forced confession and the free confession made to a friend who has legitimately gained one's confidence. If Lucie is easily converted to Emile's way of thinking about confession, it is because she already has a notion of the value of the secular confidence. Early in the novel she points out that she is making a "confidence" rather than a "confession" to Moréali (L. 10). By letter 17 she is asking Moréali to gain Emile's "confiance" as a friend rather than as a priest. When Moréali tells Emile in letter 20, "je ne prétends à votre confiance qu'autant qu'il vous plaira de me l'accorder," he finally seems willing to abandon the role of priest-confessor in favor of the status of friend-confidant. Much of the action of Mademoiselle La Quintinie can be expressed in terms of the secularization of the confessor, in keeping with George Sand's philosophical polemic against the church's claim to a monopoly on morality and salvation. The replacement of the priest-confessor by the friend-confidant, or the transformation of the former into the latter, is part of this polemic, and it is fitting that the letters discovered at the end of the novel (the deathbed confession of Lucie's mother), which Moréali assumed were addressed to him, should be addressed instead "au véritable confesseur" (p. 287)—her husband.

**DELFHINE: The Tragedy of Confidence**

Mme de Staël builds a drama of confiance of a different nature around the heroine of Delphine (1802). Delphine, a model of post-Rousseauist epistolary composition, has unfortunately been overshadowed by Mme de Staël's third-person autobiographical novel Corinne (1807). Confiance—understood in all three senses of self-confidence, faith in others, willingness to confide—is one of Delphine's primary characteristics; much of her story concerns the betrayal of that confidence by her successively chosen confidants. Indeed, an analysis of this work should reveal the extent to which the narrative structure of the epistolary Delphine—unlike
that of the autobiographically similar *Corinne*—is informed by the thematics of *confiance*.

A brief summary of the factors generating the plot of *Delphine* may help those unfamiliar with the novel to follow my analysis. At the center of *Delphine* are two star-crossed lovers—Delphine d’Albémar and Léonce de Mondoville—who, even before they meet, are described by their respective confidants as being destined for each other. Unfortunately, from the very beginning a primary obstacle to their union presents itself: the first letter of the novel announces that Delphine, by donating a dowry to Mathilde de Vernon, has just facilitated Mathilde’s betrothal to Léonce, a Spanish nobleman whom neither Mathilde nor Delphine has yet met. Throughout the novel dramatic interest is generated by the sudden appearance or disappearance of obstacles to the Delphine-Léonce union: (1) a calculating, dissimulating mother (Mme de Vernon), who uses her friendship with Delphine to ensure her own daughter Mathilde’s happiness and to destroy Delphine’s; (2) Léonce’s marriage; (3) the legalization of divorce by the Revolution; (4) Mathilde’s pregnancy; (5) a Gothic-novel rival for Delphine’s love, M. de Valorbe, who imprisons Delphine when she refuses to marry him, thereby ruining her reputation; (6) Delphine’s convent vows; (7) Mathilde’s death; and (8) the Revolution’s legalization of the breaking of religious vows. Even when the last external obstacle is removed, however, the two lovers fail to get together, for, as at previous crucial points in the novel when their union seemed possible, the internal obstacles take over. By a quirk of fate these two lovers are not so well matched as all else would imply: Delphine’s political liberalism and disregard of public approval in favor of personal integrity repeatedly clash with Léonce’s conservative sense of honor and his sensitivity to public opinion.

Parts 1 and 2 emphatically establish Delphine as a kind of “héroïne de la confiance” and present as Delphine’s foil the first character who takes advantage of this trait, her friend and aunt Sophie de Vernon. Orphaned at an early age and educated by her much older, fatherly husband, Delphine d’Albémar has been brought up in an atmosphere of trust and openness (of “confiance”), as she explains in a letter to Mme de Vernon’s daughter, Mathilde, early in the novel (pt. 1, L. 3). This letter, concerning
Delphine's rather unconventional education, has its counterpart in Mme de Vernon's deathbed letter to Delphine, where Sophie de Vernon, likewise orphaned as a baby, describes her own education: "Personne ne s'est occupé de moi dans mon enfance, lorsqu'il eût été si facile de former mon coeur à la confiance et à l'affection. Je renfermai donc en moi-même tout ce que j'éprouvais, j'acquis de bonne heure ainsi l'art de la dissimulation. Je déteste les moments que l'on destine à se tout dire" (2:41). Mme de Vernon's deathbed confession owes much to the marquise de Merteuil's long autobiography (L. 81) at the center of *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, just as the entire character of Mme de Vernon is reminiscent of Laclos's marquise. Never to write, never to confide, are Mme de Vernon's mottoes.

On the other hand, encouraging the confiance of others, particularly Delphine, is part of her strategy — not only encouraging these confidences, but discouraging those that could be made at ill-timed moments to foil her plans. Thus Sophie cuts Delphine off each time she tries to confess her growing and reciprocated love for Léonce, just as Merteuil stalls Cécile from confiding her love for Danceny until the marquise is ready to use that confidence (cf. *Liaisons*, L. 20, 38). As long as Delphine's and Léonce's love remains secret, Mme de Vernon can feign ignorance and proceed with the betrothal of her daughter Mathilde to Léonce. As we might expect of a woman of Merteuil's lineage, she plays her confidante role with studied, lockgate precision, releasing Delphine's effusions only at the right moment.

This moment occurs at the end of part 1, at a time when the generous Delphine has backed herself into an awkward corner by playing a confidante's role less successfully than Sophie de Vernon. Whereas Sophie has held off Delphine's confession, Delphine has listened all too sympathetically to the problems of her unhappily married friend Thérèse d'Ervins and has agreed to let Thérèse and her well-intentioned suitor Serbellane meet secretly in Delphine's house. When this meeting is discovered, Delphine sacrifices her own reputation to save Thérèse by letting society believe Serbellane was her suitor, not Thérèse's. She confides the truth, including her love for Léonce, to Sophie, entrusting her friend with the responsibility for discrediting her in Léonce's eyes. This time Sophie listens (Delphine notices that
Sophie “vint elle-même au-devant de la confiance que je voulais avoir en elle” [1:32]) and assures Delphine she has nothing to fear. Reluctant to disclose Thérèse’s secret in a letter, Delphine entrusts Sophie with a note to Léonce instructing him to believe Sophie, in whom she has “confided” everything. As we might expect (although we cannot see it in an epistolary novel, which necessarily presents such events obliquely), Sophie uses this letter against Delphine; the heroine does not hear from Sophie again until the day of Léonce’s marriage to Mathilde. The careful opposition of Mme de Vernon’s and Delphine’s characters in terms of “confiance” thus culminates at the end of part 1 in the first betrayal of Delphine’s confidence.

Although the first letters of part 2 reveal that some of Delphine’s former trust in Sophie is lost (“ma confiance n’est plus sans bornes” [2:3]), it is still strong enough for her to make another fatal confidence. When Léonce, repenting his hasty judgment, writes Delphine requesting an interview of explanation, she grants him an appointment, but Delphine at the same time makes the mistake of entrusting Mme de Vernon with a letter of safe-conduct for M. de Serbellane. Léonce does not show up for the interview. Thus at two crucial moments in parts 1 and 2 Sophie betrays her friend’s confiance with the aid of letters Delphine has entrusted to her.

Delphine does not learn until Mme de Vernon’s death, at the end of part 2, to what degree Sophie has abused her friendship and trust. When Mme de Vernon is dying, Delphine finally becomes her confidante and even more—her confessor. Sophie’s daughter Mathilde and her priest try repeatedly to force Mme de Vernon to accept confession and the rites of extreme unction, but Sophie finds it impossible to “parler avec confiance à un homme que je ne connais point” (p. 228). Instead Sophie chooses Delphine as her bedside minister and her long letter to Delphine serves as her confession, Delphine being the only one who can, and does, absolve her. The thematics of confidence here is reinforced by an opposition of religious confession to secular confession, which we have already seen is the main motif of Mademoiselle La Quintinie.

Mme de Vernon is not the only foil for the “confiante” Delphine. The man she has recognized as her destined spiritual partner betrays Delphine’s trust less villainously but no less
frequently than Delphine’s friend. Léonce’s willingness to accept the opinion of third parties regarding Delphine’s actions demonstrates a lack of trust that Delphine perceives immediately after his marriage (2:21). Whereas Mme de Vernon betrays Delphine’s confiance by exploiting it, Léonce betrays it by failing to return it. Thus, even after he and Delphine establish the truth and resume a chaste lovers’ relationship, Léonce will repeatedly take umbrage at certain of Delphine’s or others’ actions, close in upon himself, and refuse to confide in Delphine. Particularly salient are Léonce’s parallel, mystifying silences after he and Delphine separately receive letters from M. de Lebensei justifying divorce (4:19) and the breaking of convent vows (6:12). In each case Léonce refuses to reveal his reaction to the possibility of overcoming the obstacles to their union, and Delphine must lament the erosion of “la plus douce de nos jouissances, la parfaite confiance déjà altérée!” (4:22). The contrast between their characters is nowhere more evident than in part 3, when Léonce’s annoyance at the platonism of their relationship is translated in epistolary fashion by curtness and mystification. In this sequence of exchanges (3:20–23), Léonce’s short notes contrast visibly on the printed page with Delphine’s intervening long effusive letters. Léonce obediently agrees not to alter the chaste nature of their love, but his withdrawal, his refusal to confide in Delphine, has stifled some of her own confiance: “j’étais heureuse, je vous l’aurais dit; oh! que vous avez bien réprimé cette confiance imprudente!” (3:21).

Throughout Mme de Staël’s novel, Delphine continues to find her confiance frustrated, betrayed, exploited. Even her rejected suitor, M. de Valorbe, responds to Delphine’s generous concern when she visits him in prison by locking her up with him (Delphine: “c’est l’amitié que j’avais pour vous que vous punissez... c’est ma confiance en vous dont vous démontrez la folie” [5:24]). In each of the six sections of the novel Delphine’s confiance is subjected to a major blow: 1—Léonce’s and Mme de Vernon’s betrayal, which leads to the marriage; 2—Léonce’s second preference of Mme de Vernon’s confidences to Delphine’s; 3—Léonce’s withdrawal of confiance because of sexual frustration; 4—Léonce’s refusal to confide in Delphine after M. de Lebensei’s letter on divorce; 5—Valorbe’s betrayal of her trust; 6—Léonce’s withdrawal after the second Lebensei letter.

Even those friends of Delphine who fill the more traditional
confidant role—that is, the role of listener rather than protagonist in the plot—in some sense fail her. Delphine confides most regularly in her older sister-in-law Louise d’Albémar, but switches in part 4 to Mme de Lebensei, returning to Louise only in part 5; occasionally she confides in Mme d’Artenas, Mme de R., or Mme de Cerlèbe. As Delphine switches from one confidante to another, each appears inadequate; they either misunderstand her, disappear at crucial moments when she needs them, or try ineffectually to tear Delphine away from her amorous ties, thus appearing as weak rivals to Léonce and Mme de Vernon for Delphine’s allegiance. Delphine’s repeated failure to leave Paris to go live with Louise in the country demonstrates the weakness of traditional confidential ties in this novel.

If Delphine’s confidantes disappear or can be discarded so easily, it may well be due to Mme de Staël’s mechanics: they appear when epistolary exigencies require them and disappear when no longer needed. But even if technical necessities are the prime motive, an important thematic result is the creation of a vacuum of confiance around Delphine, as one after another of her chosen confidants fail her, either through exploitation of confiance (Sophie, Valorbe), nonreciprocation (Léonce), or ineffectuality (Louise, Mme d’Artenas, and others). For this heroine who is continually defined as “confiante,” confiance is a total affair, involving a personal self-confidence independent of others’ opinions and demanding relationships in which trust and sharing of innermost thoughts would be mutual and unlimited. The only people who reciprocate this confiance cannot hold Delphine; those who attract her cannot match her confiance. In part 5 Delphine cries out that “il vaut mieuxmourir que de se livrer à un sentiment dep confiance ou d’abandon qui ne serait pas entièrement partagé par ce qu’on aime” (5:25). Her tragic suicide is the necessary conclusion.

CONFIDENCE VERSUS COQUETRY:
The Language of Friendship and the Language of Love

The thematics of confiance/non-confiance in Delphine and other works is integrally related to the thematics of amitié/amour. If we examine any epistolary work whose plot relies heavily on the winning or losing, existence or nonexistence,
of confiance (Les Liaisons dangereuses, Delphine, La Nouvelle Héloïse, and countless others), we note a similar emphasis on the importance of amitié and a frequent opposition of amitié to amour, of l’ami to l’amant. Mme Riccoboni’s novels provide a case in point, with their valorization of candor and trust in opposition to secrecy and feint. Here, as elsewhere, confiance-confidence appears the province of amitié; to receive or make confidences, even lovers must become friends. Typical is Juliette Catesby’s statement to her former suitor who has finally confided in her: “sensible à votre confiance je vous reverrai avec ce plaisir vif qu’on sent en retrouvant un ami” (Lettres de Juliette Catesby, L. 37). “Le charme de la confiance” that Mme Riccoboni’s Fanni Butlerd repeatedly praises becomes so much the property of “l’amitié” that the two are fused into the cliché “le charme de la confiante amitié” of other epistolary fiction. Rousseau’s Julie is very much in the tradition of Mme Riccoboni’s heroines when she values “confiance” and “franchise” above “amour.” The oath that Julie exacts from her lover is not an oath of “amour éternel,” as Julie herself points out, but of “vérité, sincérité, franchise inviolable”: “Jure-moi que je ne cesserai jamais d’être la confidente de ton coeur” (1:35).

To the ties of “confiance, ‘amitié,’ and sincerity are usually opposed dissimulation, feint, and the desire to please. Fanni is constantly contrasting “le naturel et la vérité” of her own epistolary style with the studied art, and implied feint, of Milord Alfred, whose prime purpose is to “please.” Merteuil writes Valmont that she is bound to him by “la confiante amitié: c’est elle qui fait que vous êtes toujours ce que j’aime le mieux; mais en vérité: le Chevalier est ce qui me plaît davantage” (L. 10). When Delphine opposes “confiance” to “coquetterie” (1:6), she sums up the essential difference between the two possible approaches to relationships and epistolary style.

It should be evident that we are dealing here with two separate, although related, aspects of epistolary confiance. On the one hand, in opposing amitié to amour, we are doing little more than distinguishing between the two principal slots into which almost all epistolary characters fit: the friend-confidant or the lover. On the other hand, in opposing “confiance” and sincerity to coquetry or dissimulation, we are dealing with questions of style or tone.
This division would oppose two essential letter traditions: that of Crébillon and Laclos to that of Richardson, Mme Riccoboni, and Rousseau. The letter has been extolled by epistolary authors for its potential both as a faithful portrait and as a deceptive mask, as we can easily see by comparing the preface to *Fanni Butlerd* (“le naturel et la vérité sont tout le mérite de ces Lettres”) and Merteuil’s advice to Cécile (“Vous voyez bien que, quand vous écrivez à quelqu’un, c’est pour lui et non pas pour vous: vous devez donc moins chercher à lui dire ce que vous pensez, que ce qui lui plaît davantage” [L. 105; italics mine]).

As might be expected, the relationship polarity (amitié/amour or confidant/lover) and the tone polarity (confiance/coquetterie or candor/dissimulation) frequently coincide. More often than not, letter writers restrain themselves with the lover (or mystify or deceive him) while revealing their real sentiments to the confidant. Thus Lovelace writes, “I never lied to man and hardly ever said truth to woman”; Valmont tells the présidente about his “pupitre” but reveals to his confidante Merteuil the true nature of this writing desk. But just as some of the most interesting plays are those that lie on the generic borderline between tragedy and comedy and therefore can play off our expectations of one against the conventions of the other, so some of the most intriguing epistolary works blur these distinctions between the associated pairs confiance-amitié and coquetterie-amour.

A common instance of blurring is that in which an epistolary character dissimulates with a friend (the duke in Dorat’s *Les Malheurs de l’inconstance* closes almost every letter to Mirbelle with an allusion to their “amitié” yet deceives him about Syrcé and Sidley) or takes his lover for a confidant: almost all epistolary lovers are forced by the medium itself to write occasional lettres-confidence to each other. These cases are so common as to be uninteresting in and of themselves. It is only when a tension is created between the confidant and lover roles, between the options of confiance and coquetterie, so as to produce what Hans Wolpe would call “psychological ambiguity,”¹⁴ that blurring merits closer attention.

For example, the bond between Delphine and Sophie de Vernon is one of friendship, but from the very beginning this bond is troubled by an equivocal element. Delphine’s constrained
“inquiétude” in her first letter to Sophie, her fear of having “dis­pleased,” her malaise at finding that Mathilde has come between them, contrast with the next, much longer letter to her sister-in-law, in which she speaks freely of everything, including her relationship with Sophie: “Il n’existe aucune borne à ma con­fiance en elle; mais, sans que j’y réfléchisse, je me trouve naturelle­ment disposée à ne lui dire que ce qui peut l’intéresser; je renvoie toujours au lendemain pour lui parler des pensées qui m’oc­cupent. mon désir de lui plaire met dans mon amitié pour elle encore plus, pour ainsi dire de coquetterie que de confiance’” (1:6; italics mine). This movement from constraint to effusion, from “coquetterie” (with Sophie) to real “confiance” (with Louise), mimes the conventional epistolary movement from lover to confidant. If we have not yet grasped this movement, Delphine’s subsequent allusions to Mme de Vernon’s “charme,” to the “je ne sais quoi” that attracts her to Sophie, making her repeatedly forgive her aunt in spite of herself, and ultimately the violence of Delphine’s disillusionment, impress upon us that the bond between the two is comparable in strength and nature only to that between Delphine and Léonce. The similarity between Sophie’s and Léonce’s hold over Delphine is reflected in her desire to please them regardless of how ill-matched her character is to theirs.

When Delphine discovers the full extent of Sophie’s betrayal of her “tendre amitié,” her vocabulary reveals both the strength and the ambiguity of the ties between them: “Je suis troublée, tremblante, irritée comme s’il s’agissait de Léonce. Ah! quand on a consacré tant de soins, tant de services, tant d’années à con­quérir une amitié pour le reste de ses jours, quelle douleur on éprouve. Je ne puis plus offrir à personne ce coeur qui se livrait sans réserve, et dont elle a possédé les premières affections” (2:31). The tension between words like “amitié” and “tendre,” “amitié” and “conquérir,” and the comparisons of Sophie to her lover that run counter to comparisons of Sophie and her regular confidante Louise, maintain the ambiguity of a relationship that is neither amitié for a confidante nor amour for a lover, but equivocally both.\(^\text{15}\)

The “tendre amitié” that binds Delphine to Sophie has its obvious parallel in the relationship between the “inseparables” in
La Nouvelle Héloïse. Claire, like Mme de Vernon for Delphine, is much more than a confidante to Julie, and occasionally the bonds between these two appear even stronger than those between Julie and Saint-Preux. How revealing, for instance, is the first line of the note in which Claire announces to Saint-Preux Julie’s marriage: “votre amante n’est plus; mais j’ai retrouvé mon amie” (3:17).

If Claire and Julie are “inseparables,” Julie and Saint-Preux are all too separable. The themes of separation and absence, which since the Heroïdes have been the special property of lovers’ correspondence, are just as important, if not more stressed, in Julie’s letters to Claire than in her correspondence with Saint-Preux. Whereas Julie on several occasions requests Saint-Preux’s absence (Claire is even twice—in 1:64 and 3:1—the instrument of their separation), she laments the distance between herself and Claire more frequently than the various absences of her lover. Julie’s first letter to Claire is punctuated by a “reviens” that will be the thematic refrain of most of her letters to her cousin. At first it would appear that Julie needs Claire’s presence primarily as a confidante and chaperone to protect her virtue (1:6, 7, 28, 29), but by the time Julie opens part 4 with a letter to Claire, “Que tu tardes longtemps à revenir. Pour moi, ton absence me paraît de jour en jour plus insupportable, et je ne puis plus vivre un instant sans toi,” it is clear that her need for Claire is much deeper. Significantly enough, Rousseau’s novel closes on the theme of the unmaintainable separation of the inseparables: “Confiance, amitié, vertus, plaisirs, folâtres jeux, la terre a tout englouti. [. . .] son cercueil ne la contient pas tout entière il attend le reste de sa proie il ne l’attendra pas longtemps.” Amitié in La Nouvelle Héloïse thus constitutes in many ways a stronger bond than amour and even borrows some of the properties of the love relationship. When love is finally expunged from Saint-Preux’s life, he and Edouard follow the example set by Julie and Claire and become “inseparable” themselves. As Saint-Preux vows to Edouard: “le règne de l’amour est passé, que celui de l’amitié commence; je ne te quitte plus qu’à la mort” (4:3).

The relationships of the four principal characters in La Nouvelle Héloïse are marked by a certain interchangeability of the confidant and lover roles. Edouard enters the novel as Julie’s
suitor but is quickly transformed into an *ami-confident* by the letter in which Julie confides in him her love for Saint-Preux (1:58). At the end of the novel Claire is both confidante and potential spouse to Saint-Preux; an erotic element, moreover, has always been present in their relationship, which they stifle out of fear of destroying mutual *confiance*. But it is particularly in the Julie-Claire and Julie-Saint-Preux relationships that the tension between *amitié* and *amour* produces real psychological ambiguity. To this extent the equivocal relationship between Julie and Claire (or even occasionally between Claire and Saint-Preux) reflects the tension between the two central lover-friends, as Julie moves from *confidences* to mystification with Saint-Preux (her various “secrets”) or, conversely, tries to purify her *amour* into *amitié*.

The kiss episode that prefigures the famous “baiser du bosquet” is an apt emblem of the ambiguous triangle formed by Julie, Saint-Preux, and Claire. Whereas the later kiss is exchanged by the two lovers in the presence of Claire, this first kiss is exchanged by the two cousins while the tutor watches:

> quelle extase, de voir deux beautés si touchantes s’embrasser tendrement, le visage de l’une se pencher sur le sein de l’autre, leurs douces larmes se confondre, et baigner ce sein charmant comme la rosée du ciel humecte un lis fraîchement écos! J’étais jaloux d’une amitié si tendre; je lui trouvais je ne sais quoi de plus intéressant que l’amour même, et je me voulais une sorte de mal de ne pouvoir t’offrir des consolations aussi chères, sans les troubler par l’agitation de mes transports. . Ah! qu’en ce moment j’eusse été amoureux de cette cousine, si Julie n’eût pas existé! Mais non, c’était Julie elle-même qui répandait son charme invincible sur tout ce qui l’environnait. [1:38]

The uncertainty of Saint-Preux as to which cousin’s charm highlights the other, his valuation of “*amitié*” above “*amour*,” of “consolations” (the province of confidants) above “transports,” in an account that betrays the very eroticism (or at the least his own erotic perception) of that *amitié*—all of these elements deepen the ambiguity of the entire triangle. *Amitié* will be preferred over *amour* throughout *La Nouvelle Héloïse*—every character will at some point acknowledge himself “plus ami(e) qu’amant(e)” but not without borrowing from that repressed *amour* its voluptuous aspect and thus internalizing the *amitié-amour* tension within *amitié* itself.
In *Lettres de Fanni Butlerd*, on the other hand, the love-friendship dichotomy occurs within *amour* and is unilateral, in keeping with the unidirectional nature of this single-voice work. Whereas Fanni, like any Mme Riccoboni heroine and like Julie herself, would prefer *l'ami* to *l'amant*, her seducer, unlike Saint-Preux, would not appear to share her values. In repeatedly taking her would-be lover for her confidant, Fanni makes herself all the more vulnerable to seduction. Fanni’s letters to Milord Alfred offer a striking contrast to Crébillon’s nevertheless formally similar *Lettres de la marquise de M*** au comte de R***. Whereas the sophisticated, flippant marquise mystifies both count and reader as to her true sentiments for a fifth of the novel, the open, candid Fanni makes hers clear from the very beginning: “Je vous ai dit que je vous aime, parce que je suis étourdie; je vous le répète, parce que je suis sincère” (L. 6, p. 9). Most of Fanni’s letters to Alfred, unlike the marquise’s, are as much letters to a confidant as letters to a lover.

If Fanni confides everything from her daily chagrins to her love itself in Alfred, it is because he at times appears to be her best friend. Her other friends refuse to listen to her: “Vous qui êtes mon ami, mon plus tendre ami, partagez donc ma peine; souffrez que je vous la confie. Ne faites pas comme Miss Betzi; écoutez-moi avec douceur” (L. 61). Fanni speaks *to* Alfred *about* Alfred, much as any epistolary character would write to a confidant about a lover: “Il m’aime, il m’a toujours aimée: il le dit, il le jure, et je le crois” (L. 110). Fanni’s confidences to Alfred concerning Alfred himself are a function of her candor, the virtue for which she most prides herself. Her use of the third-person pronoun for the very person to whom she is writing, however, is not without its coquetry: “D’où vient donc qu’il ne donne pas des fleurs à sa maîtresse? il sait qu’elle les aime” (L. 20, Fanni to Alfred). Although Fanni never mystifies her lover, as Crébillon’s marquise does constantly, she develops her own kind of coquettish language of which *confiance* and openness are paradoxically an integral part. By speaking *to* Alfred *of* Alfred, and by repeatedly making *confidences* to a lover who can take advantage of them, she adds an ambivalence to the conventional epistolary language of love.

The ambivalence of the epistolary character who is both lover
and confidant is nowhere better exploited than in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. Like *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Laclos’s novel presents four letter writers who relate to each other alternately and sometimes simultaneously as confidants and lovers. Thus Merteuil and Danceny, like Saint-Preux and Claire, begin on a confidential tone, but the erotic element soon interferes. If Julie and Edouard move from amorous ties (Edouard as Julie’s suitor) to those of *confiance*, Valmont and Cécile move in the opposite direction. In both novels, moreover, the two central characters are bound together by both reciprocal *confiance* and an early amorous liaison. We might diagram these relationships in the following fashion:

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>= confiance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saint-Preux</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julie</td>
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<tr>
<td>Valmont</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merteuil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edouard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cécile</td>
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<tr>
<td>Danceny</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Here, as in Rousseau, *amour* that is taken for *amitié* and *amitié* that borders on love are important thematic elements. Cécile writes Danceny her hope that their “amitié” will last forever (L. 19). If the présidente de Tourvel decides to become Valmont’s “friend” early in the novel, her *confiance* in him is ironically based on the fact that Valmont is Merteuil’s “friend”: “j’ai cru, jusqu’à la réception de votre Lettre, que ce qu’il [Valmont] appelait *amitié* entre eux deux était bien réellement de l’*amour*. J’avoue que je ne regardais que comme *finesse*, ce qui était de sa part une honnête *sincérité*. Je ne sais; mais il me semble que celui qui est capable d’une *amitié* aussi suivi pour une femme aussi estimable, n’est pas un libertin sans retour” (L. 11; italics mine). The multiple ironies present in this situation where, on the word of her own friend-confidante (Mme de Volanges), a woman reverses a previous (correct) opinion regarding the nature of the relationship between two lover-confidants who are equally capable of destroying her, is typical of this novel, where *amour* is not any more “dangerous” a “liaison” than *amitié*.

Indeed, so intertwined are erotic and confidential bonds between characters that one can scarcely separate them. When Danceny writes the following to Merteuil, is he addressing a confidante or a mistress?
Oui, je l’avoue, l’amour qu’elle [Cécile] m’inspire m’est devenu plus précieux encore, depuis que vous avez bien voulu en recevoir la confidence. J’aime tant à vous ouvrir mon coeur, à occuper le vôtre de mes sentiments, à les y déposer sans réserve et puis, je vous regarde et je me dis: C’est en elle qu’est renfermé tout mon bonheur.

Ah! revenez donc, mon adorable amie ou apprenez-moi à vivre où vous n’êtes pas. [L. 118]

The kind of transferral that Danceny is revealing here, in which the confidante, as “depositary” of love sentiments, actually becomes identified with the loved one to the point of almost replacing her, is of course the same situation that arises between Saint-Preux and Claire. Merteuil’s bond with Cécile, moreover, has its erotic side; in one and the same letter, the marquise suggests their lesbian activities and announces, “j’ai l’honneur d’être sa confidente” (L. 38). Even Valmont’s ties to Danceny are not merely those of confiance; as Valmont jokingly remarks when he begins to write Cécile’s love letters to Danceny, “J’aurai été à fois son ami, son confident, son rival et sa maîtresse!” (L. 115). Laclos plays the ambiguity of these relationships (Valmont as lover-confidant to both Cécile and Danceny) for all their ironic and erotic worth when he has Cécile write a love letter “dictée par Valmont” to Danceny: “Oh! vous avez là [in Valmont] un bien bon ami, je vous assure! Il fait tout comme vous feriez vous-même” (L. 117).

The most complicated and often puzzling relationship in Les Liaisons, however, is that of the marquise and the vicomte. Held together by bonds of libertine conspiracy, reciprocal confiance based on possession of each other’s secrets, a past love affair and a potential future one, Merteuil and Valmont have every reason to stick together, yet ultimately they declare a suicidal war on each other. The seeds as well as the arms of conflict, however, are latent in the bonds themselves and arise particularly from a kind of interference between amorous interests and those of confiance.

From the beginning, the marquise and the vicomte speak an ambivalent language to each other. Both address each other as confidant: Valmont confides his progress with the présidente while Merteuil relates episodes in her affair with Belleruche. Like many other epistolary exchanges of confidences, this one is
marked by a spirit of comparison and competition. Here, however, the rivalry is complicated by jealousy, for Valmont and the marquise address each other not merely as friend-confidants but as former and potential lovers. Thus every confidence concerning a conquest has a double edge: it is designed to provoke not only the admiration of the friend-confidant but the jealousy of the potential lover. Merteuil’s and Valmont’s letters are equivocally phrased in the language of both primary types of epistolary relationship. The “revenez” motif that runs throughout the novel epitomizes the ambivalent nature of their language. The plea to return is of course an eminently epistolary motif, deriving from the separation inherent to the correspondents’ situation. We have already noted its ambiguous use in letters from Julie to Claire and from Danceny to Merteuil (see quotation from L. 118, above), where “revenez,” repeatedly addressed to a confidant, suggests a sentiment much stronger than friendship. In the case of Valmont and Merteuil, “revenez” is the first word pronounced between them (“Revenez, mon cher Vicomte, revenez” [L. 2]) and is already ambivalent. This imperative is one of “empire”; Merteuil uses (L. 2), and Valmont accepts (L. 4), the image of the “Chevalier-esclave” who takes orders from his sovereign lady “à genoux.” But is this “empire” that of love or friendship? It would be foolish to choose, for in their letters coquetry is inseparable from confidences. The “revenez” that is traditionally the language of epistolary lovers becomes the “revenez à vous” (L. 5), or the “Revenez donc, Vicomte, et ne sacrifiez pas votre reputation à un caprice puéril” (L. 113) of Merteuil’s “concerned friendship” for Valmont. Yet so much emphasis on separation sets up the expectation of an amorous reunion of the two (“peut-être au bout de la carrière nous rencontrerons-nous encore” [L. 4]). After Merteuil promises herself as a prize for Tourvel’s first postconquest letter, this expectation is maintained by Valmont’s frequent allusions to the lovers’ night he and Merteuil will spend. Valmont’s progress reports seem at times a subordinate function of his desire to win Merteuil back again as mistress, thus further embroiling confidential and amorous motives for writing.

In fact, we can measure the confidential and amorous power play between Valmont and Merteuil by the way in which they
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echo each other's pleas of "revenez." A curious reversal of positions is noticeable in three groups of successive letters in the Merteuil-Valmont correspondence (L. 113; Ll. 115 and 125; Ll. 127, 133, 138, and 144). In letter 113 Merteuil writes from Paris to Valmont in the country, informing him that his long absence is causing him to become the laughing stock of the city, suggesting that he return if he wants to salvage his reputation. At the same time, however, she announces that she herself is leaving for the country, to effect a rupture with Belleruche, because Belleruche has begun to claim "un droit exclusif," and the "insultante confiance qu'il prend en moi" is humiliating her.

In his reply (L. 115) the vicomte gloats over what is now Merteuil's provincial boredom in terms reminiscent of the marquise's previous letters, speaking of his "indulgence" toward her, threatening to withdraw his "confiance" to punish her for her lack of interest in his affairs, and mentioning the imminent renewal of their previous liaison as his "règne." He is speaking to her the same imperious language that she had used with him, in letters 2 and 5, in which she threatened withdrawal of confidence and demanded that he return to Paris. From the marquise's point of view, however, Valmont is beginning to assume the same kind of overconfidence she complained of in Belleruche. By the time he sends his next letter (L. 125), Valmont not only commends himself again for his indulgence but reminds her that in coming to claim his prize, "le nouvel Amant ne veut rien perdre des anciens droits de l'ami." This time it is Valmont who is in Paris, where he will remain until the end of the novel.

Though by this reversal in letters 115 and 125 Valmont appears to have gained the upper hand over the marquise, now stuck in the country, this ascendancy will be only momentary. It is soon the marquise's turn to refuse to return to Paris, and she does so even more stubbornly and viciously than Valmont: "vous voyez bien, qu'aussi éloignés l'un de l'autre par notre façon de penser, nous ne pouvons nous rapprocher d'aucune manière" (L. 127). Valmont's subsequent "revenez" (Ll. 133, 138, 144) are more pleading than Merteuil's imperatives ever were.

In the Valmont-Merteuil exchange at the end of Laclos's novel, the possibility of reunion of separated lovers (pleaded for by Valmont in his letters) is played off against the possibility of a
rupture of confidants (threatened by Merteuil both in her letters and by her stubborn silences). Here, as in the case of Julie (La Nouvelle Héloïse) or Léonce (Delphine), the withdrawal of confidence or the refusal to reveal secrets—such an important thematic emphasis in letter fiction—is formally implemented by epistolary silence or curtness. The physical distance between Merteuil and Valmont, which has necessitated their epistolary communication all along, has become increasingly psychological. Just at the moment when it could be eliminated, the rift widens; the expected lovers' reunion becomes instead a suicidal separation, with each one betraying the other's confidential letters. A significant factor contributing to this rupture is the very tension inherent in an epistolary relationship based on both amorous and confidential bonds.

If we examine, for instance, the most immediate cause for rupture—Valmont's interruption of Danceny and Merteuil's tête-à-tête, which ironically constitutes the only meeting of the central characters in the novel—we notice that Valmont is more insulted by Merteuil's breach of confidential faith than by Danceny's presence. For the vicomte, who has repeatedly proclaimed the right of exclusivity for their "amitié" only (L. 15—they may have many lovers but only one inviolable friendship), a Danceny who has been Merteuil's unique confidant concerning her return to Paris (although she had promised to inform Valmont first) is an even greater irritation than a Danceny-lover.

Slightly different reasons underlie the marquise's dépit, which, unlike Valmont's, is not the reaction of a moment that can be checked and thus give way to pardon. Whereas Valmont resents, but is willing to forgive, a single breach of confidence, the marquise has been irritated all along by too many confidences on Valmont's part, by his all-too-sincere letters extolling the présidente. Most of her letters to Valmont abound in mockery of his effusive style; even after repeated correction by Merteuil, even after he has sacrificed Tourvel at the marquise's request, Valmont persists in slipping in an offensive "ange" or "femme sensible et belle, qui n'existait que pour moi, qui dans ce moment même meurt peut-être d'amour et de regret" (L. 151). Valmont's numerous, long confidences revealing his involvement with the présidente outweigh in Merteuil's mind the pro forma gallant remarks ad-
dressed to her at the end of his letters. Yet the marquise values gallantry highly; her last letter to Valmont is filled with lessons emphasizing the importance of “charme,” being “aimable,” and knowing how to please: “il faut plaire. Le Valmont que j’aimais était charmant. . Redevenez donc aimable” (L. 152).

Whereas Valmont values “confiance” above all in his epistolary relationship with Merteuil, the marquise prefers gallantry. Throughout the novel Valmont needs the marquise more as admiring confidante, as someone to whom he can boast of his conquests, than as mistress. She, on the other hand, has less use for Valmont as a listener. Most of her letters (and she writes far fewer than Valmont) are sarcastic reprimands concerning Valmont’s betrayal of the libertine code or persiflage directed against the présidente, whom she regards as her rival. Her tone with Valmont is one of irony, mystification, and coquetry—that of the “lettre galante” tradition—as opposed to the vicomte’s faithful, candid accounts. In short, whereas Valmont addresses the marquise most frequently as a confidante and fellow genius in the art of corruption whose approval his ego requires, Merteuil assumes with Valmont the tone of an offended mistress whose ego requires the admirer’s total submission to pleasing her.

The difficulty of course arises when Valmont tries to reassert his lover’s rights without playing the lover’s game, basing his claims on amitié rather than amour. What Valmont sees as the mere “confiance” of a “longue amitié” Merteuil calls “présomption” (L. 129), just as Valmont regards what the marquise would call “l’art de plaire” as “insipide cajolerie.” The marquise, who mocked Valmont for taking so much time with Tourvel, now asks Valmont, What’s your hurry? To his “j’en appelle à la longue et parfaite amitié, à l’entièr confiance qui depuis ont resserré nos liens” (L. 129), she replies, “ne soyons qu’amis, et restons-en là” (L. 134). In short, when Valmont becomes involved with the présidente, he needs a confidante more than a mistress, so his relationship to Merteuil changes—his letters become confidential bulletins rather than gallant love letters. That change produces, however, the inverse change in Merteuil, who, regarded as a confidante, refuses to play anything else.

In Valmont’s and Merteuil’s case, amitié ultimately renders
amour impossible. The vicomte has revealed too candidly and persistently to his confidante that on the level of amour she has a rival. To be more precise, Valmont has changed the nature of his confidences from part of their love-gallantry game to reflections of his love for someone else; in Jost’s terms, his lettres-drame have become lettres-confidence. Valmont has moved from making love in order to be able to make confidences (in which case Merteuil holds the reins) to making confidences because he is in love (in which case Tourvel governs affairs). To maintain her power, Merteuil strikes Valmont at his vulnerable point—his confiance—and demonstrates first by equivocating and post­poning, finally by lying, that she cannot be counted on, either as mistress or confidante. The Danceny whom she throws in Valmont’s path as both rival confidant and lover is Merteuil’s declaration of independence. When Valmont pursues his course of candor with his ultimatum (no more of Merteuil’s “cajoleries” and “tergiversation”; “le moment de la franchise est arrivé” [L. 153]), offering a choice between l’amour and la guerre, the mar­quise can only choose the latter.

The tension between amitié and amour is hardly unique to epistolary narrative. Yet its frequent occurrence there seems to derive from the nature of the epistolary exchange itself, which sets up two essential categories of letter writers, lovers and friend-confidants, who speak two fundamental kinds of language: on the one hand that of candor and confiance, on the other that of coquetry, mystification, and dissimulation. In narrative that blurs these distinctions—by presenting characters who dis­simulate with friends (Delphine, Les Liaisons dangereuses, Les Malheurs de l’inconstance, Les Lettres de Vallière), speak a lover’s language to confidants (La Nouvelle Héloïse, Delphine, Rémy de Gourmont’s Le Songe d’une femme), or are too candid with lovers (Fanni Butlerd, Les Liaisons)—the ambiguity of relationship is accompanied by a thematic emphasis on the com­patibility or incompatibility of amitié and amour.

Thus even lovers’ correspondence is complicated by that epistolary necessity, the confidant, and by the lettres-confidence that the narrative medium requires at least occasionally. Likewise, though we can oppose in general the candid, “from the
heart" style of Rousseau's correspondents to the artful ironic dissimulation of Laclos's, both kinds of narrative depend on moments of mystification (e.g., the various secrets of Julie or Mme Riccoboni's characters) and moments of candor (Valmont's inadvertent confessions and his crucial "moment de franchise," or Madame de Vernon's "moments que l'on destine à tout se dire"). Indeed, much of epistolary suspense is based on an alternation between these two tones.

A technical necessity, confidential letters and the confidant figure can become in the hands of many epistolary novelists an integral part of the structure and thematics of the narrative. Central to Mademoiselle La Quintinie is the opposition of confession to confidence, of the priest-confessor to the secular confidant. At the center of Mme de Staël's Delphine is a vacuum of confiance, as Delphine's successively chosen confidants fail her. The losing and gaining of confiance, as well as confessional letters, play a crucial structuring role in La Nouvelle Héloïse, while much of Claire's activity and importance derive from her role as confidante to both Julie and Saint-Preux. As depositary of Julie's feelings, Claire becomes almost an extension of Julie, acting occasionally as her delegate. As confidante to both Julie and Saint-Preux and at times mediator of their correspondence, Claire is also, so to speak, implicated in the "crossfire" of their affections, appearing sometimes as a love object to both.

Even the passive confidant who always remains external to the action can serve an auxiliary purpose by his mere ineffectuality (Anna Howe, Pierre in Le Paysan perverti, Louise in Delphine), by his inability to extricate or entice the hero or heroine from the locus of his trouble to the peaceful locus from which the confidant writes. The most complicated, best-integrated confidants, however, are obviously those who, like Claire, play a more active role. Part of the recognized brilliance of Laclos lies in his decision to make the confidants as such the most important agents in the plot. Very few lettres-confidence in Les Liaisons serve only as narrative vehicles; even Valmont's lettres-bulletins have at least two auxiliary functions: (1) to provoke admiration and (2) to destroy, unknown to Valmont, the very confiance on which they are based.

The active confidant derives power from mere possession of
letters. In a letter to her friend Juliette, in Mme Elie de Beaumont’s *Lettres du marquis de Roselle*, Léonore warns against “le danger des confidents” (L. 69); ironically it is this letter, which Juliette ultimately sells, that will expose Léonore’s conniving, just as one of the two publicized confidential letters of the marquise de Merteuil at the end of *Les Liaisons* is precisely the one (L. 81) in which she emphasizes that one must never write. *Confiance* in *Les Liaisons* is both the source of power over others for Merteuil and Valmont and the germ of their own downfall. It constitutes both a motive for their own correspondence and ultimately a seed of discord between them.

The confidential role, letter, tone, and relationship are necessary components of epistolary narrative. When authors develop the potential of these indispensable components—by multiplying and complicating the functions of the confidant; by playing off against each other *confiance* and *coquetterie*, confidant and lover; by marking key points in the narrative by confessional letters or a change in, or disappearance of, confidants—then the epistolary necessity becomes an instrument of literary complexity.

1. Both of these words have multiple denotations in French. *Confiance* signifies, according to context, either the trust one places in another, self-reliance, or a sense of security. *Confidence* can denote a confidential relationship (“les charmes de la confiance”) but most regularly is a confidential communication. The confidential relationship is basic to most epistolary fiction, but the thematics of confidentiality are particularly visible in Romance literature, where it is reinforced by the language itself. The similarity between words of the *confier* family would not be as readily noticed in English translation, although the same psychological action (e.g., winning or loss of trust—*confiance*—or the need for a confidant) is portrayed in English letter novels. Here, as with the *amitié/amour* polarity that we shall examine in the second half of this chapter (cf. n. 15 below), linguistic phenomena would appear to encourage thematic emphases, as my use of French terms will demonstrate throughout this chapter.

2. Clifton C. Cherpack, “A New Look at *Les Liaisons dangereuses*,” pp. 515, 520. Cherpack’s linking of these two terms is hardly gratuitous, since both derive from the same Latin *confidentia* (contaminated, in the case of *confiance*, by the Old French for “foi,” *fiancé*).

3. Sophie often regrets retrospectively a “manque de confiance” in her relationships (pt. 1, L. 12). She is saddened to leave her friend Cécile without Cécile’s having confided in her (pt. 1, L. 30), reproaches herself for her own
“défaut de confiance” (pt. 1, L. 35) in not telling Mme de Monglas about her love for the marquis de Germeuil. Only when she (mistakenly) thinks Germeuil is married does she rejoice not to have to “se reprocher la folle confiance” of a love declaration (pt. 1, L. 32). Throughout the second part of the novel, numerous times she is on the verge of confiding in Germeuil but leaves him with false notions about her sentiments. Even the long interpolated récit by her newfound friend Lindsay, concerning Sophie’s parents (Henry and Emma Maubray), is full of the same emphasis on the tragedy of lack of trust in one’s friends: Henry’s repeated refusal to confide in his friend Lindsay leads to misunderstandings that bring about both his and Emma’s death.


5. See Introduction for a summary of Jost’s theory.

6. The confidant being primarily a figure in classical dramaturgy, most of my theatrical examples will be drawn from seventeenth-century plays. An excellent discussion of the development of the confidant’s role in classical French theater can be found in Jacques Schérer, *La Dramaturgie classique en France*, pp. 39–50.

7. The analogue to the theatrical monologue in fiction is of course the diary novel. The diary novel is a close relative of the letter novel, however, as both its documentary nature and the “dear diary” formula suggest.

8. Contrast Claire in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, who, like Dubois, often acts as her friend’s agent. Claire, however, not only acts by delegated authority (as does Dubois); we also see Julie delegate this power to her by confidential letters exposing her inner feelings and asking Claire to interpret these feelings and act accordingly.

9. Racine’s confidants are nonetheless much closer to their epistolary counterparts than are those of the comic theater or Corneille, and one could make a good argument for the importance of the confiance-confidence theme in his theater. Agrippine at the very beginning of *Britannicus* is upset because she has lost Néron’s “confiance”; Britannicus makes the error of placing too much confidence in Narcisse; and the entire play is a power struggle between Agrippine, Burrhus, and Narcisse for the position of privy counselor to Néron. In *Phèdre* the theme of the “aveu” is all-important. *Phèdre* is perhaps the play one could most easily imagine translated into epistolary form. Dialogue exchanges are almost always between two interlocutors; the role of narrative and confession is preponderant enough to admit division into letters. The characters seek to avoid direct confrontation; in fact, Ovid, in his *Heroides*, had perceived quite early the effect that could be produced by having Phaedra confess her love to Hippolytus by letter. If the epistolary novel draws its inspiration from the theater, its closest affinities are with Racinian theater, where the mere act of speaking or not speaking, confessing or not confessing, weighs so heavily.

10. There is, for example, a difference between the theatrical “nurse” or “governor” who serves as an evil counselor and the stock epistolary character of the mentor-corruptor, who is chosen as a friend by the protagonist.

11. The clearest, most systematic statement of this “rule” governing the
actions of Laclos's characters can be found in Tzvetan Todorov. *Littérature et signification*, pp. 64-65.

12. H. Gfeller analyzes the theme and rhythm of confession in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* in his thesis, "Die Funktion der Geständisse in Rousseaus *La Nouvelle Héloïse*" (diss., University of Bonn, 1964). His distinction of seven main confessions implies their importance as narrative nodes.

13. This division is similar to Jost's distinction between *la lettre-confidence* and *la lettre-drame* (see Introduction). It must be remembered, however, that Jost's distinction concerns narrative technique (whether the action of the novel is narrated by the letters or proceeds through the letters), whereas in this chapter we are more concerned with the thematic emphases that are a function of that technique. Moreover, whereas Jost is interested in the classification of the work as a whole within a larger system of types (and classifies any given work as either *lettres-confidence* or *lettres-drame* in its entirety), we are concerned here primarily with transformations of relationships between characters within individual works (and are therefore more interested in the juxtaposition or superposition of *confidences* and *drame* within the same work).

14. Wolpe uses this term in his study of Claire's importance in "Psychological Ambiguity in *La Nouvelle Héloïse*.”

15. The French verb *aimer* and noun *ami(e)* lend themselves to this kind of ambiguity, since they retain both senses of the Old French *amor*, which could denote either love or friendship. When Delphine writes, "j'aimais Mme de Vernon," when Valmont addresses Merteuil as his "belle amie," which relationship is being established?

16. See Wolpe for a more detailed analysis of Claire's dimensions.

17. In both Balzac's *Lettres de deux jeunes mariées* and Mme d'Epinay's *Histoire de Mme de Montbrillant*, for example, we find an exchange of letters between two girls who, after their marriages, compare their different kinds of conjugal situations—one a *mariage de raison* and the other a *mariage d'amour*.

18. Indeed the image of the sovereign lady and the knight distinguishes aptly between the different types of confidential ties linking these two. Whereas most of the vicomte's letters to the marquise are progress reports of knight to sovereign, confiding information and events to win her admiration, in the letters that flow in the opposite direction Merteuil confides instead projects for Valmont to implement. Their subtly differing use of the word *confier* in their first letters to each other is instructive: Merteuil—"il m'est venu une excellente idée, et je veux bien vous en confier l'exécution" (L. 2); as opposed to Valmont—"Dépositaire de tous les secrets de mon coeur, je vais vous confier le plus grand projet que j'aie jamais formé" (L. 4).

19. In *Fatalité du secret et fatalité du bavardage au XVIIe siècle*, Georges Daniel makes a case for interpreting all of Merteuil's actions as emanating from her offended secret love for Valmont.

20. Remy de Gourmont's *Le Songe d'une femme* (1899), composed uniquely of letters, provides a compendium of many of the themes and structures studied in this chapter. It consists essentially of exchanges between two sets of confidants—Anna and Claude (former convent friends), and Pierre and Paul—who form a *chassé-croisé* of relationships not unlike those of *Les Liaisons* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Furthermore, the bond of *confiance* between Anna and
Claude is troubled by a number of secrets that the enigmatic Anna dangles enticingly in front of her friend. In this case lesbianism is obvious; Claude writes to Anna: “avant tes confidences, je ne savais pas. Viens et je te parlerai avec une entière confiance. Quand j'écris, je suis si réservée. . je te parlerai comme à un confesseur que je voudrais faire trembler d'amour” (pp. 110–11). Secrets, amour, amitié, confession, confiance, confidences, lovers who become confidants, confidants who are lovers, ambiguous and conflicting “venez”—all are synthesized here.