CHAPTER THREE

THE WEIGHT OF THE READER

Underlying the previous two chapters is the assumed and obvious importance of that second party to every epistolary situation—the addressee of the letter. Chapter 1 dealt only indirectly with the addressee as the object of mediated communication, and chapter 2 focused more closely on his or her protean existence as confidant and lover, as receiver of confessions and influencer of epistolary language. It is time now to concentrate on this figure, whose presence alone distinguishes the letter from other first-person forms.

The "reader" has begun to assume such importance in critical discourse that some preliminary clarification of my approach in this chapter is in order. Particularly influential in recent years have been the contributions of rhetorical, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological theories that engage the issue of reader response and participation in a text. Wayne Booth, Wolfgang Iser, and Hans Jauss have identified the "implied reader." Stanley Fish, in calling for an "affective stylistics," and Michael Riffaterre, in his practice of structural stylistics, have insisted on the role of reading as process in the production of a text's meaning. Psychoanalytic critics like Norman Holland and David Bleich have explored the subjectivization of literature in the reader. Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Geoffrey Hartman, and Harold Bloom have all addressed the problematic relationships of writing and reading, of the writer-as-reader, from different angles. Distinct from these approaches are the narratological
typologies of Gerald Prince or Gérard Genette, who classify the theoretically possible readers or narratees that any narrative text constructs linguistically.

None of the above theories, of course, is genre-bound; all have relevance for the study of epistolary narrative and are potentially complementary approaches to the one that I will be taking in this chapter. For an inquiry into epistolarity, however, the simple distinction that I make below, between the internal and external reader of epistolary narrative, is the most crucial. In no other genre do readers figure so prominently within the world of the narrative and in the generation of the text. Some survey and assessment of their role is necessary and indeed preliminary to any more thoroughgoing phenomenological, psychoanalytic, or narratological approach to the epistolary reader.

If first-person narrative lends itself to the writer's reflexive portrayal of the difficulties and mysteries surrounding the act of writing, the epistolary form is unique among first-person forms in its aptitude for portraying the experience of reading. In letter narrative we not only see correspondents struggle with pen, ink, and paper; we also see their messages being read and interpreted by their intended or unintended recipients. The epistolary form is unique in making the reader (narratee) almost as important an agent in the narrative as the writer (narrator). Even when the internal reader's interpretation of the letter does not constitute part of the represented action of the epistolary work (we can know only indirectly, for example, what "reading" the recipient of unidirectional correspondence has given to the letters he receives), this reader is nonetheless a determinant of the letter's message. Indeed, at the very inception of the letter, he plays an instrumental generative role. If pure autobiography can be born of the mere desire to express oneself, without regard for the eventual reader, the letter is by definition never the product of such an "immaculate conception," but is rather the result of a union of writer and reader.

The epistolary experience, as distinguished from the autobiographical, is a reciprocal one. The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect his reader and is affected by him. Borderline cases, like Diderot's *La Religieuse* or Marivaux's *La Vie de Marianne*, which are primarily memoir novels, derive whatever epistolary
characteristics they have from the presence of an influencing and influenceable reader. I have chosen to deal with these two hybrid novels first, not because they provide the best examples of the epistolary reader figure, but because here, as in other chapters, these borderline cases are interesting precisely because they help us define the outlines of the epistolary form.\(^3\)

In contrast, it would be difficult, or at least uninteresting, to deal with Duclos’s *Confessions du comte de*** as an “epistolary” novel, even though the entire novel is in fact a letter addressed to a friend who has inquired why the count is living in solitude. Duclos uses the epistolary convention only to trigger memoirs, since the friend is not invoked after the beginning of the novel. Closer to the epistolary novel, in fact, are those diary novels written for specific readers within the world of the narrative—like Tanizaki’s *The Key* or Mauriac’s *Le Noeud de vipères*—where the desire to influence the reader is narrativized and figures prominently in the novel’s action and thematics. What distinguishes epistolary narrative from these diary novels, however, is the desire for exchange. In epistolary writing the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and to contribute as such to the narrative.

I insist upon the fact that the reader is “called upon” to respond. Whether the novel is actually a *Briefwechselroman* (multicorrespondent novel) obviously matters little, although the German noun (literally, “letter exchange novel”) alerts us to that fundamental impulse behind all epistolary writing; if there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of the letter. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world. Most of the other aspects of epistolary discourse that I focus on in this study can be seen to derive from this most basic parameter.

Let us look, then, at two particularly instructive hybrid cases, *La Religieuse* and *La Vie de Marianne*. Both Marianne and Diderot’s nun, Suzanne, address their autobiographies to a single specific reader; Marianne writes eleven letter installments to a friend who has requested her story and whom she wants merely to amuse, whereas Suzanne sends her unsolicited narrative to a marquis whose assistance she desperately needs. The addressee is constantly present in the various asides—casual and playful in
Marianne ("voyez comment il va réagir"), more formal and rhetorical in *La Religieuse* ("Cependant, monsieur le marquis, ma situation présente est si déplorable craindez qu'un fatal moment ne revienne" [p. 308]). Both are concerned to enlist their reader's help and input; whereas Suzanne seeks a protector, Marianne solicits advice concerning her style: "Comment fait-on pour en avoir un? Celui de mes lettres vous paraît-il passable?” (p. 9).

The "qu’en pensez-vous?” that constantly concerns them, to the point of governing the act of writing itself, is nowhere more clearly articulated than by Suzanne toward the end of her novel: "lorsque les choses peuvent exciter votre estime ou accroître votre commisération, j’écris avec une vitesse et une facilité incroyables. Si je suis forcée au contraire de me montrer à vos yeux sous un aspect défavorable, je pense avec difficulté, l'expression se refuse, la plume va mal, le caractère même de mon écriture s'en ressent" (pp. 383-84). Not only what Suzanne writes but how she writes is shaped by her addressee. Similarly, Marianne worries about her reader's reaction, particularly to her numerous "réflexions"; and halfway through her novel, persuaded that her friend finds her letters overlong, Marianne vows to abandon these digressions.

Robert J. Ellrich has made a cogent analysis of *La Religieuse* in terms of forensic rhetoric, developing the trial motif into an image of the novel as legal brief, an extension of the *roman-mémoires* into a juridical *mémoire*. Suzanne is the lawyer and Croismare is the philosophe-judge: "*La Religieuse* is, in fact, a 'procès des couvents,' and the judge before whom the plea is being presented is the eighteenth-century *philosophe*, morally and intellectually, the highest tribunal of the land."4 Suzanne's stance as a lawyer, her awareness of her audience, is not unlike Marianne's vanity, although the latter heroine aims merely at "pleasing" a worldly countess whereas the former seeks to persuade a powerful marquis. In each case the letter writer's consciousness of a specifically delineated reader appreciably alters the tone of a memoir novel.5 Marianne's coquettish, interrogative "style badin" and Suzanne's forensic rhetoric are a function of their respective internal readers.

Significantly, the epistolary traits of both Diderot's and
Marivaux's novels are in part dictated by a real historical reader; each work had its genesis as letters written to an actual addressee. The letters of *La Religieuse* were part of the practical joke played by Diderot on the marquis de Croismare to prompt his return to Paris, whereas Marivaux coyly used letters as serial installments to test the popularity of his work among readers before continuing it. Both Marivaux and Diderot create a specific internal reader persona (Croismare, Marianne's "friend") who becomes increasingly dispersed into the vague "ceux qui liront ces mémoires" (*La Religieuse*, pp. 307–8) or the "friends" with whom Marianne's confidante shares the heroine's letters. In other words, the internal reader persona frequently loses his or her specificity to coincide with the external reader, who could be anyone. *Marianne* recaptures some of the specificity of the reader by internalizing the reactions of the external readers, making these reactions part of the novel itself, as at the beginning of part 6 where she allows the readers' critique of previous letter installments to influence subsequent letters. Most importantly for our discussion of epistolarity, neither novel is perceived as complete without the reader response. "La réponse de M. le marquis de Croismare," writes Suzanne, "me fournira les premières lignes de ce récit." This desire to incorporate a specific reader response within the world of the narrative distinguishes epistolary from autobiographical writing. The epistolary reader is empowered to intervene, to correct style, to give shape to the story, often to become an agent and narrator in his own right.

Being borderline cases, *Marianne* and *La Religieuse* provide us with a simple example of how awareness of a specific second-person addressee can alter the character and experience of the first-person writing itself. In purer epistolary narrative we find countless examples of this influential reader presence. We have only to examine any *bulletin* from Valmont to Merteuil to recognize how radically even his reporting of dialogue differs from simple first-person reporting: "Aussi me précipitant à ses genoux, et *du ton dramatique que vous me connaissez*: 'Ah! cruelle,' me suis-je écrié" (L. 125; italics mine). Even more a poser than Suzanne or Marianne, Valmont never lets us forget to whom he is addressing his accounts, and his superior tone derives in part from the fact that he is regarding his victim with the eyes of
Merteuil, to whom he wants to appear a "vainqueur couronné." Thus epistolary writing, as distinguished from simple first-person writing, refracts events through not one but two prisms—that of reader as well as that of writer. We as external readers must always interpret a given letter in the light of its intended recipient.

If writing is partially shaped by potential reading in letter narrative, it is not surprising that the act of reading should itself be an important narrative event. Epistolary novels are filled with portrayed readings, rereadings, and even proofreading. Restif de la Bretonne, who seems almost obsessed by the act of reading, considers it worth the attention of a voyeurlike observer. In *La Malédiction paternelle* Dulis constantly spies through a crack in the wall on the Englishwoman he adores while she reads the letters he has slipped to her through the same crack; as he tells us, he delights in reading his reader: "J'ai l'art de lire dans l'âme par les mouvements des yeux et du visage" (L. 123).

The letter is a prime instrument of revelation and discovery, so that the act of reading in epistolary fiction often corresponds to the classical moment of recognition (Aristotle's *anagnorisis*), be it through a rereading of one's own letters or a close scrutiny of the letters of others. Through the letters they stumble across, Edmée-Colette in Restif's *Le Paysan perverti* discovers that her marriage is incestuous, and Adélaïde de Sancerre in Mme Riccoboni's *Lettres de Sancerre* learns of her husband's infidelity. Such facile chance discoveries, however, are so common in all types of fiction that they merit little attention. What is more striking in epistolary narrative is its emphatic portrayal of the art of close reading, the art of analysis and explication.

Rereading one's own letter entails a switch in perspective—from writer to reader—and a consequent distancing that may lead to self-discovery. Upon rereading, Dorat's Mirbelle perceives a personal weakness he had tried to hide in his letter to the duke: "toute ma lettre décèle les combats d'un homme honnête qui se dissimule sa faiblesses" (*Les Malheurs de l'inconstance*, pt. 1, L. 10). No character is more skilled at the careful reading of her own letters than Crébillon’s duchess (*Lettres de la duchesse*), whose analyses of her previous letters often constitute the subject matter of subsequent ones.
The careful epistolary reader is sensitive to messages of all kinds within the letter he decodes. A sleuth like Valmont learns all he needs to know about the présidente’s sentiments from tearstains on a letter and the evidence that she has pieced together in private a letter that she had torn up in public. Colette’s Mitsou discerns Robert’s hidden feelings by the length of his last letter to her, rather than through what he writes. The work of this internal reader-interpreter bears such close resemblance to that of the literary or textual critic that narrative where the reader plays such a predominant role seems to contain within itself the explication of its own text. Internal reading may be so important that the decoding of a message becomes part of a new message; the critique is incorporated into the work. In his letter of 9 July, Lovelace depicts for Belford a communal reading of one of Clarissa’s letters, in which sentences from the original letter alternate with running commentary on them; this letter could be called Lovelace’s “Annotated Clarissa.” In Mme d’Epinay’s *Histoire de Mme de Montbrillant*, Emilie sends her confidante a copy of one of M. de Montbrillant’s letters, inserting her own glosses in parentheses between the lines of his letter (vol. 1, p. 28).

Valmont and Merteuil constantly engage in such explications de texte for each other’s benefit. Terser than Richardsonian characters, the marquise and the vicomte tend to omit copying letters for the other to read and limit themselves instead to incisive summaries. Typical is Valmont’s brief analysis of a letter from the présidente: “Je viens de recevoir un second billet, toujours bien rigoureux, et qui confirme l’éternelle rupture, comme cela devrait être; mais dont le ton n’est pourtant plus le même. Surtout, on ne veut plus me voir: ce parti pris y est annoncé quatre fois de la manière la plus irrévocable. J’en ai conclu qu’il n’y avait pas un moment à perdre pour me présenter” (L. 138). Merteuil provides a no less penetrating critique when she points out the parallels between two letters she has received from Cécile and Mme de Volanges shortly after betraying the former to the latter: “A mon réveil, je trouvai deux billets, un de la mère et un de la fille; et je ne pus m’empêcher de rire, en trouvant dans tous deux littéralement cette même phrase: C’est de vous seule que j’attends quelque consolation. N’est-il pas plaisant, en effet, de consoler
pour et contre, et d'être le seul agent de deux intérêts directement contraires? Me voilà comme la Divinité, recevant les voeux opposés des aveugles mortels” (L. 63).

The creation of a “Divinité” of the type described by Merteuil, a kind of Super Reader,⁷ who reads, interprets, and censors the letters of most of the other characters, is one of the hallmarks of epistolary fiction. Lovelace, once he gains control of the Anna Howe-Clarissa correspondence, assumes this role briefly. The letters that flow between the many correspondents of Restif de la Bretonne’s *Le Paysan perverti* (1775) are collected by Edmond’s brother Pierrot, who stays on the farm and persists in the virtuous path while Edmond is corrupted by the city. Not only is Pierrot Edmond’s chief confidant and therefore the recipient of the bulk of the letters, but many of the letters not addressed to him are forwarded to him for a variety of reasons.⁸ Pierrot’s overview of the situation enables him to serve from the beginning as a kind of editor of the novel, footnoting and supplying rhetorical “arguments” that precede some of the letters (e.g., “Celle-ci est un piège qu’il nous tendait” [L. 35]).

Restif uses the reader-judge figure also in *Le Nouvel Abélard* (1778), where the role of overseeing all correspondence is assumed by four parents. As the preface explains, after betrothing their children Heloise and Abelard to each other at birth, two couples conceived the idea of having the children “faire l’amour par lettres” without knowing each other’s identity, “en sorte que leurs âmes se connussent, et que leurs corps ne se vissent pas” (vol. I, pp. 31–32). Although the parents write very few letters, they read, censor, and footnote those of the children, in addition to authoring many of the lessons and model stories that Abelard sends to Heloise as her epistolary tutor. These “modèles” often foreshadow what will later happen to Heloise and Abelard; the ignorance of the children contrasts with the superior knowledge of the parents (revealed in the stories and the footnotes), who appear increasingly as puppeteers controlling the actions of their children.

In an ironic final interpolated story (“Le petit Abélard”), which Heloise’s father sends Abelard in a letter, he finally points out explicitly to the boy the parallels between Abelard and the hero of
this "modèle," whose parents had likewise imposed the "bridle of the pen" on him:

Et voilà que le Babouin écrivait tout-comme toi. Ça était plaisant! Et le Père de la petite Personne, bon réjou, tiens, tout-comme toi, riait de tout son coeur, de voir mon petit Vaurien bridé, qui rongeait son frein, tant bien que mal, et qui écrivait, écrivait. Et la petite Personne répondit à mon bon sujet, tantôt en petite sainte-nitouche, tantôt avec un peu plus d'intérêt; par-ci par-là elle aurait bien voulu lui marquer certaines choses; mais on y mettait bon ordre. [L. 85].

Continuing in the same vein, the father's letter is an ironic reading of the letters by one of the characters who, by their censoring and analytic powers, have controlled their shape all along.

Laclos's marquise and vicomte provide us with an even more fascinating example of the Super Reader. Like the parents of *Le Nouvel Abélard*, these two read, analyze, censor, and even occasionally write the correspondence between the younger couple in *Les Liaisons*, Cécile and Danceny, thus playing the same puppeteering role vis-à-vis their ignorant tutees as Restif's parents. Because Laclos's novel is so much more complex than Restif's—in terms of sheer multiplicity of points of view, plots, and correspondents—and because Laclos's main characters participate in a veritable "mythology of intelligence," their role as lucid readers of letters is correspondingly more complex.

Very few letters in *Les Liaisons* are read by their intended recipients only. The Cécile-Danceny correspondence is conducted under Merteuil's surveillance in Paris, under Valmont's in the country. Valmont forwards many of the letters from his exchange with the présidente to Merteuil for her to read and comment upon ("lisez et jugez" [L. 25]). The vicomte intercepts letters that pass between Tourvel and Volanges and, later in the novel, between Tourvel and Rosemonde. A letter such as Danceny's apology to Mme de Volanges (L. 64) is read by both Valmont and Merteuil before being sent to its original addressee. Knowledge—the key to power for Valmont and Merteuil—is acquired by reading, by gaining access to the correspondence of others.

As we read *Les Liaisons*, we develop the illusion that we are
reading a novel in the process of being written. Merteuil and Valmont speak self-consciously of themselves as creators of their own novel, as "historiens," playwrights, and directors. "C'est de vos soins que va dépendre le dénouement de cette intrigue," Merteuil writes Valmont. "Jugez du moment où il faudra réunir les acteurs" (L. 63). As we have just seen, we the external readers are not the only readers of this novel in the making, for the vicomte and the marquise themselves gradually become privy to almost as many letters as we. Indeed, part of our own reading is determined by the fact that we share their vision. When we read Valmont's celebrated letter to the présidente (forwarded to Merteuil) in which he speaks of his "pupitre" (actually the back of the prostitute Emilie), our appreciation of the multiple ironies generated by the situation comes from our stereoptic reading through Merteuil's as well as the présidente's eyes. The Super Reader dimension assumed by Valmont and Merteuil is the epistolary role that most closely approximates that of the omniscient narrator in third-person fiction. Because we so often share this omniscient viewpoint of Laclos's two principal characters, we are drawn into their conspiracy and participate in their ironic stance.

Creators and readers of their own novel, the marquise and the vicomte acquire power not merely through access to the correspondence of others but through their highly developed science of reading. Although the letters of simple-minded souls like Danceny and Cécile pose no problems, the more complex psychology and restraint of the présidente's letters offer a greater challenge. Valmont scrutinizes every line of the présidente's letters for signs of weakness; his responses reflect his close reading in their point-by-point rebuttal of Tourvel's arguments, including those that she has not explicitly formulated.

Even the archdecoders Valmont and Merteuil do not always concur on the interpretation of the présidente's letters. Whereas Valmont early in the novel is certain the présidente has revealed her vulnerability, Merteuil disagrees: "elle vous bat dans sa Lettre" (L. 33). Often Merteuil's position as observer rather than participant in the action makes her a better reader than Valmont. Valmont, moreover, frequently defers to the marquise's superior interpretive powers. In letter 59 he forwards Danceny's letter 60
to Merteuil for an explication: “Apprenez-moi, si vous savez, ce que signifie ce radotage de Danceny.” Likewise, in letter 76 Valmont admits to being baffled by one of Merteuil’s letters and asks for an interpretation: “J’ai beau vous lire et vous relire, je n’en suis pas plus avancé. Qu’avez-vous donc voulu dire?”

Such queries contribute to our feeling that, though Valmont writes more letters than Merteuil, the marquise is the central reader and decoder of this novel. Indeed, toward the end of Les Liaisons, as the Merteuil-Valmont correspondence becomes the crucial one, much of Valmont’s frustration hinges on his inability to understand what reading Merteuil is giving to his letters. Merteuil begins to resort to one of her favorite techniques, using quotations from her correspondent’s letters to reveal the correspondent to himself.

The marquise has already used this approach with Cécile in letter 105, where Merteuil selects from Cécile’s previous letter passages such as “ce trouble qui vous faisait trouver si difficile de se défendre,” in order to prove to Cécile that she took more pleasure in Valmont’s rape-seduction than she realized or was willing to admit. Similarly, Merteuil holds up to Danceny quotations from his letters in order to force the chevalier both to the recognition that he is in love with her and to a choice between her and Cécile; she does this so indirectly and coquettishly, however, as to preserve her own reputation:

Vous ne trouverez donc dans ma lettre que ce qui manque à la vôtre, franchise et simplesse. Je vous dirai bien, par exemple, que j’aurais grand plaisir à vous voir , mais vous, cette même phrase, vous la traduisez ainsi: apprenez-moi à vivre où vous n’êtes pas; en sorte que quand vous serez, je suppose, auprès de votre maîtresse, vous ne sauriez pas y vivre que je n’y sois en tiers. Quelle pitié! et ces femmes, à qui il manque toujours d’être moi, vous trouverez peut-être aussi que cela manque à votre Cécile? [L. 121]

Merteuil uses her various readings of letters as mirrors, which she holds up so that others can recognize themselves in the image that their own words have created.

As Valmont begins to pressure Merteuil to award him his promised “prize” toward the end of the novel, Merteuil responds (as she had done with Danceny and Cécile) with quotations from his own letters: “Quand, par exemple, vous voudrez vous distraire
un moment de *ce charme inconnu que l'adorable, la céleste Madame de Tourvel vous a fait seule éprouver*” (L. 127). In Merteuil's mirror Valmont now can finally “read” his own letters as she has read them all along, for though he has gallantly paid hommage to the marquise, the images by which he has described Tourvel have been more forceful. To defend himself, Valmont accuses Merteuil of being a bad reader, because “ces mots [those quoted by Merteuil], plus souvent pris au hasard que par réflexion, expriment moins le cas que l'on fait de la personne que la situation dans laquelle on se trouve quand on en parle” (L. 129). Here, however, it would appear that it is Valmont who is the bad reader, for even if he has forgotten the marquise's earlier admonition (“Vous voilà donc vous conduisant sans principes, et donnant tout au hasard” [L. 10]) or her formulation of her own rigid code (“mes principes ne sont pas donnés au hasard ils sont le fruit de mes profondes réflexions” [L. 81]), he is overlooking how much this attribution of his word choice to “le hasard” condemns him. By letting “le hasard” play a role, Valmont is betraying his own and the marquise's code of intelligence and calculation. Furthermore, one need not wait for Freud to know that unconscious language is often more revealing than conscious language, as the subsequent exchanges between Valmont and Merteuil demonstrate.

In letter 134 Merteuil again singles out passages to criticize from Valmont’s previous letter: “En effet, ce n’est plus l’adorable, la céleste Madame de Tourvel, mais c’est une femme étonnante, une femme délicate et sensible, et cela, à l’exclusion de toutes les autres; une femme rare enfin, et telle qu’on n’en rencontrerait pas une seconde.” The incorrigible Valmont makes the same error again and again, as Merteuil points out to him in subsequent letters: “Encore dans votre dernière Lettre, si vous ne m’y parlez pas de cette femme uniquement, c’est que vous ne voulez m’y rien dire de vos grandes affaires; elles vous semblent si importantes que le silence que vous gardez à ce sujet vous semble une punition pour moi” (L. 141). Yet in these letters that Merteuil so mockingly quotes, Valmont has included many a cajolery directed at Merteuil. It is as if Merteuil, by continually asking Valmont to go home and correct his paper, were forcing him to play a schoolboy’s role, just as they had together made pupils of
Danceny and Cécile. Each time Valmont appears to bring his new paper back with words erased and complimentary addenda on Merteuil; yet each time Merteuil reads closely enough to discover the new references to the présidente that have slipped in: “C’est ainsi qu’en remarquant votre politesse, qui vous a fait supprimer soigneusement tous les mots que vous vous êtes imaginé m’avoir déplu, j’ai vu cependant que, peut-être sans vous en apercevoir, vous n’en conserviez pas moins les mêmes idées” (L. 134).

In her capacity as reader-judge of the letters of others Merteuil appears, even more than the vicomte, to be at the central switchboard for all the lines of communication in the novel. To decode letters Valmont himself defers occasionally to this central intelligence agency. There are many reasons why we sense Merteuil to be Laclos’s superior character, as Seylaz and so many others have remarked. Not the least of these, however, is her function as Laclos’s Super Reader.

If we turn now to three other novels where portrayed readings and readers play a significant role, we will find many of the observations made in the first part of this chapter still operative—the moment of reading as a moment of anagnorisis or discovery, the tendency of epistolary decoders to pore over specific words and shape new letters around quotations from old ones, the presence of dominating reader figures who excel in the art of explication de texte. All of these factors are present in La Nouvelle Héloïse, where even many years after their initial writing, letters are subject to many readings and rereadings.

Emotional though they may be when reading each other’s letters, Julie and Saint-Preux are nonetheless attentive to logical matters and occasionally indulge in the same kind of close analysis that we have seen in Les Liaisons. In part I, letter 9, Julie catches a subtle contradiction on Saint-Preux’s part: “en sorte que, dans la même lettre, vous vous plaignez de ce que vous avez trop de peine, et de ce que vous n’en avez pas assez.” Julie and Claire together formulate a critique of Saint-Preux’s letters from Paris (2:15), mocking his wordly style by quoting his absurd metaphors. A careful reading of Saint-Preux’s letters enables Julie to deduce from his style the company he is keeping and the kinds of frivolous, even dangerous, activities into which he may be drawn (2:27).
It is Claire, however, more than any other character, who engages in the most significant analyses of the novel. When Julie is faced with her crucial decision (2:9)—whether to accept Milord Edouard’s offer of a haven for the two lovers in England—she lays the burden of choice in Claire’s hands, sending to Claire both Edouard’s letter (2:3) and her own efforts to articulate her emotions (2:4). Julie begs Claire to “read” both Edouard’s letter and Julie’s heart. In her long response Claire verbalizes equally complex and divided emotions, affirming the uniqueness of Julie’s destiny and Claire’s willingness to follow Julie wherever she goes, even if it means abandoning her own fiancé. Although Claire ostensibly leaves the decision to Julie, Julie reads in Claire’s letter the advice she was seeking (“Je t’entends, amie incomparable et je te remercie”) and in her next letter (2:6 to Edouard) declines the Englishman’s offer.

An even more curious exchange in which Claire “reads Julie’s heart” through her letter occurs in part 4. Both letter 7, in which Julie describes her feelings for Saint-Preux upon seeing him for the first time in over four years, and letter 8, in which Claire interprets Julie’s letter 7, are fascinating witnesses to the weight of the reader in the epistolary exchange. For Julie’s letter is written as if Wolmar were not to read it, though in fact she expects him to read it. Claire’s commentary is double; Claire tells Julie both how Wolmar would have read his wife’s letter and how she, Claire, reads it.

Julie’s letter actually contains two radically different sections: the body proper, which is a straightforward description of Saint-Preux and her reactions to his return, and a postscript, in which Julie reveals to Claire her resolution to write each letter “comme s’il [Wolmar] ne la devait point voir, et de la lui montrer ensuite.” In the postscript, which is almost as long as the body of the letter, Julie reports Wolmar’s refusal to read the letter when she brought it to him, his almost clairvoyant knowledge of its contents (“Avouez, m’a-t-il dit, que dans cette lettre vous avez moins parlé de moi qu’à l’ordinaire”), and the complete trust in his wife that inspires his respect for confidentiality between her and Claire. The perceptive Wolmar teaches his wife that it is impossible to communicate intimately with two readers simultaneously
through the same letter: "Il y a mille secrets que trois amis doivent savoir, et qu'ils ne peuvent se dire que deux à deux. Vous communiquez bien les mêmes choses à votre amie et à votre époux, mais non pas de la même manière; et si vous voulez tout confondre, il arrivera que vos lettres seront écrites plus à moi qu'à elle, et que vous ne serez à votre aise ni avec l'un ni avec l'autre." Julie's letter itself bears witness to this wise observation, for in spite of her effort to be totally candid, to speak from her soul, she has decorously denied herself the pleasure of praising her husband in a letter he would see. Her double reader-consciousness, in this case awareness of a second addressee, has given her writing a different turn from that of her usual confidences to Claire.

Claire totally approves of Wolmar's decision not to read Julie's letter; in her compensatory double commentary Claire systematically contrasts her own reading with the reading Wolmar would have given the letter:

M. de Wolmar aurait d'abord remarqué que ta lettre entière est employée à parler de notre ami, et n'aurait point vu l'apostille où tu n'en dis pas un mot. Si tu avais écrit cette apostille, il y a dix ans, mon enfant, je ne sais comment tu aurais fait, mais l'ami y serait toujours rentré par quelque coin, d'autant plus que le mari ne la devait point voir. . . .

Enfin il s'imaginerait que tous ces changements que tu as observés seraient échappés à une autre; et moi j'ai bien peur au contraire d'en trouver qui te seront échappés. Quelque différent que ton hôte soit de ce qu'il était, il changerait davantage encore, que, si ton coeur n'avait point changé, tu le verrais toujours le même.

Claire's dual analysis enables us to delve into a complex psychology, to explore many of the nuances of Julie's feelings for Saint-Preux and the progress Julie has made over ten years, by observing the long-awaited scene of the lovers' reunion from multiple reader perspectives—including those offered by hypothesis and memory.

The way in which Claire measures this progress is not only to compare her own reading with the hypothetical reading of a Wolmar but to compare Julie's letter with a letter Julie might have written ten years ago. Claire's measurement of Julie's progress is a measurement of change. In a novel where the theme of change over time is so important, we might well expect to see
letters of “ten years ago” contrasted with those of the present, and rereadings of old letters give rise to memories of irretrievable past happiness.

Both Julie and Saint-Preux make a “recueil” of their letters. Nowhere more than in La Nouvelle Héloïse are individual letters more subject to later resurrection as mementos and as edifying “manuels” (Saint-Preux’s term in 2:13) to be reread privately in the future. Frequent specific allusions are made to letters written in the distant past; even Edouard and Claire show an extraordinary familiarity with Saint-Preux and Julie’s correspondence as they cite letters long after the lovers had written them. When offering Julie asylum in England (2:3), Edouard alludes to the letter in which Saint-Preux described the Valais country (1:23); Edouard writes Julie that in his idyllic English province “vous pourrez accomplir ensemble tous les tendres souhaits par où finit la lettre dont je parle.” This technique of citation and allusive cross-referencing suggests a community of rereaders who have the entire text of their past correspondence at their fingertips. It draws attention, moreover, to the letter as a privileged physical trace of temporal experience. In part 3, letter 7, Claire reminds Saint-Preux of his letter 55 of part 1, which Claire had read and which was proof of the condensability of a lifetime into one year; Claire tries to console him with the thought that the letter itself, in its rereadability, is a souvenir preferable to a slow decline in love.

Letters in La Nouvelle Héloïse mark points in time and by so doing participate in Rousseau’s complex mythology of change and the irreversibility of time. To reread an old letter is to measure one’s own change against a point perceived as fixed in the past. To compare today’s letter with yesterday’s is to discover the distance traveled between two temporal moments. Saint-Preux’s last letter in the novel opens with a reading of Julie’s first letter to him in seven years, a letter that he cannot refrain from juxtaposing with the earlier ones. Every physical aspect—“la forme, le pli, le cachet, l’adresse, tout dans cette lettre m’en rappelle de trop différentes. Ah! deviez-vous employer la même écriture pour tracer d’autres sentiments?” (6:7). Such a strong preoccupation with “anciennes lettres” is no cause for alarm, however, Saint-Preux writes Julie, for it helps him realize and accept the fact that the Julie and Saint-Preux of the present are no longer
and can never be the lovers of the past. As in other novels, the act of reading in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* is linked with acts of discovery - recognition of change, deepening understanding of complex emotions. Rousseau's characters attempt to read each other's souls by reading letters as the changing reflections of these souls.

For Crébillon's duchesse de *** writing is reading. Although we never directly see the letters of the duke who courts her from a distance, the duchess's published responses are filled with quotations from his letters, which she scrutinizes and explicates. Indeed, most of her letters are based on examination and analysis of her own language and that of the duke; many of them revolve around the interpretation of a single word. Rarely does the duchess take the duke's words at face value. Most of her conclusions about his character are inferences drawn from attentive reading, as when she deduces that in spite of what he has written, he does not believe her denial that she loves another (L. 4), or when she repeatedly sees through her seducer's techniques. So carefully does the duchess measure her own words, so analytical is her style, that we sense that her refusal to become the duke's mistress is not the formal "no" of an epistolary heroine who will eventually surrender. Yet the duchess's emotions are perceptible. They are evident in her indirect statements and her constant use of the conditional, the same "if I loved you" that Mme de Tourvel begins to use with Valmont in letter 50 of *Les Liaisons*. "Si j'avais le malheur de vous aimer," the duchess writes, "je ne vous le dirais que le plus tard qu'il me serait possible. Mais si cela était, auriez-vous besoin que je vous le disse?" (L. 47) The duke, however, would appear to need a more explicit statement, since he opts for an easier affair with the disreputable Mme de L. thereby proving that he has not mended his ways for the duchess, as he had claimed and she had doubted. If the duke and the duchess never get together, it is because she has been too clever a reader of his letters and he not a perceptive or persistent enough interpreter of hers.

In the game of love, close reading may prevent a union of lovers (the case of the duke and duchess, of Merteuil and Valmont), or it may facilitate it (Mme Riccoboni's *Comtesse de Sancerre* — where a curious mirror reading of letters catalyzes recognition of love).
Pamela would fall into the latter category of novels, for the marriage of Pamela and Mr. B and the entire denouement are largely determined by a reading of letters.

Although one can often question whether Pamela’s letters to her parents are really letters and not merely a personal diary, particularly during her imprisonment by B, Pamela repeatedly emphasizes that she writes her letters to be read and reread: “as I know you keep my letters, and read them over and over and as it may be some little pleasure to me, perhaps, to read them myself, when I am come to you, to remind me of what I have gone through (which, I hope, will further strengthen my good resolutions, that I may not hereafter, from my bad conduct, have reason to condemn myself from my own hand as it were)” (L. 20). The letter thus becomes a symbol of virtue for Pamela, and her reader-consciousness is none other than consciousness of a moral monitor, be it future self or parents, who shape her writing to the extent that they influence the actions that she writes about. That B recognizes this symbolic value of the letter for Pamela is evidenced by his constant efforts to prevent her from writing, even early in the novel (cf. L1. 12, 27), just as he will later make attempts upon her virtue.

The readers for whom Pamela intends her letters (her parents and her future self) are not the ones who actually read all of them. As the editor tells us in the interpolated section between the first episodes and the Lincolnshire section, B has contrived quite early to intercept Pamela’s letters to her parents and even retains three of them, which Pamela’s parents never see. B has intimated as much in a conversation with Pamela: “I have seen more of your letters than you imagine and am quite overcome with your charming manner of writing and all put together makes me, as I tell you, love you to extravagance” (L. 30). When B becomes the reader of Pamela’s letters, Richardson is providing us with an interesting variation on the theme of the letter as a means of seduction, for Pamela’s letters win, without her knowing it, her master’s love.

In fact, the turning point in the novel occurs when, after a long period at Lincolnshire during which he has not been able to discover where Pamela hides her letters, B finally succeeds in stealing a group Pamela had intended to smuggle to her parents.
After perusing these letters, B demands that Pamela show him the rest of her writings: “I long to see the particulars of your plot, and your disappointment, where your papers leave off: for you have so beautiful a manner, that it is partly that, and partly my love for you, that has made me desirous of reading all you write. Besides, said he, there is such a pretty air of romance, as you relate them, in your plots, and my plots, that I shall be better directed in what manner to wind up the catastrophe of the pretty novel” (p. 242). B’s consciousness of Pamela’s letters as her “novel,” their novel which he reads and yet is an agent in—resembles Valmont’s and Merteuil’s awareness of themselves as creators and readers of their own story. Here, as in Les Liaisons, it is B’s reading of the “novel” he is a part of that influences the action portrayed in the novel.

Pamela finally surrenders her letters to B and, having no choice, agrees to show him her subsequent letters, though not without complaining about the difficulty of writing for two different readers: “how can I write with any face, what must be for your perusal, and not for those I intend to read my melancholy stories?” (p. 251). Soon B is the first to read all of Pamela’s letters. When B becomes Pamela’s primary reader, the seduction vector changes direction. Witnesses to Pamela’s moral and literary virtue, the letters convince B simultaneously that Pamela’s character is disinterested and that his jealousy of Pamela’s friend Williams is unfounded. B’s decision to free Pamela and to propose marriage to her is the immediate result of his reading of her entire correspondence.

The novel does not end here, however (although many critics think it should have). Even after marriage to B, Pamela must undergo the trials of being presented to a society that is dubious about her social station and her motives for marrying B. To interpret the second part of Pamela it is instructive to refer again to the reader motif. If, in the first half, B is Pamela’s principal reader, in the second half her audience multiplies. First B’s sister, Lady Davers, then Lady Davers’s friends read her letters; ultimately the letters are circulated among an even wider public. This “publication” of Pamela’s story is consonant with B’s general efforts to make a spectacle of Pamela in other ways—by having her tell stories in salons and even reciting himself one of her
poems before a group of guests. Pamela’s letters again become the instruments of conversion, of an entire society this time—including the proud Lady Davers—who soften upon reading about her virtuous resistance and even ask Pamela to continue writing letters “that this wondrous story be perfect, and we, your friends, may read and admire you more and more” (p. 317). Artificial though this reason for Pamela’s continued “scribbling” may be, it nonetheless reinforces the role of letter reading in the novel and the characters’ own consciousness of Pamela’s writing as a story that must be completed as a rhetorical unity.

The movement from the first half to the second half of Richardson’s novel is the movement from the privacy of the prison and the tête-à-tête to the world of society and the salon, the movement from private reading to publication. By a curious reversal, the “very things that I [Pamela] most dreaded his seeing, the contents of my papers” become “the means to promote my happiness” (p. 326). If Pamela’s story must become public, it is because Pamela must serve as an example. In a sense she becomes public property at the end, as it becomes imperative that she keep society apprised of all events in her story. The letters hidden and regarded as criminal in the first half of the story become documents for public edification in the last half. If B’s reading of Pamela’s papers puts an end to her first period of trials, the reading by B’s society puts an end to her second period, and it is only fitting that the reading by that wider circle—the external public—should put an end to Richardson’s novel.

The movement from private to public reading is not unique to Pamela. We have already seen the tendency of the single reader to multiply in La Religieuse and in Marianne, where letters written for one addressee are shared by him with other readers. In fact, any moment when letters begin to circulate among several readers marks their passage from a private to a more public domain. This occurs in Restif’s Le Paysan perverti, where the characters increasingly forward copies of letters to each other so that by the end of the novel Pierrot is able to piece together Edmond’s story and we understand better why he has served as editor of the published collection.14 Within Clarissa’s fictional universe, Jack Belford assumes a role approximating that of the editor. Just before Clarissa’s death Belford furnishes her the letters from
Lovelace to Belford, which, together with the letters Clarissa requests from Anna Howe, enable Belford and Clarissa to reconstruct the heroine’s story. Her will, moreover, names Belford as compiler of the collection and gives him jurisdiction over a copy of it.

The internally portrayed collector-publisher figure appears briefly in Mme de Genlis’s *Adèle et Théodore, ou Lettres sur l'éducation*. At the close of this multicorrespondent novel, when Adèle is married, her wedding gift from her mother (one of the chief correspondents in the novel) is none other than the collection *Lettres sur l'éducation*. Mme de Genlis does not bother, however, to show us how Adèle’s mother collected these letters.

A much more narratively integrated collecting of letters occurs at the end of *Les Liaisons*, when Mme de Rosemonde gradually assembles most of the novel’s correspondence. If Valmont, and particularly Merteuil, have been the central confidant and reader figures of the first part of the novel, Rosemonde replaces them in the denouement; all the letters begin to flow toward her, sent by people who now entrust her (*confier* is again the key word) with their documents, just as Cécile and Danceny earlier entrusted their letters to the marquise and Valmont for safekeeping. A footnote informs us that the published edition was compiled from the letters Rosemonde assembled. Rosemonde’s collection and subsequent publication of this correspondence would not have been possible if Valmont had not been a letter collector himself. When she inherits Valmont’s pile of papers, Rosemonde gains access not only to Valmont’s correspondence (letters to him from Tourvel and her priest, from Danceny, Merteuil, Cécile, his chasseur, as well as rough drafts of Valmont’s letters to them) but also to all the letters that Cécile received in the country and that Valmont kept. Through Danceny Rosemonde acquires the Danceny-Cécile correspondence; she inherits the dying présidente’s letters; and she of course already has her own correspondence with the présidente and Mme de Volanges. Yet curiously enough, in this novel where every end is tied, where each phenomenon is so highly motivated and integrated into the rest, Laclos does not account in any way for Rosemonde’s access to the other letters. If we could assume that Danceny’s letters to Cécile, and Cécile’s to Sophie, were acquired through Rosemonde’s
friendship with Mme de Volanges, how can we account for her possession of the letters sent to the marquise de Merteuil? Here, as in Restif's *Paysan perverti*, it is merely the illusion of acquisition that has been created by so much portrayed collecting.

A significant difference between Laclos's and Restif's novels, however, lies in the motivation for collecting letters. Rarely in *Le Paysan perverti* are letters forwarded to second recipients for any reason other than a vague desire to communicate ("I thought you might like to see this letter") or preserved for any motive other than to constitute a story that can be reread. In *Les Liaisons*, on the other hand, where letters are stockpiled as weapons, the collecting and passing on of correspondence is a major element in the plot, and the events whereby the letters wind up in Rosemonde's hands are the principal episodes of the denouement. Fatally wounded by Danceny in a duel, Valmont bequeathes to him a package of letters, which Danceny circulates among the Parisian public to avenge their mutual betrayal by Merteuil. Rosemonde acquires the letters that Valmont had given Danceny only because Danceny sends them to her to vindicate himself and to prevent her from prosecuting him as Valmont's murderer. Her acquisition of Tourvel's and Danceny's letters is likewise well motivated. Rosemonde urges Danceny to send her Cécile's letters (as a kind of "safety deposit") in order to protect Cécile from exposure; Rosemonde argues that since Danceny no longer is interested in Cécile and yet has been partially responsible for her corruption, his honor requires him to surrender her letters. The respectful Danceny can only comply. The présidente entrusts Rosemonde with her cassette of letters for what must be the same reason: in order to bury her affair in "le silence et l'oubli" (L. 171).

Letters in *Les Liaisons* are thus collected for two contradictory reasons: either to expose others publicly or to bury an affair in oblivion. In other words, letters are collected either to prevent further reading or to extend the circle of readers. In fact, the entire novel moves between these two poles of secrecy and publication, between the need for privacy and the need for publicity. Merteuil and Valmont distinguish between private and public versions of the same story; Merteuil sends Valmont an account of the Prévan episode written for private reading but writes her letter to Volanges for a "lecture publique" (L. 85). The vicomte and the
marquise conduct their affairs in secret, yet each needs the other as an audience for approbation; indeed, even this restricted need for a public will lead to their ultimate destruction.

The denouement constitutes an acceleration of the oscillation between the private and public poles. Ironically, it is precisely Merteuil's private version of the Prévan episode (L. 85, to Valmont) that will be subjected to a "lecture publique" at the end. The marquise, Valmont, and Danceny all use exposure of letters to a wider audience as a means of vengeance. Yet after the initial rapid-fire publication of letters, the pendulum swings back to secrecy; Danceny, Volanges, and the présidente hasten to "deposit" (the image most frequently used) letters with Mme de Rosemonde so that all may remain "à jamais ignoré de tout le monde" (L. 174). The novel whose principal characters have emphasized acquisition of knowledge through reading of letters, and public exposure of others through collection of letters, ends on the note of silence and deliberate ignorance. "Il ne reste qu'à pleurer et se taire," Mme de Rosemonde advises Danceny. "Se taire" is precisely what Rosemonde does in response to Volanges's request for enlightenment on her daughter's motives for retiring to a convent.

And yet the fact remains that this story has not been buried in silence; the very existence of the novel belies such a myth of oblivion. A footnote to letter 169 explicitly informs us that an unidentifiable "on" has formed the present "recueil" from Mme de Rosemonde's collection. The existence of this work is a monument to the letter's potential for publication. As a tangible document, even when intended for a single addressee, the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers. It passes freely from the private to the public domain and even back again.

Mme Riccoboni's Lettres de Fanni Butlerd offers a different example of the same movement in epistolary narrative. Since this novel follows the love affair of a woman through her letters to her lover, the correspondence is of the most intimate nature, yet the final letter, in which Fanni finally renounces the man who has betrayed her, is addressed to him in "les papiers publics." Fanni chooses this public rather than private means of communication in order to seal symbolically the fact that their affair is no longer
intimate; she stresses the significance of print over handwriting: "Vous me reconnaîtrez: un style qui vous fut si familier mais vos yeux ne reverront jamais ces caractères que vous nommiez sacrés, que vous baisiez avec tant d’ardeur, qui vous étaient si chers, et que vous m’avez fait remettre avec tant d’exactitude" (L. 116). Furthermore, Fanni chooses to publish equally anonymously her entire half of the correspondence in order to immortalize her passion, blaming her suffering on the lover rather than on the love. Her preface to this collection is an unusual variation on the typical "au lecteur," in that it is addressed to a single specific reader: "Miss Fanni, à un seul lecteur." The first lines make the identity of this reader clear: "Si le naturel et la vérité, qui font tout le mérite de ces Lettres, leur attirent l’approbation du Public; si le hasard vous les fait lire; si vous reconnaissiez les expressions d’un coeur qui fut à vous Just as Fanni had transformed an intimate letter into a public one by publishing it in the newspaper, in her preface she converts a traditionally public form into a personal letter by restoring the specificity of the reader. By being both the first letter of the volume and the last letter Fanni writes, the preface seals the novel’s circle, which moves from the original intimate correspondence to a final public letter whose purpose is to annul the previous intimacy. Her final letter thus points back to the other public act, the preface, in which Fanni paradoxically addresses herself anew to her original reader, who may now reread the correspondence in published form. In other words the cycle of reading may begin again, since the original private sequence is now subject to both a private rereading and a public first reading.

Each novel that we have examined—La Religieuse, Marianne, Pamela, Le Paysan perverti, Clarissa, Adèle et Théodore, Les Liaisons dangereuses, Fanni Butlerd—has its own way of motivating and rendering explicit the movement from private to public reading. Yet all share the same tendency not only to dramatize the act of writing but also to tell the story of their own publication, either by the presence of a reader-editor figure whose collecting of letters is part of the action of the narrative (as in Le Paysan perverti, Clarissa, Les Liaisons, Adèle et Théodore) or by the internal representation of letter circulation among a wide public (as in Marianne, Fanni Butlerd, Les Liaisons, Pamela).
The effect of such an internal publication, within the world of the narrative, is to blur the distinction between external and internal reader. Between the internal addressee and the external eavesdropper lie the internal eavesdroppers. The path from internal private reader to internal public to external public appears a continuous unbroken one. We pass almost imperceptibly from the fictional to the real, historical world in narrative that portrays the story of its own publication.

The concern to account for publication of private documents is of course primarily an eighteenth-century preoccupation. This fact alone may explain why the majority of the texts in this chapter are eighteenth-century novels. To justify the claim to authenticity, the real publisher of an eighteenth-century novel naturally had to account for his possession of "private" letters. Such clichés as discovery in an old trunk or inheritance of letters were weak justifications and could not be applied at all to multicorrespondent works. Such ploys, furthermore, necessitated the introduction of an editor figure removed from the world of the narrative, whereas what is interesting about the texts that we have just examined is precisely their internalization of the publisher figure. Even a unicorrespondent novel like Fanni Butler offers the originality, for reasons integral to the story, of making the publisher the letter writer herself.

The internal reader's role in shaping epistolary narrative cannot be overestimated. Addressee-consciousness informs the act of writing itself, and acts of reading constitute consequential narrative events. Epistolary mythology tends to locate power with the reader, as its regular creation of a Super Reader figure reveals. The external reader's experience is partially governed by the presence of his internal counterpart; we read any given letter from at least three points of view—that of the intended or actual recipient as well as that of the writer and our own. Even when only implied, the interpretation that the addressee would give to a letter enters into our own reading: we are drawn to read the présidente's letters from Valmont's point of view, having been sensitized to watch, like him, for signs of weakness. When portrayed, on the other hand, the internal reader's decoding of a message becomes part of a new message (Lovelace's annotations, Merteuil's analyses). For the external reader, reading an
epistolary novel is very much like reading over the shoulder of another character whose own readings—and misreadings—must enter into our experience of the work. In fact, the epistolary novel’s tendency to narrativize reading, integrating the act of reading into the fiction at all levels (from a correspondent’s proofreading of his own letters to publication and public reading of the entire letter collection), constitutes an internalizing action that blurs the very distinctions that we make between the internal and external reader. I shall have more to say about this phenomenon in the Conclusion.

1. Throughout this chapter a simple distinction will be made between the internal reader (a specific character represented within the world of the narrative, whose reading of the letters can influence the writing of the letters) and the external reader (we, the general public, who read the work as a finished product and have no effect on the writing of individual letters). In his “Discours du récit,” published in Figures III, pp. 265–66, Gérard Genette makes a similar distinction, valid for all forms of narrative discourse, between the “intradiegetic narratee” (our internal reader) and the “extradiegetic narratee” (our external reader). In his “Introduction à l’étude du narrataire,” Gerald Prince systematically examines the role of the implied addressee in narrative in general.

2. I am not suggesting, by these distinctions, that writers of autobiography or memoir novels have no real or implied readers, or that they never address a reader directly. My notion of “pure autobiography” is a theoretical model, emphasizing that the autobiographer’s primary relations are with self and the act of self-expression, whereas in the truly epistolary novel writing is governed by a desire for exchange with an addressee who is specifically other. This distinction is implicitly supported by studies of other first-person forms: namely, Philippe Lejeune’s work on a corpus that he carefully defines as “autobiography” (L’Autobiographie en France [1971] and Le Pacte autobiographique [1975]), Philip Stewart’s analysis of the role of the reader in the memoir novel (pp. 141–68 of Imitation and Illusion in the French Memoir Novel [1969]), Patricia M. Spacks’s study of autobiography and novel in eighteenth-century England (Imaging a Self [1976]), and Gerald Prince’s article “The Diary Novel: Notes for the Definition of a Sub-genre” (1972). The autobiographer’s reader, if acknowledged, is nonspecific (typically an anonymous public or posterity, Rousseau’s “qui que vous soyez”), whereas the letter writer’s language is shaped by the specificity of his reader. If invoked, the autobiographer’s reader is typically called upon to read and judge a total account of a life, not to influence that life or account.

3. Jost, in his classification of epistolary narrative (discussed earlier, in the Introduction), considers Marianne and La Religieuse as epistolary in genre; the “type-Marianne” constitutes, in fact, one of Jost’s six major divisions. By displacing the emphasis from classification to definition, I intend to use these novels to help define epistolarity itself, while offering further evidence of the specific aspects that can justify dealing with them as “epistolary” novels.

5. For other perspectives on the hybrid generic affiliations of La Religieuse and their relation to the novel’s well-known “mistakes” (bévues) see Georges May, Diderot et “La Religieuse,” pp. 199–218; Jacques Rustin, “La Religieuse de Diderot: mémoires ou journal intime?”; and Emile Lizé, “La Religieuse, un roman épistolaire?” For Marianne a comparison with Marivaux’s more formally conventional memoir novel, Le Paysan parvenu, is instructive: Marianne engages in much more discourse with her reader than the narrator of Le Paysan and maintains a clearer distinction between her style as narrator and her style as character. What Rousset has called Marivaux’s “double register” figures far less in Le Paysan (see Conclusion, note 21).

6. We notice the same tendency in reporting dialogue: instead of faithfully registering and reproducing dialogue in their letters, as would a Pamela or a Clarissa, Valmont and Merteuil offer concise analyses. Here, for example is a passage in which the marquise quickly and cleverly reduces an entire conversation to its component parts: “Je ne vous rendrai donc pas notre conversation que vous suppléerez aisément. Observez seulement que, dans ma feinte défense, je l’aïdaïs de tout mon pouvoir: embarras, pour lui donner le temps de parler, mauvaises raisons, pour être combattues . . . et ce refrain perpétuel de sa part, je ne vous demande qu’un mot; et ce silence de la mienne . au travers de tout cela, une main cent fois prise, qui se retire toujours et ne se refuse jamais” (L. 85). The entire dialogue is condensed into its salient elements and filtered through the marquise’s interpreting intelligence.

7. This epithet has nothing to do with Michael Riffaterre’s “Super-Reader” (Archilecteur), a construct defined as a sum of readings for purposes of stylistic analysis, in his Essais de stylistique structurale.

8. See, for example, letters 72, 172, 249, and especially 232, where Pierrot is heir to a large volume of letters. In his recently published study Rétif de la Bretonne et la création littéraire (1977), Pierre Testud likewise notes the extent to which Restif emphasizes his characters’ function as readers. Although Testud examines the role of the reader in a chapter devoted to Restif’s epistolary novels (pp. 366 400), he offers examples and conclusions quite different from mine. Since his arguments bear upon many of the same works that we shall be discussing in this chapter and the next (Restif’s Malédiction paternelle, Paysan perverti, Nouvel Abélard, and Posthumes), it is worth clarifying the extent to which they complement or diverge from the readings I offer. After a sensitive analysis of all of the technical resources of the epistolary form that Restif did not exploit, Testud concludes that Restif chose the letter form because it reproduces “l’image de la communication entre l’écrivain et son lecteur” (p. 391). The instances that Testud cites, however, are all cases in which the letter writer forwards a récit (interpolated story) to his correspondent. Testud points out in particular the frequency with which Restif’s letter writers send each other copies of Restif’s already published works and comment upon them; such a ploy allows Restif to create his own public and orient the reading of his own work (pp. 394 95). A second phenomenon that Testud points out is the frequency with which the letter prolongs or gives rise to an oral communication; whenever a letter either transcribes an orally delivered story or is itself read orally, it testifies to Restif’s view of the letter as a privileged form for establishing a direct relationship between a narrator and a public (p. 400). Testud’s findings intersect with mine in demonstrating Restif’s preoccupation with reader response.
However, since Testud deals only with the communication of récits that are exterior to the world of the correspondents, the readership that he studies bears more pertinently upon Restif’s view of literary reception in general than upon his use of the epistolary form in particular. I would argue—that through the examples I offer in chapters 3 and 4—that although Restif is hardly an outstanding technician, his use of the epistolary form is more subtle than is usually acknowledged. For in Restif’s epistolary novels, correspondents do not read only interpolated stories. They also read letters, and in so doing become implicated in superimposed narrational levels and multiple perspectives on the very letters that compose their own story.


10. See Seylaz, pp. 112–16, for a discussion of Merteuil’s superiority.

11. In Mme Riccoboni’s Adélaïde, comtesse de Sancerre, Adélaïde’s friend Nancé forces her to acknowledge her love for the marquis de Montalais by mirroring revealing juxtapositions from her letters in his own letters. It is only by reading between the lines of Nance’s letters (which reflect Adélaïde’s), rather than her own, that Adélaïde recognizes the nature of her emotions.

12. Wolmar similarly calls the Julie–Saint-Preux correspondence, which he has read without Julie’s knowledge, “les fondements de ma sécurité” (4:12), since the letters bear witness to the fundamental virtue of both Julie and the man she chose as a girl.

13. Fielding in his parody Shamela of course questions whether Pamela was not trying to seduce B for his money all along!

14. Restif does not account for Pierrot’s access to all of these letters, however. We do not actually see him collect all of the letters but merely enough of them that the illusion that he has access to them is created.

15. Tzvetan Todorov was the first to point out that the denouement of Les Liaisons tell the story of its own creation. For his perceptive analysis see his Littérature et signification, pp. 47–49.

16. Les Liaisons in this respect seems an inversion of Pamela. If Pamela is the novel of “virtue rewarded,” Les Liaisons is the novel of “vice punished.” In both cases it is through a publication of letters that justice occurs. The publication of Merteuil’s letters brings about her punishment, whereas Pamela’s “rewards” are due in part to B’s reading of her letters: “I still wish to see them [her letters] too . to have before me the whole series of your sufferings, that I may learn what degree of kindness may be sufficient to recompense you for them” (pp. 284–85). Les Liaisons and Pamela thus offer interesting epistolary approaches to the eighteenth century’s preoccupation with verisimilitude and moral justification. Internal publication of letters brings about reward and punishment in addition to accounting for how such documents as letters might have passed into an editor’s hands.

17. The incorporation of the publication process into the fiction is not, however, limited to the eighteenth century. Jacques Derrida’s Envois plays as fully as any eighteenth-century narrative upon the epistolary potential to move between the historical and fictional worlds, between private and public readings.
(See in particular pp. 191 ff., where the game of authenticity [are these real or fictional letters?] begins with the writer's stated plan to burn part and publish the rest of the correspondence we have been reading.) The author and principal correspondent of *Envois* (who both *is* and *is not* Jacques Derrida) even reports on negotiations with his publisher, Flammarion, thereby fictionalizing the "real" publisher of the book. After publication, however, the writer plans to continue the intimate private correspondence destined for the fire, thereby rehistoricizing the fictional correspondence. With Derrida the letter's potential to oscillate between private and public readings becomes emblematic of a general "crise de la destination": to whom, for whom, does one write?