EPISTOLARY DISCOURSE

The language of the letter belongs to the larger linguistic system of "discourse," that is, utterances that suppose a speaker or writer (I) and a hearer or reader (you). Epistolary discourse is distinguishable from other types of discourse—such as the memoir, diary, rhetoric, or theater—by certain basic pronominal and predicative traits. No one of these traits alone defines epistolarity, and none is applicable only to the letter, but taken together they constitute what is unique to its language. This chapter will explore in detail each of the following characteristics of epistolary discourse:

1. **Particularity of the I-you**, the I of epistolary discourse always having as its (implicit or explicit) partner a specific you who stands in unique relationship to the I. (Epistolary narrative is thus distinguished from both memoir and diary narrative, where there is no reified addressee, or from rhetorical works, where the addressee is anonymous and could be anyone.) In letter language, moreover, the addressee plays a role; he is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance. Such reciprocality whereby the original you becomes the I of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange.

2. **A present tense**, which figures prominently as a pivot for past and future. Like the diary writer, the letter writer is anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both
past and future events. The relationship of both temporal aspects to the present is important in the unfolding of letter narrative.

3. Temporal polyvalence. The temporal aspect of any given epistolary statement is relative to innumerable moments: the actual time that an act described is performed; the moment when it is written down; the respective times that the letter is dispatched, received, read, or reread. (Such time lags distinguish epistolary from theatrical dialogue.)

In the concluding section of this chapter we shall further examine the effect that time lags have on the epistolary exchange in terms of the relationship between written dialogue and its oral model.

PRONOMINAL RELATIVITY: Particularity of the I-You

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of epistolary language is the extent to which it is colored by not one but two persons and by the specific relationship existing between them. As we have already seen in the chapters on mediation, the confidant, and the reader, the interpersonal bond basic to the very language of the letter (I-you) necessarily structures meaning in letter narrative. Those works that we perceive as being the most “epistolary,” as cultivating the letter form most fully, are those in which the I-you relationship shapes the language used, and in which I becomes defined relative to the you whom he addresses. Thus in a work like Les Liaisons we must distinguish between the Merteuil who writes Mme de Volanges, the Merteuil who writes Valmont, the Merteuil who writes Cécile, and the Merteuil who writes Danceny.

If the addressee is an eminently necessary reference point for interpreting any letter in Les Liaisons, Senancour’s Oberman provides an instructive example of a minimal epistolary use of the you. Although the bulk of Oberman’s writing, like that of his forerunner Werther, resembles diary entries more than letters (so heavy is the weight of the je and so undeveloped the personality of the vous), Senancour nevertheless makes it clear that his hero is not merely writing for the sake of writing, but in order to be read and to be written to by a specific reader. When his confidant goes abroad, Oberman gives up writing: “je n’écrirai pas jusqu’à votre
retour; je n'aime pas ces lettres aventurées qui ne sauraient rencontrer que par hasard celui qui les attend; et dont la réponse, qui ne peut venir qu'au bout de trois mois, peut ne venir qu'au bout d'un an. Pour moi, qui ne remuerai pas d'ici, j'espère en recevoir avant votre retour" (L. 73). Oberman’s “[je] ne remuerai pas d'ici” is a key to the most important function of the vous in this novel. For Oberman letter sending is always connected with fixity: “J'attendais pour vous écrire que j'eusse un séjour fixe” (L. 5). It is obvious that the epistolary exchange is facilitated if both partners are easily reachable by the postman; the addressee cannot assume much importance if he does not have an address. In Oberman, however, where the hero wanders from place to place seeking an end to his ennui and a meaning to his life, the postal theme acquires a value beyond the simple mechanics of sending and receiving letters. The theme of fixity and stability is a major one in the narrative; Senancour's wanderer seeks to attach himself to something permanent, to come to rest somewhere, to acquire weight instead of floating. For this reason he attributes a great deal of importance to place (the word lieu figures prominently), hopping from one location to another (a fact accentuated by the postmarks) and becoming successively disenchanted with each. He buys several properties and abandons them one by one; “Quel lieu me faudra-t-il donc?” (L. 4). The only fixed point in the novel is the friend, the vous: “N'avez-vous pas été jusqu'à présent ma seule habitude? Vous êtes le point où j'aime à me reposer dans l'inquiétude qui m'égare, où j'aime à revenir lorsque j'ai parcouru toutes choses” (L. 4). The friend provides a stable reference point against which Oberman measures his own instability.

The I of epistolary discourse always situates himself vis-à-vis another; his locus, his “address,” is always relative to that of his addressee. To write a letter is to map one's coordinates—temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual—in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing. Reference points on that map are particular to the shared world of writer and addressee: underlying the epistolary dialogue are common memories and often common experiences that take place between the letters. Thus Oberman will allude to places and people that only he and
his friend know ("J'ai été jusqu'à Blammont, chez le chirurgien qui a remis si adroitement le bras de cet officier tombé de cheval en revenant de Chassel" [L. 38]).

Pushed to its logical extreme, epistolary discourse would be so relative to its I-you that it would be unintelligible to an outside reader. In analyzing a real correspondence—that of Mme de Sévigné and her daughter Mme de Grignan—Roger Duchêne observes, “Plus la lettre est réussie en tant que lettre, c’est-à-dire profondément adaptée à la personnalité d’un destinataire complice de celui qui l’écrit dans la complexité d’un contexte vécu, plus elle est, en définitive, illisible à autrui.”2 In fictional letters, where there is no historical “contexte vécu” as in a real correspondence, the illusion that something is going on between the letters or preceding the letters must be created without having the characters tell each other things they already know; this is usually accomplished by editorial footnotes, by shorthand allusions within the letters to memories or intervening events, by enigmatic statements that are part of the complicity of the I and you but exclude the outside reader. The creator of fictional letter narrative must produce an impression of authenticity without hopelessly losing his outside reader. To do so he not only establishes a code that is particular to the I-you messages but also ultimately makes this code accessible to others—either because what remains obscure appears minor (as when characters’ allusions to shadowy common experiences are less important than their communication of their reactions to these experiences) or because accumulation of fragmented esoteric messages makes the total code clear.3 Epistolary discourse is thus a coded—although not necessarily an obscure—language, whose code is determined by the specific relationship of the I-you.

The I-you relationship that governs epistolary discourse also governs our perception of which characters are to be the principal narrative agents. It is not necessarily the voice that pronounces “I” who captures our attention, as the opening letter of Clarissa teaches us. Anna Howe’s first letter, like her subsequent ones, is so you-oriented that it establishes Clarissa once and for all as the chief protagonist in the narrative. Such you-oriented letters provided us with second-person narrative long before Butor’s La Modification.
The status of epistolary discourse as both first-person and second-person narrative derives from the reversibility of the I-you pronouns. The you of any I-you statement can, and is expected to, become the I of a new text. In Mme de Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, where epistolary communication takes place via reusable knotted quipos, even though the addressee never responds to the Peruvian heroine’s letters, the image of epistolary discourse as a reversible medium is nonetheless tangibly visible; Zilia writes Aza, “Les mêmes noeuds qui t’apprendront mon existence, en changeant de forme entre tes mains, m’instruiront de ton sort” (L. 1).

*Lettres portugaises* reveals how well the notion of epistolary exchange is adapted to the idea of reciprocality in love. Mariane writes at first because she believes that both her letters and her love will elicit a reciprocal response in her lover. She feels that the “excess” of her own love should guarantee her an extraordinary measure of fidelity on her lover’s part (L. 2). As Mariane begins to face the knowledge that loving and being loved are not necessarily interdependent, she opts for independence, continuing both to love and to express her passion in spite of its unidirectionality: “mon amour ne dépend plus de la manière dont vous me traiterez” (L. 2). Her last letter, however, acknowledges the impossibility of prolonging a correspondence that is not a real dialogue, concurrently with her bitter recognition that “l’amour tout seul ne donne point de l’amour” (L. 5). Loving is no more a guarantee or substitute for being loved than writing is for receiving letters.

Because the notion of reciprocality is such a crucial one in epistolary narrative, the moment of reception of letters is as important and as self-consciously portrayed as the act of writing. The hastily torn-open envelope makes as frequent an appearance as the pen and ink. In no other form of dialogue does the speaker await a reply so breathlessly; in no other type of verbal exchange does the mere fact of receiving or not receiving a response carry such meaning. Roger Duchêne has analyzed the Sévigné-Grignan correspondence in terms of the role the letter played in working out the problems of the mother-daughter relationship. Cold in person, Françoise-Marguerite de Grignan was better able to demonstrate her affection for her mother in letters and through her very assiduity in responding: “C’est que le thème de la récep-
tion des lettres ne peut être dissocié de celui des sentiments de Mme de Sévigné. "Adieu, ma bonne, continuez à m'écrire et à m'aimer," prie-t-elle en achevant; comme l'insinue la coordination des verbes, l'assiduité épistolaire est une preuve d'amour."

Love narratives do not have a monopoly on the theme of reciprocality, as a quick glance at the first line of La Religieuse reminds us: "La réponse de M. le marquis de Croismare, s'il m'en fait une, me fournira les premières lignes de ce récit." It is the hallmark of epistolary language in general to make statements in order to elicit a response from a specific addressee. To write a letter is not only to define oneself in relationship to a particular you; it is also an attempt to draw that you into becoming the I of a new statement.

TEMPORAL RELATIVITY: The Pivotal and Impossible Present

Caught up in the particularity of its writer-reader relationship, epistolary discourse is also governed by its moment of enunciation. The letter writer is highly conscious of writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted: "Je vous aime plus que je ne vous aimais il y a un moment; et dans un moment je vous aimerai plus encore que je ne vous aime" (Boursault, Treize lettres amoureuses, L. 8). Epistolary characters constantly engage in such ritual acts of stocktaking, communicating their "état présent" in terms of what they have already done, where they are now, and what they fear, hope, or plan for the future. Thus Julie entreats Saint-Preux: "Mon ami, songez à vous, à moi, à ce que nous fûmes, à ce que nous sommes, à ce que nous devons être" (6:6).

In Julie's statement the past tense ("ce que nous fûmes") is opposed to the present ("ce que nous sommes"), which is the pivotal tense from which all else radiates. Whether the epistolary preterite refers to a distant past (as in Julie's statement) or merely relates actions that have occurred in the interval since the last letter, its meaning is always relative to the present that is the writer's reference point. Here we note a significant difference between memoir and epistolary narrative. Whereas in the latter the present is the pivotal tense, in the former the preterite is the central and most immediate tense; the reader of the memoir novel is transported to the world of a distant past, experiencing as his
new present scenes from the life of the actor in the story rather than experiencing the present of the narrator telling the story. Even when the voice of the narrator interrupts momentarily our involvement in a past-become-present, as occurs so frequently in Marivaux, the present of the memoir narrator intervenes only to shed light on the past that interests us, to add the illuminating perspective of now’s reflections to the obscurity of then’s actions. In epistolary narrative, on the other hand, the past is the interloper, intervening to shed light on the present. Even interpolated autobiographies within epistolary narrative (from the long notebooks of Mme Riccoboni’s characters to Merteuil’s comparatively succinct letter 81), which may appear to be interpolated memoirs, have as their function to illuminate the present, to provide background explaining why a character has become what he is. In short, whereas in the memoir the present is subordinate to the past, in the letter the past is always relative to the present.

But of what present are we speaking when we discuss epistolary discourse? In any first-person narrative it is useful to distinguish between time of narration (Erzählzeit) and time of narrated action (erzählte Zeit). Obviously in the simple memoir form, where the time of narration does not begin until all the events narrated have been completed, the entire Erzählzeit relates to erzählte Zeit as present to past; but in the diary or the letter the situation is more complex. At any given point in the time of narration, narrated time may relate to time of narration as past to present, present to present (“just now ”), or future to present (“I will ”).

The pivotal time in epistolary discourse is therefore the present, and the pivotal tense is the present of narration (Erzählzeit). No matter how interesting the narrated events are in and of themselves, they always depend upon, and are partially defined by, the time when they are narrated. This axiomatic statement bears investigation, since its ramifications are numerous and varied. First of all, we might consider the reporting of events by a Valmont in his “bulletins,” where even the vicomte’s rendering of past dialogue is colored by an equally important present one: the ongoing dialogue with Merteuil. Richardsonian narrative illustrates yet another way in which a stress on present Erzählzeit
affects the reader's perception of the events narrated. "Writing to the moment" creates a sense of immediacy and spontaneity that plunges the reader in medias res, so that he feels tuned in to the hotline of events narrated as they occur by the person experiencing them. This sense of immediacy is also essential to Richardsonian suspense: Pamela and Clarissa write under the constant threat of danger, they fear both bodily injury and discovery of the fact that they are writing. Their much-portrayed time of narration (frequent mention of the writing instruments, highly self-conscious picking up and laying down of the pen, running to the window at a noise or to the door to check that it is locked) serves to emphasize the instability of their present, the imminent danger that threatens to interrupt the writing totally. Similarly, Soeur Suzanne's fragments at the end of La Religieuse, which are contemporary with the action she narrates, make her plea for help more pressing by driving home the insecurity of her present position. Hence, the importance—in Richardson and his imitators—of the letter as a cry for help, not just a recording of past dangers.

This sense of immediacy, of a present that is precarious, can only exist in a world where the future is unknown. The present of epistolary discourse is vibrant with future-orientation. Interrogatives, imperatives, and future tenses—rarer in other types of narrative—are the vehicles for expression of promises, threats, hopes, apprehensions, anticipation, intention, uncertainty, prediction. Letter writers are bound in a present preoccupied with the future.

In Delphine futurity is a crucial component of epistolarity. Perhaps the central question in Mme de Staël's novel is whether statements made in the present can bind the future, whether today's verb is valid tomorrow. The entire narrative is structured around two issues raised by the French Revolution: divorce and the revocability of religious vows. The events of the plot lead up to and away from two foci of the same ellipse, Léonce's forced marriage to a woman he does not love and Delphine's convent vows made under pressure. The only two long philosophical letters in the novel punctuate this structure: in part 4, letter 17, M. de Lebensei writes to Delphine on divorce and in part 6, letter 12, to Léonce on the breaking of monastic vows.
As the most pro-Revolutionary, antitradiotional voice in the novel, M. de Lebensei is very future-oriented. He defends the French Revolution by its future establishment of liberty: “cette révolution sera jugée dans la postérité par la liberté qu'elle assurera à la France” (6:12). Similarly, his arguments in favor of both divorce and revocability of convent vows are based on prospective rather than retrospective vision. To the “moralistes qui ont écrit contre le divorce, en s'appuyant de l'intérêt des enfants,” he responds that children should also be considered as “époux futurs” who should also have a right to divorce (4:17). Monastic vows are an “esclavage complet de tout notre avenir” that deprives us of the innate human right to hope; these vows constitute a slavery whereby “l’homme d’un jour enchaînerait l’homme de toute la vie” (6:12).

M. de Lebensei’s thematic emphasis on futurity is echoed by the language of the letters. Almost all of the letters in *Delphine* close on verbs in the future tense. The action of the narrative is continually projected into a future that obsesses the characters, who at one and the same time try to control it and acknowledge it as uncontrollable. We have only to examine any sequence of letters to discovery the variety and importance of future tense usage in *Delphine*:

[3:1, Léonce to Delphine]
Oh! ma Delphine, je te verrai, je te verrai sans cesse. Demain j’irai chez vous.

[3:2, Delphine to Léonce]
Léonce, . . . quand je me sentirai prête à mourir, j’aurai encore un moment de bonheur qui vaut tout ce qui m’attend, je me permettrai de t’appeler auprès de moi.

[3:3, Léonce to Delphine]
Sais-tu ce que j’appelle le bonheur? c’est une heure, une heure d’entretien avec toi. Delphine, une heure! et tu pourras après.

Dialogue in *Delphine* is, to paraphrase Valéry, “un dialogue toujours futur.”

Just as individual letters close on the future tense, each of the six parts of the novel terminates on an oath binding a character’s future (1 Léonce’s marriage vows; 2—Delphine’s oath to the
dying Mme de Vernon to protect Mathilde; 3—Thérèse’s religious vows, followed by Léonce’s effort to get Delphine to swear on the same altar to belong to him; 4—Delphine’s letter promising Mathilde to leave Paris, followed by a letter to Thérèse in which she contemplates taking religious vows; 5—Delphine’s convent vows; 6—Léonce’s second attempt to force Delphine to swear to be his, ending in two oaths of separation). The structuring of Delphine around such vows, coupled with the future-oriented language of the letters, makes futurity a central question. Delphine is about the necessity and yet impossibility of engaging one’s future. Each letter halts us in a present time where the future is uncertain and yet where the characters have attempted to control that future by threats or vows. Mme de Lebensei’s “Que vont devenir Léonce et Delphine?” which closes her letter 42 of part 2 to Louise, epitomizes the attitude of any character at any given point—an explicitly expressed anxiety about the future, shared by the reader. Yet M. de Lebensei’s remarks to the lovers epitomize the other possible stance vis-à-vis the future. In painting a vivid picture of the life Delphine and Léonce would share (“Heureux vous oublierez les hommes que vous ne verrez pas” [6:12]), Lebensei affirms the power of man to possess, to change, his future.

The future-orientation of the characters propels the novel suspensefully forward to its conclusion, in which the central characters reject the future offered them. Responding to Lebensei’s letter Léonce uses the future ironically: “Delphine a donné son consentement à votre proposition, je l’accepte; elle change mon sort, elle change le sien. Nous vivrons, et nous vivrons ensemble; quel avenir inattendu! Demain devait être mon dernier jour, il sera le premier d’une existence nouvelle. Delphine enfin sera heureuse! Adieu” (note included in 6:12). The fact is that Léonce has become so death-oriented as to lose his concern for the future. Delphine’s and Léonce’s suicidal deaths at the end constitute the ultimate reversal; the narrative that has turned on speculation about, and preoccupation with, the future is brought to a halt by the main characters’ decision to refuse that future completely.

La Nouvelle Héloïse, long before Delphine, had raised the same question about the possibility of engaging tomorrow today.
Julie points out repeatedly that one can make statements about the past and present, but the same verbs are less valid in the future: "Nous réglons l'avenir sur ce qui nous convient aujourd'hui, sans savoir s'il nous conviendra demain; nous jugeons de nous comme étant toujours les mêmes, et nous changeons tous les jours. Qui sait si nous aimerons ce que nous aimons, si nous voudrons ce que nous voulons, si nous serons ce que nous sommes" (6:6). Such preoccupation with the future is intrinsic to the epistolary form, where each letter arrests the writer in a present whose future is unknown.

So oriented toward the future is the epistolary present that deadlines, dreaded days, and hoped-for days assume great importance. Letters, with their date lines, provide a built-in means of marking time between the writer's present and the moment he anticipates. In Clarissa Richardson indulges in many such countdowns toward dreaded days: the Tuesday that Clarissa has agreed to confront Solmes, the Wednesday on which she fears she will be forced to marry Solmes, the Thursday that Lovelace projects as their wedding day. Saint-Preux looks forward to the secret rendezvous Julie has given him with impatience: "Quoi! trois jours d'attente! trois jours encore!" (1:38).

If the present of epistolary discourse is charged with anticipation and speculation about the future, it is no less oriented toward the past. Janus-like, epistolary language is grounded in a present that looks out toward past and future. "Now" defines itself relative to a retrospective or anticipated "then." The epistolary present is caught up in the impossibility of seizing itself, since the narrative present must necessarily postdate or anticipate the events narrated. For this reason epistolary narrative is particularly adapted to the schemer or calculator figure, who plots future events and analyzes past ones. On the other hand, the epistolary medium is also well adapted to Rousseauist nostalgia. Because the narrative present cannot be perfectly simultaneous with the event narrated, Saint-Preux can capture the euphoria of a night spent with Julie only by anticipatory and retrospective letters (1:54, 55). In Rousseau, happiness is unseizable, always past or future; in Rousseau, Rimbaud's "La vraie vie est absente" takes epistolary form.

For the letter writer is "absent"—removed, however slightly,
from his addressee and from the events to which he refers. The present is as impossible to him as "presence." Yet paradoxically, epistolary discourse has many ways of creating this impossible present. In writing to the moment, the oscillations between immediate future (e.g., "I'll go now to see") and immediate past (e.g., "I have just come back") are so frequent as to create the illusion of a narrative present simultaneous with the events narrated. Writing to the moment in Richardson, however, is significantly different from what we might call writing to the moment in a work like *Lettres portugaises*. In Richardson important events take place independently of the writing; by closing the gap between *Erzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit*, the Richardsonian writer creates a sense of immediacy, of tension about the events themselves. In *Lettres portugaises* (or any similar letter narrative from one lover to an absent lover), on the other hand, the oscillation is between memory and hope; separation leaves the writer with only memories of past union and hope of a future one or fear of permanent separation. The switch from past tenses (e.g., "Je vous ai vu souvent passer en ce lieu avec un air qui me charmait" [*Portugaises*, L. 4]) to future ones ("ne paraîtrez-vous pas agréable à d'autres yeux? Je vois bien que vous demeurerez en France" [L. 4]) is the oscillation between memory and hope (or fear) that poisons the present of the writer. Here it is not events that are highlighted. Far more significant than past or future events are the emotions of the writer herself; the memory is less important than the experience of remembering. If in Richardson the approximation of *Erzählzeit* to *erzählte Zeit* heightens tension about the narrated events (*erzählte Zeit*), in narrative of the *Portugaises* type, the tension is created at the level of *Erzählzeit*; indeed, the action is so exclusively psychological that it becomes difficult to speak of an independent *erzählte Zeit*.

In the *Portugaises* type the "event" is the writing. Whereas in Richardson vicissitudes are external to the writer but are reflected immediately in the changing emotions of the writer-seismograph, in the *Portugaises* the vicissitudes are internal and may often result from the experience of writing itself. Mere expression of a sentiment can cause the emotional pendulum to swing in the opposite direction: "Adieu, je voudrais bien ne vous avoir jamais vu. Ah! je sens vivement la fausseté de ce sentiment, et je connais,
dans le moment que je vous écris, que j'aime bien mieux être malheureuse en vous aimant, que de ne vous avoir jamais vu” (Portugaises, L. 3). So important has the narrative present become that all action takes place on that level, yet even this present of narration is precarious and unseizable.

Epistolary discourse is the language of the pivotal yet impossible present. The now of narration is its central reference point, to which the then of anticipation and retrospection are relative. Yet now is unseizable, and its unseizability haunts epistolary language. The epistolary present is caught up in three impossibilities:

1. The impossibility of the narrative’s being simultaneous with the event (when the event is not part of the writing itself); hence a time of narration that must always be out of phase with the time of the event narrated. That is, the letter writer can only say “I have just done” or “I will soon do.”

2. The impossibility of the written present’s remaining valid (especially when the important events are the writing itself—e.g., the expression of sentiments); the unseizability and precariousness of now is constantly reflected in the epistolary seismogram, wherein one moment’s sentiment is contradicted or modified by the next. That is, though the letter writer can say, “I feel, I believe, I am writing” his present is valid only for that moment, as subsequent moments demonstrate.

3. Since the present of the letter writer is never the present of his addressee, epistolary discourse is caught up in the impossibility of a dialogue in the present. That is, “I feel” cannot be interpreted by the addressee as “you feel” but rather as “you felt when you wrote this letter.”

Epistolary narrative plays constantly on the disparities between these various times, as we shall see in our next section.

TEMPORAL POLYVALENCE

The meaning of any epistolary statement is determined by many moments: the actual time that an act described is performed, the moment when it is written down, the respective times that the letter is mailed, received, read, and reread. Time intervals
and intervening events are of crucial importance. Thus in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* a letter reread several years later will have a significantly different effect from that of the first reading. In *Les Liaisons* the letter from Mme de Rosemonde to the présidente congratulating her on her courageous resistance has a different meaning from the intended one when it arrives after Tourvel’s fall. In both cases the novelist is playing on the disparity between two or more moments, between the time of the writer and the time of the reader, between the time of the first reading and the time of the rereading. Meaning is relative not to one time but to two or more.

An interesting passage from *La Nouvelle Héloïse* illustrates the way in which epistolary statements depend on multiple temporal levels. Saint-Preux gives an account to Claire of a moment of weakness, in which there is a curious interplay between the time of the event narrated and the time it is written down:

> En entrant dans la chambre qui m’était destinée, je la reconnus pour la même que j’avais occupée autrefois en allant à Sion. À cet aspect je sentis une impression que j’aurais peine à vous rendre. J’en fus si vivement frappé, que je crus redevenir à l’instant tout ce que j’étais alors; dix années s’effacèrent de ma vie, et tous mes malheurs furent oubliés. Hélas! cette erreur fut courte, et le second instant me rendit plus accablant le poids de toutes mes anciennes peines. Quelles tristes réflexions succédèrent à ce premier enchantement! Quelles comparaisons dououreuses s’offrirent à mon esprit! Charmes de la première jeunesse, délices des premières amours, pourquoi vous retracer encore à ce cœur accablé d’ennuis et surchargé de lui-même! O temps, temps heureux, tu n’es plus! J’aimais, j’étais aimé. Je me livrais dans la paix de l’innocence aux transports d’un amour partagé. Je savourais à longs traits le délicieux sentiment qui me faisait vivre. [5:9]

We are dealing with three distinct times here: the time (distant past) of Saint-Preux and Julie’s first love, the time (immediate past) of Saint-Preux’s recent stay in his old room, and third, the time that he writes all this to Claire. When Saint-Preux enters into his apostrophic “Charmes de la première jeunesse,” however, we enter with him into a confusion of times. Is his apostrophic lament simply a reporting in indirect discourse of his sentiments that night in his old room, or is it the expression of his feelings at the time of writing? Similarly, do the sentences beginning “Je me
livrais dans la paix de l'innocence” and “Je savourais” refer to the distant or the recent past? Since a crucial issue at this point in Rousseau's novel is whether or not Saint-Preux is “cured” of his love, these are not irrelevant questions. A rigid answer to them is both impossible and less important than the mere fact that confusion of times raises such questions. The temporal ambiguity of the apostrophe “Charmes O temps” indicates that at the very least the act of recording such past sentiments makes Saint-Preux relive them once again, just as for a brief moment in his room he had relived the distant past. Saint-Preux’s effort to transcend his moment of weakness by confessing it to Claire is paradoxically also one in which he can savor that moment again.

Confusion of past and present is Saint-Preux’s chronic problem, as Wolmar writes to Claire:

L’erreur qui l’abuse et le trouble est de confondre les temps et de se reprocher souvent comme un sentiment actuel ce qui n’est que l’effet d’un souvenir trop tendre.

Il l’aime dans le temps passé: voilà le vrai mot de lénigme. Otez-lui la mémoire, il n’aura plus d’amour. [4:14]

The power of memory to blur temporal distinctions is inherent to epistolary narrative where lovers are separated, since memory is all one has left in absence. Memory, imagination, and hope make of past and future the only living present for the letter writer separated from the lover, visible in the very oscillation between past and future tenses: “je serais bien ingrate si je ne vous aimais avec les mêmes emportements que ma passion me donnait, quand je jouissais de témoignages de la vôtre. Je ne puis vous oublier, et je n’oublie pas aussi que vous m’avez fait espérer que vous viendriez passer quelque temps avec moi” (Lettres portugaises, L. 1). The moment of separation fixes a permanent image that makes the past persist into the present with all the illusion of reality, when no real present comes to reveal the past as past: “Le temps où vous séparâtes ces deux amants fut celui où leur passion était à son plus haut point de vêhémence. Peut-être s’ils fussent restés plus longtemps ensemble, se seraient-ils peu à peu refroidis; mais leur imagination vivement émue les a sans cesse offerts l’un à l’autre tels qu’ils étaient à l’instant de leur séparation” (Wolmar to Claire, 4:14).
The epistolary situation, in which both time lags and absence play such a large role, lends itself to the temporal ambiguity whereby past is taken for present. The only possible present is the most immediate past—be it the last contact or the last letter. In narrative whose action is the recovery from unrequited love, the lover will continue to “love in the past tense” until a more immediate present effaces that past. Thus for Saint-Preux the image of Julie d’Etanges can be effaced only by prolonged contact with the present Julie—Madame de Wolmar. After a stay at Clarens he is on his way toward a cure when he can say that “pour la première fois, j’ai vu Julie en son absence, non telle qu’elle fut pour moi mais telle qu’elle se montre à mes yeux tous les jours si chaste et si vertueuse, au milieu de ses trois aimables enfants” (4:11). The Portuguese nun, who never actually sees again the man she had loved, confronts a more immediate image of him in the form of his last two cold, indifferent letters. In returning all of his other letters, she keeps these two to remind her of his indifference, to efface a past image with a more recent one.

The time gap between writer and addressee makes of any epistolary verb a potentially polyvalent one. In his statement the I can address only a you who is an image persisting from the past; likewise, the you who receives the message exists in yet another time, which was future to the I sending the message. Restif de la Bretonne’s Lettres posthumes presents a curious exercise in such temporal polyvalence. De Fontlhète, fatally ill, writes letters for one year to his wife Hortense, to be mailed to her during the first year after his death and reread in succeeding years. The wife, not knowing that De Fontlhète has died but believing him on a trip, thinks that these letters are being written during the same year that she is reading them. To encourage this illusion, De Fontlhète had provided for a secretary to forge postscriptum replies to specific queries in his wife’s letters after his death. As a result the novel, which consists of both the husband’s letters and the wife’s responses, does not read as a total “dialogue des sourds,” although the time lag in such a dialogue between a dead man and his wife generates numerous ambiguities and ironies. For example, when De Fontlhète describes his plan in his first letter—“Tous les jours vous écrire une Lettre que vous lirez peut-être, quand je ne serai plus” — the “lirez,” which the wife must
interpret as “reread” is meant quite literally by De Fontlhète, since the first time Hortense reads his letters he is already dead without her knowing it. In one of her letters Hortense complains of her husband’s long absence but consoles herself with the knowledge that it is “forced.”

Restif further complicates the interval between time of writing and time of reading by introducing new temporal levels. In each letter De Fontlhète describes not only his thoughts and the events of the day of the writing but those of the corresponding day of the previous two years as well. Since his wife is supposed to reread the letters on the anniversary of each day in succeeding years, he is taking a “five-year diary” approach to both writing and reading. To De Fontlhète such an approach approximates immortality, since Hortense “réunira, dans un seul instant, quatre années, les deux passées, dont je décrirai chaque jour; celle qui s’écoule, et dans laquelle j’écris, et celle où elle me lira. Ainsi je prolonge mon existence, je la quadruple, et je sens à cet instant le bonheur” (L. 2). De Fontlhète’s letters constitute not only a proto-Proustian effort to redeem time by superimposing various temporal levels, but also an attempt to project the past into the future by adding to the life of the word-when-written the life of the word-when-read.

The time-lag aspect of epistolary discourse is the foundation on which Restif could build a novel like Les Posthumes. If such a time interval is exaggerated in Restif (one year between writing and reading) or in Lettres persanes (where delays in communication undermine Usbek’s authority in the harem), even when shorter this interval plays a role. Just as De Fontlhète may no longer be alive when his wife receives his letter, so any statement made in the present by a letter writer may no longer be valid when his message is received. Saint-Preux is painfully aware of this time lag when he writes, upon receiving a letter from Julie, “Enfin je respire, je vis, tu te portes bien, tu m’aimes: ou plutôt il y a dix jours que tout cela était vrai; mais qui me répondra d’aujourd’hui? O absence! ô tourment! ô bizarre et funeste état où l’on ne peut jouir que du moment passé, et où le présent n’est point encore!” (2:16). And yet in similar circumstances Mme de Sévigné can write, upon receiving a letter, “Je vis défaire la petite malle devant moi, et en même temps, frast, frast, je démêle le mien [my bundle of letters] et je trouve enfin, ma bonne, que vous vous portez bien”
134 EPISTOLARITY

(13 December 1671). In the light of Saint-Preux's comment, Mme de Sévigné's use of the present tense is erroneous, yet it testifies to another prerogative of epistolary discourse. Depending on the correspondents, the time lag can be ignored or emphasized. Although epistolary discourse is characterized by time lags and a resulting temporal polyvalence or ambiguity, too much emphasis on such time lags would destroy the possibility of dialogue.

THE EPISTOLARY DIALOGUE

Epistolary discourse is inscribed within the larger domain of verbal exchange between two parties, each of whom alternately assumes the role of speaker or hearer. A brief comparison of the epistolary exchange with some other types of dialogue will help us keep in mind the traits particular to letter dialogue.

1. Communication between two or more parties who share the same time and space is extraverbal as well as verbal; tones and gestures play a role.

2. When space is no longer shared, tones still play a part in communication, but gestures are lost. Phone conversations already involve that sense of absence inherent to the letter exchange.

3. The comparison with shortwave radio communication is instructive. Here we have a situation parallel to phone communication (shared time, different space, tones are still important) but a significant difference that makes radio communication more akin to the epistolary exchange. The
participants in a radio conversation cannot interrupt each other; each speaker completes his speech as a discrete unit and signs off before the other begins. The radio message, like the letter, may be highly structured—with a beginning, middle, and end; its mode of existence has an independence, a separateness, that allies it with the monologue.

4. The letter is an even more discrete unit than the radio message. Writer and reader share neither time nor space. The discontiguity of the space and time is reflected in the discontinuity of the exchange, a dialogue composed of more separate, monologuelike units than the component units of the oral dialogue. The written exchange not only introduces the time lag between message transmission and message reception; it also widens the interval between message reception and response. The writer has more time to meditate, to measure and correct his words, to polish his style. The status of the letter as a written, tangible document, moreover, enables epistolary discourse to introduce its own extraverbal signs equivalent to tones and gestures in oral discourse. Tears, handwriting, punctuation, and even spelling may be part of the message. Finally, letters are both permanent words and losable words. They can complicate communication by crossing each other in the mail or getting lost or stolen; they make the epistolary dialogue one that can be scrambled, so that the order in which words are read is not necessarily the order in which they were written.

As written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model. No sooner is the writer aware of the gap that separates him from his reader than he tries to bridge that gap. The cliché "Il me semble que je vous parle quand je vous écris, et que vous m'êtes un peu plus présent" (Portugaises, 1. 4) is an essential epistolary statement; epistolary language is preoccupied with immediacy, with presence, because it is a product of absence. Since both the temporal and the spatial hiatus are so much a part of epistolary discourse, the word present in the letter is charged with both its temporal and its spatial meanings; it signifies "now" as opposed to the "then" of past and future events or contact, and it means "here" as opposed to the "there" where the addressee always is. The letter writer is engaged in the impossible task of
making his reader present; the epistolary dialogue attempts to approximate the conversation of the “here” and the “now.”

Thus although the epistolary situation involves a wider hiatus between thought and expression than the oral one, we can note a self-conscious tendency among letter novelists to close this gap. Writing to the moment aims at bridging the interval between event and expression. Likewise, the technique of invoking the postman or messenger who is pressing one to finish reduces the time of reflection and gives written language the unerasable qualities of spoken language: “Pourquoi n’ai-je pas la force d’effacer tout ce que je me reproche? Sans Dupré, qui s’impatiente dans ma chambre, et qui ne me donnerait pas, sans doute, le temps de recommencer, je m’épargnerais la honte de tant de folies” (Lettres de la marquise, L. 27). In both writing to the moment and writing under postal pressure, the rhythm of writing is dictated by external forces that give the epistolary utterance the spontaneity of the oral one.

Occasionally the exchange of notes may be so rapid that even the spatiotemporal distance between correspondents seems to disappear. In the sequence of notes between Saint-Preux and Julie at the beginning of La Nouvelle Héloïse, the two lovers could be speaking rather than writing to each other:

I. Billet de Julie

Réponse
Je me suis tu longtemps; votre froideur m’a fait parler à la fin. Si l’on peut se vaincre pour la vertu, l’on ne supporte point le mépris de ce qu’on aime. Il faut partir.

II. Billet de Julie
Non, monsieur, après ce que vous avez paru sentir, après ce que vous m’avez osé dire, un homme tel que vous avez feint d’être ne part point; il fait plus.

Réponse
Je n’ai rien feint qu’une passion modérée dans un coeur au désespoir. Demain vous serez contente, et, quoi que vous en puissiez dire, j’aurai moins fait que de partir.
III. Billet de Julie


The rapid alternation between “restez” and “je pars” produces a dramatic effect comparable to the most intense dialogues in the theater. Like stichomythia, such an exchange must be reserved for rare moments, as in the following example from Laclos:

[Valmont’s Letter 153]

J’ajoute que le moindre obstacle mis de votre part sera pris de la mienne pour une véritable déclaration de guerre: vous voyez donc que la réponse que je vous demande n’exige ni longues ni belles phrases. Deux mots suffisent.

REPONSE de la marquise de Merteuil écrite en bas de la même lettre.

Hé bien! la guerre.

The brevity of the ultimatum and the curtness of the response, the intensity of the emotion expressed “en deux mots”—all add to the violence of the collision: the ultimate clash between two superior minds whose words are brought together for the first time here on a piece of paper, but whose interests are henceforth in conflict. This brief dialogue is the culminating point of the narrative; the entire denouement will spring from this short exchange of words.

The collision of Valmont and Merteuil on a piece of paper is an epistolary coup on Laclos’s part. Much less intense approximations of a conversation in the here and now occur throughout letter narrative. The act of picking up the pen to write even a leisurely letter becomes an almost magical ritual whereby one evokes the presence of the addressee. For this reason, what we might call “interior dialogue” or “pseudodialogue” is a fundamental occurrence in epistolary discourse.

When Zilia knots her quipos (the Peruvian equivalent of writing), “la sorte de ressemblance que j’imagine qu’ils ont avec les paroles, me fait une illusion qui trompe ma douleur: je crois te parler” (Lettres d’une Péruvienne, L. 4). For the letter writer, to write someone is to speak to him, but in order for this illusion to be maintained in a lengthy letter, the other person’s voice must somehow be heard. A common technique for making
the partner "present" is one we have already examined in chapter 3—that of quotation and paraphrase of his remarks. The partner is represented through his own words. In novels where we are given only one-half of the dialogue (usually that of the woman in novels that trace the development and decline of love), this is a common means of letting the outside reader glimpse the other half of the conversation: "Je ne vous connais point assez? qui vous l'a dit? Je ne douterais jamais un instant de la sincérité, de l'ardeur, de la vérité — Oh! va te promener avec tes plaintes" (Fanni Butlerd, L. 67). Werther conducts an interior debate with Wilhelm, reproducing Wilhelm's voice within his letter through paraphrase:

Entweder, sagst Du, hast du Hoffnung auf Lotten, oder du hast keine. Gut, im ersten Fall suche sie durchzutreiben, suche die Erfüllung deiner Wünsche zu umfassen; im anderen Fall ermanne dich und suche einer elenden Empfindung los zu werden, die alle deine Kräfte verzehren muss. —Bester! das ist wohl gesagt und—bald gesagt.

Either, you say, you have some hope of winning Lotte, or you have none. Very well, in the first case try to realize your hopes, try to seize the fulfillment of your wishes; in the other case take hold of yourself and try to get rid of a miserable sentiment that must ultimately consume all your strength. —Dear friend! your advice is well expressed—but so easy to give. [Werther, 8 August 1771; translation mine]

Thus within a letter written by a single correspondent we often hear several voices, different points of view, which transform the monologue into a dialogue.

Interior dialogue in which the addressee's words are quoted differs from that in which his voice is imagined. The technique of citation and paraphrase serves one of two purposes: (1) it is either a somewhat artificial device for letting us glimpse the other half of the conversation in novels that present only one correspondent's letters, or (2) it is an integral part of the psychological action of the narrative, presenting the writer as reader-decoder (see chapter 3). In either case the partner's voice is his real, though past, one, heard upon replay because the letter writer has before him the partner's letter. Past stimulus (the partner's letter) is incorporated into present response (represented—made present again).
In the imaginary dialogue, however, no letter stimulus is needed; or rather, the stimulus is the mere act of picking up the pen, which can conjure up the addressee. Fanni Butler writes to her lover as if he were in the room with her: “Adieu, Milord. Vous faites la mine. Adieu mon ami. Vous boudez encore. Eh bien! adieu, mon cher Alfred” (L. 10). Merteuil engages in a pseudodialogue with Valmont in which she symptomatically assigns him the lines of a dullard: “Mme de Volanges marie sa fille. Et qui croyez-vous qu’elle ait choisi pour gendre? Le comte de Gercourt. J’en suis dans une fureur. Eh bien! vous ne devinez pas encore? oh! l’esprit lourd! Lui avez-vous donc pardonné l’affaire de l’intendante? Et moi, n’ai-je pas encore à me plaindre de lui, monstre que vous êtes?” (L. 2). In Montherlant’s quartet of novels, _Les Jeunes Filles_, Andrée Hacquebaut pushes the epistolary one-person dialogue to its psychotic extreme. After sending numerous unanswered, unopened love letters to the writer Pierre Costals, the provincial spinster writes him, “Toute seule! Oui, oui, venez vite. Je vous ouvre la porte. Oh! comme vous avez froid! Vous sentez bon l’hiver, la gelée. Il faut que je vous réchauffe. Sortons. Quelle robe me conseillez-vous? Marchons longtemps, jusqu’à ce que je demande grâce. Moi, froid? Toute chaude de vous, oui” (_Les Lépreuses_, L. 7). Andrée’s letter illustrates an extreme that is latent in the epistolary situation. In the absence of the real addressee, one creates an image of a present addressee, with whom one can converse comfortably. Imagination substitutes what reality cannot supply. The world of the lonely person, or of the person separated from lover or friend, becomes so peopled with images that when he picks up the pen, it is natural that he should engage in an immediate conversation with the image conjured up by the act of writing.

The imagined dialogue, moreover, has an advantage over the real conversation: one can manipulate one’s partner. The presence evoked by the sorcerer’s pen can speak only the words that the sorcerer assigns him. The fantasy dialogue thus reveals more about the ventriloquist than the puppet. We have only to reexamine the above-quoted passages to note how much of Fanni’s naive, childlike personality, Merteuil’s superiority, and Andrée’s frustration are revealed. Likewise, Lovelace’s frequent
pseudodialogues with Belford are more an occasion for Lovelace to exercise his wit than to confront any real moral objections on Belford's part:

And now, Belford, what dost think? I shall be very sick tomorrow. Sick! Why sick? What a-devil shouldst thou be sick for? For more good reasons than one, Jack. I should be glad to hear but one. Of all thy rogish inventions I should not have thought of this. Perhaps thou thinkest my view to be, to draw the lady to my bedside: that's a trick of three or four thousand years old, and I should find it much more to my purpose, if I could get to hers. [Lovelace to Belford, 26 May]

Interior dialogue is haunted by an air of falseness. When the partner's words are imagined, the letter writer is addressing a manipulated pseudopresence; when they are quoted, the dialogue borders on artifice. Interior dialogue is an attempt to approximate a conversation of the here and now, which both grows out of and is doomed by the epistolary situation.

Epistolary discourse is a discourse marked by hiatuses of all sorts: time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and reception; spatial separation between writer and addressee; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript. Yet it is also a language of gap closing, of writing to the moment, of speaking to the addressee as if he were present. Epistolary discourse is the language of the "as if" present. In ordinary conversation language affirms a physical presence; it is an extension of the roll-call ritual—"Are you here?"—"Present." In the theater, which imitates a present action, dialogue traditionally affirms presence in the act of performance. The actors who speak stand corporeally before one another and the audience. The performance of a play, as the Latin languages indicate, is conceived as a *repraesentatio*, a "making present" by physical "presences." Epistolary language, which is the language of absence, makes present by make-believe. The particular *you* whose constant appearance distinguishes letter discourse from other written discourse (memoir, diary, rhetoric) is an image of the addressee who is elsewhere. Memory and expectation keep the addressee present to the imagination of the writer, whose narrative (*erzählte Zeit*)
and narration (Erzählzeit), through a frequent oscillation between past and future, likewise seize the present through illusion.

1. I am following Emile Benveniste's well-known distinction between two fundamental linguistic subsystems: (1) the personal, or "discourse," characterized by the use of I-you, and (2) the nonpersonal, or "récit historique," characterized by the use of il (Problèmes de linguistique générale [1]). Harald Weinrich makes a similar distinction between "erzählte Welt" and "besprochene Welt" in his linguistic analysis of time in literary texts, Tempus. Weinrich's two systems are grounded primarily in distribution of verb tenses, whereas Benveniste uses both tense repartition and the notion of deixis (demonstrative function) developed by K. Brugmann (1904), Karl Bühler (Sprachtheorie [1934]), and R. Jakobson (Essais de linguistique générale, chap. 9 [1963]). Benveniste's histoire/discours distinction has been widely discussed and applied in linguistics and narrative theory. In the 1975 Benveniste festschrift (Langue, discours, société, ed. Julia Kristeva et al.), Jenny Simonin-Grumbach redefines the basic distinction and introduces some interesting nuances ("Pour une typologie des discours," pp. 85–120).

2. Roger Duchêne, Réalité vécue et art épistolaire, vol. 1, Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d’amour, p. 114. Duchêne's sensitive analysis of the Sévigné-Grignan correspondence as "le meilleur roman épistolaire et le plus beau roman d'amour" (p. 264) is based on the thesis that what distinguishes Mme de Sévigné's letters radically from those of the secrétaires, the greco-latin tradition, and the galante tradition is the particularity of the I-you relationship that shapes them and the role that "réalité vécue" plays.

3. At the beginning of Humphry Clinker, for instance, any one of the first letters taken singly would mystify the outside reader, but all of them together make clear the relationships between the various people mentioned and what activity the correspondents are engaged in.


6. "Writing to the moment" is the term coined by Richardson in his preface to Sir Charles Grandison to describe the simultaneity of writing with the event or emotion described: "The nature of familiar letters, written, as it were, to the moment, while the heart is agitated by hopes and fears, or events undecided, must plead an excuse for the bulk of a collection of this kind."

7. I refer only half facetiously to the commercially sold five-year diary, in which each page contains space for five consecutive years’ entries for the same day (e.g., 1 January 1981, 1982, 1983, 1984, 1985). In fact, a regular preoccupation with superimposable anniversaries appears elsewhere in Restif’s writing. In Monsieur Nicolas Restif tells about how he kept from 1752 to 1754 a series of notebooks of anniversary inscriptions; he habitually reread each inscription on the corresponding day in subsequent years and added marginal annotations. Michel Baude has located and studied this curious structure in Restif's diary.
writing in his article "Une Structure insolite: les anniversaires dans le journal intime."

8. Restif writes similarly in Les Nuits de Paris, "Je vis quatre fois dans un seul instant, au moment actuel et les trois années précédentes. . . . Je compare le tableau et cette comparaison me fait revivre le temps passé comme dans le moment présent. Elle empêche, renouvelée, la perte des années écoulées, et qu'au bout d'un temps je ne me sois étranger à moi-même" (London, 1788, 6:2506). For Michel Baude, who finds the same mystic conception of time in Restif's journal Mes Inscriptions (see note 7 above), Restif's cult of anniversaries enables him to accede to an eternal present. In fact, as it works out in Les Posthumes, the multiplication of temporal levels in an epistolary context creates not only a sensation of Bergsonian durée but also an ironic gap between writer and reader that makes more apparent a play of Derridean différance (difference, deferring, postponement).

9. Gail B. Mensher has analyzed a striking stylistic trait in Mme de Sévigné's correspondence, which she calls "writing to the future." Mme de Sévigné's desire to live in her daughter's, rather than her own, spatiotemporal zone often led her to attempt to fantasize the situation in which her letter would arrive and be received. Whereas Richardsonian writing to the moment attempts to draw the reader into the writer's present, writing to the future involves an imaginative attempt to approximate a dialogue in the reader's present. See Gail Mensher, "Problems of Time and Existence in the Letters of Madame de Sévigné." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1977.

10. A comparison of Crébillon's Duchesse and Marquise with Mme Riccoboni's univoice novels reveals that Mme Riccoboni overuses quotation, whereas Crébillon employs it sparingly, relying more on paraphrase and allusion to keep alive his duke's and count's voices.

11. Merteuil's guessing game is reminiscent of a more elaborate and famous one- Mme de Sévigné's letter announcing the engagement of the Grande Mademoiselle to Lauzun (15 December 1670).