CHAPTER FIVE

THE DYNAMICS OF EPISTOLARY CLOSURE

The readings that I have proposed in the preceding chapters are based largely on the relationship of internal writer to internal reader that marks the epistolary situation. For this reason many of the remarks in these chapters are as valid in analyzing single letters as in approaching an entire novel. It is time now, however, to turn primarily to the analysis of the epistolary work as a whole. In this chapter we shall consider the relationship of internal writer to internal reader only insofar as it affects the structure of the entire correspondence—a structure that becomes particularly evident in the dynamics of epistolary closure.

Several recent studies concerned with the signifying process in poetic and narrative fictions have chosen, in one way or another, to "begin with the end." In her illuminating analysis of the architectonic principles underlying poetic closure, Barbara Herrnstein Smith has effectively transformed the question of "how poems mean" into the question of "how poems end":

Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art; and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a specific design.
In *Fable's End: Completeness and Closure in Rhetorical Fiction*, David H. Richter complements Smith's work on the lyric by focusing on closural strategies in one type of novel. Both Smith and Richter are attentive to reader expectation and response; both illustrate the way in which narrative and poetic forms satisfy, or frustrate, what Frank Kermode emphasized as man's deep-rooted metaphysical and psychological desire for "intelligible Ends": "We project ourselves past the End, so as to see the structure whole."²

Other studies, particularly those that emphasize the modernity of the fictions they deal with or of their own approach, concentrate on the "open form." R. M. Adams, Alan Friedman, and Beverly Gross, among others, study open-endedness, unresolved conflict, and anticonclusion in the modern novel as emanating from a modern sensibility that conceives that life itself is open.³ When Umberto Eco writes about open forms (*Opera aperta*, 1962), he likewise evokes an epistemology of indeterminacy. Eco is, however, the most radical and thorough of the apologists for openness (in both literature and literary criticism), for he chooses modern forms—musical, sculptural, literary—that not only lend themselves to multiple interpretations but demand the interpreter's collaboration in order to be created and completed.

The question of openness and closure has thus become a focal point for discussion of fundamental literary, psychological, and philosophical questions: the relationship of art to life, of literary structure to experience. "Men, like poets," writes Frank Kermode, "rush 'into the middest,' in *medias res*, when they are born; they also die in *mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations."⁴ As a literary form, letter narrative imposes the ritual of closing upon both the individual correspondents and the novelist who creates them. Throughout this chapter we shall examine how letter writers end their fictions. The individual sign-off as well as the denouement of the work as a whole can "reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations," can occasion an effort to "make sense of [the] span" covered by the narrative. Most importantly, to ask how narrative ends is to ask what makes it proceed; a close look at the
dynamics of epistolary closure should reveal many of the forces that generate letter narrative in the first place.

In the subdivisions of any work of literature (scene or act in the theater, chapter in the novel, stanza in poetry), the closing lines can be a privileged moment for emphasis, summary, retrospective illumination, or simply a playful punch line. Letter narrative multiplies the number of such privileged positions, and in so doing runs the risk of devaluation. Some novelists have nevertheless made interesting use of the individual sign-off. The two lovers who correspond in Edme Boursault’s *Lettres à Babet* (composed of letters both “à Babet” and “de Babet”) close their letters most frequently with “tout à toi,” yet this formula is almost always cleverly incorporated into the body of the letter:

> Vous verrez, par la différence de nos services [that of the writer and his rivals], que, n'étant pas si bête qu'eux, je suis plus digne d'être
> Tout à vous. [L. 4]

One can always measure the mood of the entire letter and the degree of intimacy of the two lovers by its closing; the following signature highlights a moment of coquettish retreat on the part of Babet, who transforms her closing “tout” accordingly:

> Et si je m'avise de t'écrire, et après t'avoir commandé tout ce qui m'aura plu, tu croiras que ma lettre doive finir par la protestation que j'ai coutume de te faire, d'être à toi toute ma vie:
> Point du tout. [L. 16]

In fact, a cursory glance at the closing lines of all the *Babet* letters would provide a summary of the action of the novel, from the beginning of the courtship through all its vicissitudes to Babet’s final letter:

> Adieu, mon cher, je t'embrasse de toute mon âme avant que d'entrer en religion, et te proteste que je n'en sortirai de ma vie que pour être
> A toi.

Boursault continually invests the signature with the power to summarize the narrative span of the individual letter.

*Babet’s* “tout à toi” is a brief formula that Boursault cleverly reformulates. The more usual French closings of the type “j'ai l'honneur d'être” however, are so cumbersome that most
letter novelists simply omit them. English epistolary style, being less restricted than the French by long conventional closing formulas, lends itself more easily to the incorporation of signatures into the narrative. Such integrated signatures are a hallmark of Richardson's style. The act of terminating a letter seems to encourage the Richardsonian character to situate himself on an emotional map, to summarize his present psychological state and attitude toward the person to whom he is writing:

and what is all this wild incoherence for? It is only to beg to know how you have been ..., by a line directed for Mrs. Rachel Clark which will reach the hands of your unhappy—but that's not enough—

Your miserable
Clarissa Harlowe [28 June]

Signatures in Richardson must be read; otherwise we fail to appreciate the ambiguity of a letter to Clarissa signed simply “A.H.,” a letter so scolding in tone as to make Clarissa think it is from her shrewish sister Arabella Harlowe rather than from her beloved Anna Howe (5 and 6 July).

The ritual of opening and closing a letter imposes upon the writer a gesture of self-definition vis-à-vis the addressee. The five personal letters exchanged by Heloise and Abelard, years after Abelard’s castration and their retirement into separate convents, offer the most interesting trace of this problematic activity. In the standard editions Abelard’s salutations define both himself and Heloise in relation to Christ:

Heloisae, dilectissimae soror suae in Christo, Abaelardus, frater eius in ipso. [L. 2]
To Heloise, his dearly beloved sister in Christ, Abelard her brother in the same.

Sponsae Christi servus eiusdem. [L. 4]
To the bride of Christ, his servant.

Abelard speaks from a relatively stable position; by his syntax he makes it clear that Christ is the ground for his own and Heloise’s identity. Outside of Christ there is no relationship between Abelard and Heloise. Heloise’s salutations, however, reveal a more troubled and fluctuating thought:
Domino suo immo patri, coniugi suo immo fratri, ancilla sua immo filia, ipsius uxor immo soror, Abaelardo Heloisa. [L. 1]
To her master, or rather father, her husband, or rather brother; his servant, or rather daughter, his wife, or rather sister; to Abelard, Heloise.

In this first letter Heloise's first impulse is always to speak in terms of the previous relationships, tutorial and conjugal (“master,” “husband”). Her second gesture—that of erasure or correction—dramatizes her efforts to transform the relationship into acceptable ecclesiastical ones (Abelard becomes priestly “father” or “brother”). Yet the very movement to “father” and “brother” from “master” and “husband” suggests that the ground for relationship in Heloise’s mind remains personal and familial; Abelard is not her brother “in Christ” but her “brother.” Letter 3, beginning, “unico suo post Christum unica sua in Christo” (“To her only one after Christ, she who is his alone in Christ”), adds Christ seemingly as the ground for relationship but actually as afterthought and effectively as obstacle: without Christ, Abelard would be “her only one” and she “his alone.” Heloise is attempting the impossible, to speak a language of exclusive love that would include both Abelard and Christ. The cryptic salutation of Heloise’s final personal letter, “Domino specialiter, sua singulariter”—alternately translated as either “God’s own in species, his own as individual” or “To him who is especially her lord, she who is uniquely his”—does not solve the dilemma but offers further evidence of its complexity. As a nun addressing her former husband and present convent counselor, Heloise wrestles most visibly and subtly with the problems of self-definition in the problematic moment of framing the letter.

Few writers investigate the depths implied by the gesture of closure as thoroughly as Heloise or Guilleragues’s Portuguese nun (whose closings we shall discuss later in this chapter).¹ Most writers, like Boursault and Richardson, treat signatures playfully (and a more recent letter novelist, Rémy de Gourmont, even reproduces the handwritten signatures of the various correspondents of Le Songe d’une femme on the printed page). Many, however, use the closing for more serious emphases. Goethe’s hero Werther reserves his most morbid thoughts for the final lines of his letters, which frequently close on death wishes or
metaphors of annihilation (e.g., 16 July, 26 July, 10 August, 18 August, 30 August), just as his novel will be brought to a close by his suicide. Foscolo's *Ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis*, very much influenced by *Werther*, adds to the Wertherian suicide motif a perennial Italian concern: despair over the state of the fatherland. (Foscolo's particular concern, in the final version of the novel [1802], is the concession of Venice to the Austrians in the treaty of Campo Formio.) Jacopo's letters abound in two kinds of death imagery: (1) personal death wishes that often revolve around a preoccupation with his own tomb (words such as *sepolcro, fossa, sepoltura*, and *seppellire* are dear to the poet of *I Sepolcri*), and (2) images of a larger-scale "Distruzione" in which he envisions the past and future destruction of nations in apocalyptic terms (in particular 10 January, 13 March, 21 May, 25 May, 28 May 1798; 19 February, 5 March 1799). The two visions of annihilation that often terminate his letters—personal and political—reinforce one another and propel the novel toward its ultimate Wertherian conclusion.

That "ultimate" conclusion, the point where the narrative work as a whole actually comes to a stop, is the moment that interests us most in this chapter, for the closural force of that ultimate ending depends on a dynamics particular to the epistolary form. Epistolary endings move between two contradictory possibilities: (1) the potential finality of any letter—given its conventional mechanism for closing, for "signing off," and (2) the open-endedness of the form—in which the letter writer is always in dialogue with a possible respondent, and in which any letter appears as part of a potentially ongoing sequence. The typical seduction novel (*Lettres de la marquise*, or the présidente-Valmont plot of *Les Liaisons*) plays on this dual possibility when it chains together a series of letters from the seducer's victim, each of which closes with an oath that she will not write again. Each letter's "adieu" threatens to bring the novel to a halt, yet the response to such a farewell letter gives the narrative new momentum, since the seducer's art lies in his very ability to keep the dialogue going.

Epistolary narrative, in keeping with the dual potential of the letter, falls into two major categories of closure: (1) those novels that come to a motivated state of arrest and equilibrium, produc-
ing a strong sense of closure, and (2) those novels that are open-ended, whose lack of resolution is due often to an enigmatic silence on the part of one of the writers. It is the former, more numerous group that we shall examine first.

All epistolary narrative ultimately drops off into silence, yet in some works this silence is more motivated than in others. An obvious cause for cessation of writing—the death of the principal correspondent—brings many a letter novel to a close.\textsuperscript{7} Such a denouement differs from a simple tragic conclusion by its epistolary subtext: in works such as Crébillon’s \textit{Lettres de la marquise}, Restif’s \textit{Les Posthumes}, or those of the \textit{Werther} strain, the act of writing becomes so identified with life and the life force throughout the narrative that the mere cessation of letters from the protagonist is synonymous with his death. Voltaire plays on this synonymity of \textit{écrire} = \textit{vivre} in his short \textit{Lettres d’Amabed}. It is through the act of writing that Amabed, after a long silence, finally reveals that he has survived the Inquisition; his first letter following an abrupt halt in his correspondence begins: “Je suis donc au nombre des vivants! C’est donc moi qui t’écris, divin Shastasid!” (p. 443). Underlying Amabed’s curious double syllogism (I write, therefore I live; I live, therefore I write) lies an equation that invests the act of writing with vital significance for both the writer and the receiver of the letter (to write is to live, when the letter is literally the only sign of life). Both for real letter writers and for readers of epistolary fictions there is doubtless a profoundly felt truth in the ostensibly specious argument that correspondents exist only in their letters.

In \textit{Lettres de la marquise} the letter functions doubly as a symbol of life. At the end of Crébillon’s novel, as in \textit{Werther}, the continuation of correspondence by the dying marquise indicates that she has not yet expired; its interruption confirms her death. Whereas in theater, film, and opera the life force conventionally expresses itself metonymically through the breath that gives voice to speech or song (and death is communicated as that moment when breath = speech breaks off), in epistolary literature ink is regularly metaphorized—explicitly or implicitly—as life’s blood. Furthermore, in \textit{Lettres de la marquise} the metaphorical equation \textit{écrire} = \textit{vivre} is reinforced by the identities \textit{écrit} = \textit{aimer} and \textit{vivre} = \textit{aimer}. Throughout Crébillon’s novel it is clear that
writing and loving are equated as one and the same act; it is by corresponding with the count that the marquise comes to love him ("A force de vous écrire que je ne vous aimais pas, je vins enfin à vous écrire que je vous aimais" [L. 40]), or is it perhaps rather because she loves him that she agrees to write to him in the first place? The marquise likewise associates letters with life; after the count's cruel betrayal she announces: "J'ai brûlé vos lettres, et c'est par ce sacrifice que j'ai commencé à me détacher de la vie" (L. 69). In this novel love, letter, and life are so inextricably bound up together that when one ceases, the others must follow suit.

Thus tragic closure in epistolary narrative is regularly grounded in metaphorical structures that subextend the entire novel with the equation of writing to living. Comic closure, however, tends to produce resolution more ornamentally, as a more limited final cadence. Both types of closure, however, develop along predictably epistolary lines: if the tragic resolution of the epistolary work occurs when the letter writer can no longer write, we might say that in the comic denouement the letter writer no longer has anyone to whom to write. Typically, in those novels that end with a marriage of protagonists, there is no reason to continue writing the confidants, for the latter come to join the wedding party. Thus Pamela ends when the heroine's parents come to live with the newlyweds, and Lettres de Juliette Catesby closes on Juliette's wedding invitation to her confidante Henriette. At the end of Mme Riccoboni's Juliette Catesby, moreover, for the first time in the novel new voices (other than Juliette's) are heard. Letters from Mylord d'Ossery, Mylady d'Ossery (Juliette), and Mylady d'Ormond follow each other in rapid succession, each inviting Henriette to join them for the wedding festivities. This sudden proliferation of letter writers resembles the final scene in classical comedy, where all the characters are brought together on stage to celebrate the lovers' marriage. An actress herself, Mme Riccoboni simply translated the conventional theatrical denouement into epistolary form to create the same sense of closure. Seen together, however, both comic and tragic closure in epistolary fiction point once again to those polar limits—total presence (reunion) and total absence (death)—that constitute the conditions obviating the letter.

What we have called comic closure (letters cease because of
addressee’s arrival) and tragic closure (letters cease because of writer’s decease) are not the only types of resolution possible in epistolary narrative, although they are the most traditional and conventional. An equally strong sense of closure can be produced by any motivated discontinuation of a correspondence. Herzog provides a simple illustration. Throughout Bellow’s work, letter writing has become such a symptom of Herzog’s manic state that his decision to give up message sending constitutes not only his most significant step toward a cure, but an appropriate conclusion to the novel: “Perhaps he’d stop writing letters. Yes, that was what was coming in fact. The knowledge that he was done with these letters. Whatever had come over him during these last months, the spell, really seemed to be passing, really going. In a few minutes he would call down to her [the cleaning woman], ‘Damp it down, Mrs. Tuttle. There’s water in the sink.’ But not just yet. At this time he had no messages for anyone. Nothing. Not a single word.’ Bellow’s emphatic final lines leave us with the feeling that when Herzog gives up message sending there really is no more to say. Silence—the return of calm after Herzog’s frantic scriptomania—puts an end to both Herzog’s neurosis and Bellow’s novel.

Motivated renunciation of writing provides the conclusion to Lettres portugaises. Only five letters long, this work by Guilleragues nonetheless shows a psychological development and unity of structure that make it worthy of treatment here. Mariane, the Portuguese nun responsible for the five letters, is an Ovidian heroine, abandoned by the lover to whom she desperately writes. Each of her first four letters terminates on a note of powerlessness: “Adieu, je n’en puis plus” (L. 1); “Mariane n’en peut plus, elle s’évanouit en finissant cette lettre” (L. 2). Overwhelmed by her uncontrollable emotions, Mariane is forced to break off abruptly: “Adieu, ma passion s’augmente à chaque moment” (L. 3); “Adieu, pardonnez-moi! Je n’ose plus vous prier de m’aimer; voyez où mon destin m’a réduite! Adieu” (L. 4). Although she always evokes the impossibility of continuing the letter in question, Mariane never renounces writing in these four letters. On the contrary, her closing includes a promise to take up the pen again: “Ah! que j’ai de choses à vous dire!” (L. 3). It is only in the fifth letter that Mariane renounces writing (“Je vous écris pour la
dernière fois”), after she has recognized the total lack of dialogue between herself and her lover: “Vous ne m’écrivez point. Vous ne la lirez point [my letter]. j’écris plus pour moi que pour vous” (L. 4). This moment of recognition occurs at the end of the fourth letter and prepares the denouement of the fifth. If the first four letters have broken off on a note of powerlessness, the fifth ends on a note of strength, of independence: “souvenez-vous que je me suis promis un état plus paisible, et que j’y parviendrai, ou que je prendrai contre moi quelque résolution extrême, que vous apprendrez sans beaucoup de déplaisir, mais je ne veux plus rien de vous, je suis une folle de redire les mêmes choses si souvent, il faut vous quitter et ne penser plus à vous, je crois même que je ne vous écrirai plus; suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?” (L. 5). The very fact that this is Mariane’s final letter, that no others follow, constitutes evidence that the resolution that she merely articulates here (silence and return to a peaceful state—through either self-control or suicide) has been actualized. The letters being an outward manifestation of inner turmoil, they cease when the turmoil ceases or is controlled.

In this instance it seems probable that closure is being purchased at the expense of repression. In renouncing letter writing Mariane is doubly renouncing her lover, for the two have become synonymous, with letter writing replacing the lover. In her very first letter, Mariane establishes the letter’s quality as erotic metonymy for the person: “Adieu, je ne puis quitter ce papier, il tombera entre vos mains, je voudrais bien avoir le même bonheur.” The first four letters stress her desire to have more frequent and longer letters from him and to prolong the moments when she writes him, as if the letter were the lover himself and writing an erotic experience. It is only in the last letter that she asks him not to write, resolves not to write herself, and returns his letters. Mariane would now be tempted to do to her lover’s person exactly what she has almost done with his letters: “je me sens, depuis quelques jours, en état de brûler et de déchirer ces gages de votre amour. si quelque hasard vous ramenait en ce pays, je vous déclare que je vous livrerai à la vengeance de mes parents.” (L. 5). So complete is the identification of letter and lover that the end of the love affair and the end of the letter narrative cut the
same thread in a single act of castration, as Mariane symbolically annihilates—or represses—lover, passion, and writing.

A radical shift in writing dynamics likewise closes Crébillon’s *Lettres de la duchesse*. The duchess’s final letter (L. 56) is even more distinct from the preceding narrative than Mariane’s. Much longer than the preceding letters (forty-two pages) it is written two years after them. These forty pages serve as a key to the rest of the novel; in them the duchess summarizes and puts into perspective the events that the earlier correspondence had merely punctuated, providing us with a retrospective illumination of the feelings and motives behind her previously mysterious actions. It is here that we learn that the duchess’s love for the duke preceded the beginning of their correspondence, that her sarcasm and indifference throughout have been feigned. For the first time, in this letter, she pronounces the word *aimer*; yet significantly enough, it is in the past tense: “je vous aimais.” Even the conditionals that occasionally suggested her emotions in earlier letters (“if I loved you, I would”) are now in the past: “vous auriez exigé de moi un aveu positif: je ne dois pas douter que vous ne l’eussiez obtenu. il n’y a rien, peut-être, à quoi avec le temps vous ne m’eussiez conduite.” Since the duke had chosen not to make time his ally, abandoning his courtship at an early point, the duchess invokes time as her bulwark: “le temps qui s’est écoulé entre votre lettre, et ma réponse, doit vous être une preuve que je n’ai rien donné au premier mouvement.” The interval between letters sets this final letter apart, just as its retrospective tone (summary and illumination of the past, confession of love in the past tense) distinguishes it from the earlier letters. Such a movement backward in time, as compared with the earlier future-oriented correspondence, constitutes a significant braking action. Even the duchess’s confession of love is a dead-end confession, not only because it is in the past tense, but also because it appears as a fulfillment of her earlier statement, “Si j’avais le malheur de vous aimer, je ne vous le dirais que le plus tard qu’il me serait possible” (L. 47). It remains only for the closing lines to bring the novel to its final state of arrest: “je vous préviens que je ne répondrai à aucune des lettres que vous pourrez m’écrire.

Adieu, Monsieur, quelqu’amertume que vous ayez répandue sur ma vie, c’est bien sincèrement que je désire que
la vôtre soit heureuse.' Since this letter is indeed the last one, we must assume that the duchess kept her resolution.

Epistolary narrative thus adds to the usual dynamics of closure (resolution of conflict, restoration of order, marriage, death) a dynamics of its own. Because the letter is not merely the narrative medium but frequently acquires a symbolic value as well, the very continuation or cessation of the writing constitutes a message that is often appropriate closure material:

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<td>sign of life</td>
<td>death</td>
<td>Werther, Jacopo Ortis</td>
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<td>sign of love</td>
<td>renunciation of love</td>
<td>Marquise, Duchesse, Portugaises</td>
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<td>neurosis</td>
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<td>separation of friends</td>
<td>reunion</td>
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In *Pamela* the letter becomes so much identified as a moral monitor and means to protect Pamela's virtue (see above, chap. 3) that the heroine cannot cease writing until she has convinced both B and B's society of that virtue (by the very fact that she writes, as well as by the events narrated within the letters). In *Les Liaisons*, where letters are stockpiled as secret weapons, the arms race easily explodes into total warfare, which destroys both of the warring parties. After the holocaust the survivors inherit the correspondence; as soon as all the secret weapons have been confiscated, the collection is complete, as is the novel.

The movement from private reading to public reading discussed in chapter 3 above is thus another example of the dynamics of epistolary closure. The novel that tells the story of its own publication (*Les Liaisons, Pamela, Fanni Butlerd, Adèle et Théodore*) is also telling of its own completion. The *finis* and the *imprimatur* in these novels are almost synonymous and are both contained within the narrative itself.

Thus far we have dealt only with narrative whose ultimate halt is motivated, leaving us with the impression of completion, of resolution. We feel that there is nothing more to say, either because there is no one left to say it, no one to whom to say it, or no longer any motivation for writing. Although such a strong
sense of closure characterizes the majority of epistolary works, the letter form lends itself just as easily to open-endedness. Whenever we find ourselves wondering what the letter writer would have communicated in his next letter or asking why there is no response to the final letter, we are testifying to a particular potential for continuation implicit in any letter sequence.

If we compare the end of *Les Liaisons* with that of *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, for example, we are in each case faced with a silence: the silence of Mme de Rosemonde, that of Saint-Preux. Whereas Rosemonde’s refusal to reply to Mme de Volanges is explicable and constitutes a message in itself (Rosemonde prefers not to reveal the full horror of what has happened to Cécile), Saint-Preux’s silence is more enigmatic. He who opened the novel with a series of three aggressive letters has become a mere passive receiver of the six letters that close the novel (6:8–13). Saint-Preux never articulates his reaction to Julie’s death or to her final letter. Instead it is Claire whose brief lament closes the novel. Saint-Preux’s enigmatic silence, coupled with Wolmar’s, Julie’s, and Claire’s final lines, terminate the action on an atmosphere of “attente,” of waiting and suspension: “les larmes ne coulent pas encore: on vous attend pour en répandre” (6:11, from Wolmar); “Non, je ne te quitte pas, je vais t’attendre” (6:12, from Julie); “Son cercueil attend le reste de sa proie il ne l’attendra pas longtemps” (6:13, from Claire). Reunion or separation? Terrestrial or celestial? The suspension of writing opens a number of possibilities. Just as Saint-Preux’s muteness is more appropriate to a grief that is ineffable than a letter would be, so the entire novel seems to trail off naturally into the void left by Julie’s eclipse.\(^9\) There is more to say, but what?

The unanswered letter, which leaves the narrative in suspension, is Montesquieu’s choice for ending *Lettres persanes*. In Montesquieu’s novel, as in Rousseau’s, the hero is the passive receiver of the last six letters (I.1. 156–61).\(^10\) The final letter, from the dying Roxane, contains a revelation that is the inverse of Julie’s (Roxane has appeared faithful but has been unfaithful all along), yet Usbek remains as silent in the face of this revelation as Saint-Preux is in response to Julie’s confession.

Usbek’s silence is even more significant than that of Saint-Preux. As Roger Laufer has pointed out, throughout *Lettres*
Usbek unconsciously leads a double life: in France that of the enlightened philosopher who believes in natural law and liberty, and at home that of the cruel despot. \(^{11}\) Roxane's revelations should constitute a moment of *anagnorisis*, of recognition for Usbek. Her emphatic statement “j'ai toujours été libre; j'ai reformé tes lois sur celles de la nature” should make it clear to him how inconsistent his own tyranny has been with his philosophical observations: “Nouvel Oedipe, Usbek reconnaîtrait enfin sa mauvaise foi et sa misère, condamnerait la contradiction de ses pensées et de ses actes. Mais le livre s'arrête brusquement. Montesquieu n'a pas osé, ou pu, tirer la leçon de son expérience. Usbek se tait, Usbek n'a probablement pas compris. Usbek n'est pas Oedipe.”\(^{12}\) If we examine the novel further, we discover that Usbek is not merely silent on the questions that Roxane raises. In a letter preceding Roxane's in order of presentation but actually postdating it by six months (in other words, a letter likely to have been written *after* Usbek received Roxane's, the usual mailing interval being five months), Usbek makes statements that reveal the full extent of his blindness. The letter in question (L. 146) is a scathing condemnation of a bad minister, presumably John Law, which begins, “Il y a longtemps que l'on dit que la bonne foi était l'âme d'un grand ministère.” Usbek proceeds to describe in apocalyptic terms the ruin, chaos, and corruption that can be produced by “le mauvais exemple” of a single ministry:

J'y ai vu une nation, naturellement généreuse, pervertie en un instant. J'y ai vu tout un peuple devenir tout à coup le dernier des peuples.

J'ai vu la foi des contrats bannie, les plus saintes conventions anéanties.

If the repetition of “J'ai vu j'ai vu” throughout this letter testifies to Usbek's vision where European affairs are concerned, it only highlights ironically his extraordinary blindness where governance of his own harem is involved. In this letter Usbek does not even mention the recent harem events, yet these events have created a state of disorder at the very least equal to the conditions in Law's France. Both “final” letters of *Lettres persanes* (Roxane's presentationally final L. 161 to Usbek, Usbek's chronologically final L. 146 to Rhédi) break off inconclusively, leaving
us with an Usbek who has not drawn the logical conclusion from the events he has witnessed.

The unanswered last letter of *Lettres persanes* or *La Nouvelle Héloïse* gives the impression of having been flung into the vacuum of blank space that follows. Montesquieu and Rousseau use the silence of the addressee for two completely different purposes: Rousseau to suspend us over the inexpressible grief of Saint-Preux and the uncertain future of the community at Clarens, Montesquieu to point an ironic finger at the tyrant-philosophe who is unable to draw from Roxane’s letter the obvious conclusion about his own bad faith. In *Poor People* Dostoyevsky makes yet another use of this final letter tossed into a void.

*Poor People* (*Bednye lyudi*). Dostoyevsky’s first published novel (1846), is composed of letters exchanged between Makar Alexsyevich Dyevushkin, a timid, impoverished, older government clerk, and Varvara Alexsyevna Dobroselov, a poverty-stricken young girl who lives in the building across from him. Dostoyevsky carefully motivates the correspondence. Because Dyevushkin fears that the other boarders in his building will talk about his friendship with a girl so much younger than he, the older man limits himself to a very few visits, preferring the discretion of a correspondence, which will moreover help him “to improve his style” as an aspiring writer. In their poignantly simple language the two suggest tremendous depth of feeling and daily suffering. Dyevushkin’s letters, full of self-deprecation, develop a character who occasionally borders on the ludicrous yet is redeemed by his constant efforts to help those around him. He gradually reveals (though never explicitly) that his paternal concern for Varvara’s well-being is a reflection of his love for her. Although Varvara is appreciative, her much shorter letters (always interrupted to return to work) suggest that her attachment is not as strong. Dyevushkin’s self-sacrificing efforts to save Varvara from poverty and protect her from her lecherous persecutor Bykov are to no avail; Varvara realizes that her situation is ruining them both and chooses the only way out—marriage to the wealthy Bykov, whom she despises.

In announcing her irrevocable decision, Varvara expresses a fear of the unknown into which she is stepping and only hints at the grief that leaving Dyevushkin will cause her, before breaking off her letter: “Bykov has come, I leave this letter unfinished. I
wanted to tell you a great deal more. Bykov is here already!” (23 September). Dyevushkin receives a number of such incomplete notes. As Bykov is about to carry her away to his estate in the steppe country, Varvara bequeaths to Dyevushkin her last unfinished letter: “How will you do left alone here? To whom am I leaving you, my kind, precious only friend! I leave you the book, the embroidery frame, the unfinished letter, when you look at those first words, you must read in your thoughts all that you would like to hear or read from me, all that I should have written to you; and what I could not write now!” (30 September).

“Unfinished” is the motif that echoes throughout this correspondence; Varvara’s interrupted letters leave unexpressed her feelings for Dyevushkin, uncertain her future with Bykov. She promises to write, but “God alone knows what may happen” (30 September). If Varvara’s letters are interrupted, cut short by her work and later by Bykov (“Mr. Bykov is calling me”), Dyevushkin’s letters are a desperate attempt to stave off the end by prolonging the writing. His letter of 30 September, the last one we read, is a frantic and moving fight against conclusion:

You are being carried off, you are going. [. . .] And with whom will you be now? Your little heart will be sad, sick and cold out there. [. . .] You will die out there, they will put you in the damp earth; there will be no one to weep for you there! [. . .] Why, how can such a thing be, Varinka? To whom am I going to write letters, matotchka? [. . .] I shall die, Varinka, I shall certainly die; my heart will never survive such a calamity! [. . .] No, you must write to me again, you must write another letter about everything, and when you go away you must write to me from there, or else, my heavenly angel, this will be the last letter and you know that this cannot be. this cannot be the last letter! Oh no, I shall write and you will write. [. . .] Besides, I am acquiring a literary style. [. . .] Oh, my own, what does style matter now? I don’t know, now, what I am writing, I don’t know at all, I don’t know and I don’t read it over and I don’t improve the style. I write only to write, only to go on writing to you matotchka, my own, my Varinka.

Dostoyevsky leaves us hanging on this plaintive suspended note, the blank space that follows representing the widening distance between him and the Varinka who is being carried away.

In closing Poor People Dostoyevsky is actually playing off the unfinished against the finished. On the one hand incomplete
letters—that are interrupted or trail off in ellipsis—suggest that there is more to say, that these two souls could go on writing. Such unfinished letters are the tangible manifestation of a love that is never fully confessed and never comes to fruition; they leave us with a feeling of the incomplete; just as the last letters, though suggesting death, leave uncertain the fate of Varvara and Dyevushkin. On the other hand, the very cessation of the correspondence suggests an ending—and of more than just a relationship. For it is not merely the separation that drives Dyevushkin to distraction, but the impossibility of getting letters to Varvara ("So I keep on about our letters; who will carry them for us, my precious?" [29 September]). Letters are all these impoverished people have; to take away this simple treasure is to strip them totally. The end of the correspondence constitutes the ultimate destitution.

When we compare the end of Poor People to the conclusion of other love novels in letters, we better grasp this sense of the incomplete that characterizes Dostoyevsky's first work. Whereas in the Lettres portugaises, in Crébillon's Marquise and Duchesse, or in Mme Riccoboni's Fanni Butlerd the heroine's final letter constitutes a renunciation of both love and letter, Poor People leaves us with a promise to write and an expectation of more letters; it breaks off with a half-articulated statement of love from one writer and an effusion of sentiments from the other, who refuses to put down his pen. In the former group of novels the final blank space confirms resolutions; in Poor People it merely betrays hopes. In short, whereas the cessation of letters in narrative like the Lettres portugaises reinforces an already strong movement of closure, in Dostoyevsky the termination clashes with the will to continue, augmenting tension rather than producing resolution.

No character, not even Makar Dyevushkin, is more reluctant to put down his pen than Senancour's Oberman. Senancour makes three different attempts to end his autobiographical hero's volume of letters to a friend-confidant. The 1833 edition contains a continuation of the correspondence into the tenth year (the 1804 edition having ended in the ninth year), and the 1840 edition contains yet another supplement. Of Senancour's three attempts to end the collection of letters, none sounds the note of finality.
Such endlessness, however, is entirely consonant with the thematic emphases of the work. Oberman, a Romantic hero stricken with *le mal du siècle*, lives in a perpetual “état d’attente” (L. 10); another epistolary victim of ennui from the same period—D’Alembert in *Mademoiselle de Maupin*—describes this Romantic state with an epistolary metaphor: “Moi, je demande au messager la réponse à une lettre que je n’ai pas écrite” (p. 46). Oberman complains repeatedly about “cette perpétuelle lenteur de toutes choses,” a slowness that is reflected in the very languor of his own letters. Typically, from each new place he writes, “Rien ne se termine: les misérables affaires qui me retiennent ici se prolongent chaque jour” (L. 10). It is no surprise that a writer who declares “que m’importa ce qui peut finir?” (L. 18) should not bring his own correspondence to a close.

Oberman is constantly in search of both ending and end, of conclusion and purpose, of termination and goal; long before Beckett’s protagonists, this writer expresses a preoccupation with “termes,” “but,” “fin,” “finir,” “résultat,” in almost every letter:

{lorsque je pressens cet espace désenchanté où vont se traîner les restes de ma jeunesse et de ma vie que trouvez-vous que je puisse attendre à son terme, et qui pourrait me cacher l’abîme où tout cela va finir?

Il faut que toute chose ait une fin selon sa nature. [L. 41]

Oberman entertains frequent thoughts of death and suicide, takes a morbid pleasure in autumn: “la saison où tout paraît finir” (L. 24). Yet his preoccupation with ends is abortive; the narrative leads us neither to a Wertherian suicide nor to a discovery of purpose in living. Each new postmark reflects the prolongation of this wanderer’s search. Rather than lead us to an end in either sense, the letters merely continue, as endless and aimless as the life of the writer himself.

Oberman testifies perhaps more than any other work to the potential ongoingness of the epistolary form, just as its corollary piece, *Werther*, actualizes letter narrative’s potential for finality. All of the works that we have examined, however, elaborate themselves in a context in which both continuation and discontinuation of the writing itself have a special meaning. Because the letter writer feels so frequently the need to justify both picking up
the pen and putting it down, epistolary narrative adds to the usual dynamics of literary closure its own dynamic. By rendering explicit the forces and counterforces acting on the process of enunciation, letter narrative demands to be understood in terms of the very forces that bring it into being, propel it, and bring it—or fail to bring it—to a state of arrest.

It is tempting, in view of the recent polemics for openness in art forms and criticism, to ask whether letter narrative is an end-determined or an antiteleological form. Insofar as the letter poses as a real-life document (and it certainly did in the eighteenth century), it hardly lends itself to the kind of well-made plot that builds toward a climax and contains no gratuitous elements. The memoir novel, written in the light of the end, is much more amenable to such selective patterning of plot elements, whereas the letter writer, who presumably cannot know the outcome of events he narrates, must include unimportant details as well as those that are central to the main action. Are we to conclude then that letter narrative, insofar as it adheres to its documentary pretensions, is a shapeless mimesis of pure contingency? How can a letter novel that respects verisimilitude be end-determined?

To pose the question in the above way is, however, to raise a separate and new issue. What is particular about epistolary closure, as we have been stressing throughout this chapter, is that it depends as much on the act of narrating as on what is narrated. For us to sense a letter as final we must not only be satisfied that all important threads of the plot have been tied but that there is no longer any reason for the writing to continue. This chapter's survey has suggested the variety of ways in which this constraint becomes a structuring possibility and closural strategy. Indeed, one of the implications of this survey may be that in comparison to other early novelistic modes, epistolary literature developed relatively more codified, more formal, and more narratively integrated closural strategies. Motivated renunciation of writing (with comic, tragic, and thematic implications) assures the strongest closure in this kind of narrative, whereas the unanswered letter or the refusal to put down the pen leaves the novel open-ended. Beneath the structure of the plot, epistolary narrative spins out a network of communication with its own
raison d'être; as the letter itself acquires a symbolic value for the correspondents (sign of life, love, neurosis, virtue), motivation for writing becomes as important as story. Resolution—if it occurs—must take place not only at the level of the narrative as fable but at the level of the narrative as communication.

Moreover, in epistolary closure the ultimate narrative events—those that actually terminate the “fable”—are typically not narrated; they are merely signified by a rupture in the process of narration that leaves marks in the text. Ricarda Huch’s 1910 novel *Der letzte Sommer* comes to a halt on the printed letter “j—.” which signifies that the Russian governor who has been typing this final letter has been assassinated by a bomb wired to detonate when his typewriter strikes the j key. The epistolary form sets up possibilities for contrapuntal and referential interplay between narrating act, physical text, and narrative content, which letter novelists regularly exploit.

Finally, although epistolary literature exhibits both diverse and strong closural strategies, there is a very real sense in which the epistolary text is never closed. The letter collection is regularly presented by its fictitious editors as incomplete: it is a “selection” from a larger group of letters or one side of an exchange. Such presentation spawns publication of texts that are not so much sequels (the appropriate continuation for the episodic work) as efforts to fill in the gaps or present the other side of the previous text—*Charlotte’s Letters to Werther* or Fielding’s publication of the “real” letters of Mrs. Shamela Andrews. Furthermore, the epistolary text is regularly framed and reframed as part of an ongoing process of textual creation, transmission, and interpretation that is endless. Editorial prefaces to epistolary works rarely make the gesture of presenting the work as completed product to a public or patron. An instructive contrast is offered by two Crébillon novels. Crébillon frames his memoir novel *Les Egarements du coeur et de l’esprit* with two prefaces, a short conventional dedicatory one, offering this “unworthy homage” to his father, and a second, justifying its narrative content; in both prefaces the work is presented as a completed product, whose content may be questioned but not added to. His *Lettres de la marquise*, however, is introduced by an “extract” (i.e., incomplete text) from a “letter” by Mme de***, an acquaintance of the count
to whom the marquise wrote. Mme de *** is in turn passing these letters on to a M. de *** for his reading and (intimated) publication pleasure; she has selected seventy out of more than five hundred letters but will show M. de *** the others if he would like to see them. In other words, this work consists of fragments framed by yet another “extract.”

The editor of the epistolary work is, after all, not primarily a writer: he is a selective reader. He may devote most of his preface to explaining his work as textual critic or translator. The editor of Crébillon’s Marquise explains her criteria for selecting the seventy letters, whereas Laclos’s editor protests that he wanted to make more changes but “had no authority.” Typically the editor also worries about the consequences of printing and reading. Smollett frames Humphry Clinker with an exchange between Jonathan Dustwich and Henry Davis, publisher in London, in which they discuss the libel suits that publication of private letters may bring upon them.

Thus the chain of actions and consequences is perceived as unending, the circuit of communication is never closed. Epistolary texts engender prefaces, preprefaces, and postfaces, which dialogue with each other and with the text proper, and which are a continuation of the text’s dialogical model. In short, the very publication of the epistolary work is explicitly seen as having consequences; within the epistolary framework, frames are constantly broken, and even closural gestures have inaugural implications.

1. Barbara H. Smith, Poetic Closure, p. 36.
5. Indeed, when Upton Sinclair imitates Richardson in Another Pamela: or, Virtue Still Rewarded (1950), he uses the same kind of closings: “May God guard and spare such sufferings to / Your sister / Pamela.”
6. Jacques Derrida’s Envois, however, poses questions that are not unrelated to the issues at stake in Heloise and Abelard’s correspondence. The problematic moment of framing and signing the letter occurs at several points in Envois: (1)
when the letter writer conceives the idea of publishing his correspondence: "cela me donne l'envie . . . de publier sous mon nom des choses pour moi inconcevables, invivables surtout, que je n'ai pas écrites moi-même, en abusant ainsi du crédit 'editorial' que j'accumule depuis des années. . . Ils vont encore me dire que je ne signerais pas n'importe quoi: prove it" (p. 251); and (2) whenever the act of addressing words of love to his correspondent provokes an awareness of the multiplicity of self and other: "je t'aime ne se poste pas . . . je peux toujours dire 'ce n'est pas moi'" (pp. 254-55); "d'autres croiront que nous sommes quatre. . . Mais quel que soit le nombre arrêté, c'est toi que j'aime uniquement" (p. 260). The strong move toward definition of unique selves (signer and addressee of letters) is contradicted by a move that denies the uniqueness and definability of an endlessly differentiated self. Like Heloise with Abelard, Derrida's writer and addressee split in the very gesture of self-identification imposed by the signature.


8. To demonstrate just how codified this type of closure is in classical epistolary novels, we might well contrast the typical comic reunion of correspondents with the opposite movement in a tragic novella such as Nodier's Adèle. Adèle consists mainly of the letters of Gaston de Germance to his friend Edouard de Millanges, telling about the vicissitudes in his courtship with the enigmatic Adèle. Gaston's last letter, in which all the mysteries of Adèle's past are cleared up, could easily close a comic narrative, with its invitation to Edouard: "Viens auprès de moi, Edouard je suis heureux à jamais; ta présence manque seule à ma félicité." The letter that actually closes the novel, however, is the subsequent one from Gaston's valet announcing Adèle's death: "Oui monsieur, venez. Il vous écrivait son bonheur—Il ne savait pas. . ." Even while the valet is writing, more tragic events are transpiring, for his final line is "Mais quel bruit! Hélas, monsieur Edouard, ne venez pas!" The change in movement here—to "ne venez pas"—is precisely the opposite of the comic denouement's invitation to a reunion. In fact, it is tempting to call this tragicomic alternation between two possible outcomes an epistolary tragicomedy, or—in this case—melodrama.

9. Saint-Preux's muteness corresponds to that of Wolmar and Claire. Claire writes, "Wolmar m'entend et ne me répond pas. . . Moi seule je ne puis ni pleurer, ni parler, ni me faire entendre" (6:13).

10. These letters, being part of the harem sequence, which Montesquieu grouped together at the end, are not actually the last in chronological order but rather the last in order of presentation.


13. Though all quotations are from the Constance Garnett translation of Poor People, I have substituted for "my darling" in the Garnett translation the original "matotchka." Matotchka is Dyevushkin's special term of endearment for Varvara, which he repeats with desperate frequency in his last letter.
14. Thirteen out of seventeen chapters of Gautier's novel are in letter form.
15. Huch does not, of course, explain how this letter survived the accident. But then, as a twentieth-century novelist, she is less bound to account for her sources.
16. A noteworthy exception is Richardson, who presents Clarissa as a “History,” with its dramatis personae and its moral. Richardson’s impulse to present his text as completed, moreover, governs his entire narrative technique: his text presents all documents relevant to Clarissa’s story (including wills and contracts) and his correspondents try to “give all the particulars”; the text is designed as an authoritative version and the editorial comments attempt to impose an interpretative authority. The editor presents himself not as a reader but as the reader of this work, invested with ultimate authority.
17. Jacques Derrida seizes this self-fragmenting aspect of the letter as an apt emblem for his concept of dissemination. He develops this notion in Envois: “une lettre, à l’instant même où elle a lieu... se divise, se met en morceaux, tombe en carte postale” (p. 90); but he had already articulated it in his 1975 essay on Lacan: “La structure restante de la lettre, c’est que, contrairement à ce que dit le séminaire [Jacques Lacan’s well-known seminar on Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”] en son dernier mot (‘ce que veut dire “la lettre volée,” c’est qu’une lettre arrive toujours à destination’), une lettre peut toujours ne pas arriver à destination. Sa ‘matérialité,’ sa ‘topologie’ tiennent à sa divisibilité, à sa partition toujours possible. Elle peut se morceler sans retour. la dissémination menace la loi du signifiant et de la castration comme contrat de vérité” (“Le Facteur de la vérité,” rpt. in La Carte postale, p. 472).