CONCLUSION: THE PARAMETERS AND PARADOXES OF EPISTOLARITY

WHAT IS EPISTOLARITY?

"Quand vous écrivez à quelqu'un c'est pour lui et non pas pour vous: Vous devez donc moins chercher à lui dire ce que vous pensez que ce qui lui plait davantage. (Merteuil to Cécile, L. 105)

"Mon ami, quand vous m'écrivez, que ce soit pour me dire votre façon de penser et de sentir, et non pour m'envoyer des phases que je trouverai dans le premier roman du jour." (Merteuil to Danceny, L. 121)

When the marquise de Merteuil articulates her two theories of the epistolary art in letters 105 and 121, it is clear that her advice is governed by utility rather than consistency. If Merteuil's self-contradiction in these two letters tells us nothing new about her duplicity, her two statements are nevertheless quite revelatory insofar as epistolary theory is concerned. The letter is no less mutable in character than the marquise; depending on the writer's aim, the letter can be either portrait or mask. This protean aspect of the letter raises a serious question about our study of epistolarity. How can we speak of what is particular to the epistolary form when the letter can in one context demonstrate properties that are exactly the opposite of those revealed in other contexts?

Merteuil's contradictory definitions cannot, however, lead us to conclude that the letter is a totally amorphous instrument in the hands of its creator. The letter is unique precisely because it
does tend to define itself in terms of polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, bridge/barrier. These polarities guarantee the letter’s flexibility and define its parameters, thus giving it recognizable dimensions of thematic emphasis and narrative potential. At those moments when letter writers speak self-consciously of their chosen form, they make these polarities clear; thus Merteuil in each of her above statements defines one epistolary pole by opposition to the other.

A brief description of some of the polar dimensions of the letter will remind us of those properties underlying the six approaches presented in this study:

1. **Bridge/barrier (distance breaker/distance maker).** The letter’s mediatory property makes it an instrument that both connects and interferes. In *Clarissa* the letter is an imperfect intercessor, calling attention to estrangement, whereas in *Mitsou* it is a mediator without which two persons, even in the presence of each other, cannot communicate. As an intermediary step between indifference and intimacy, the letter lends itself to narrative actions that move the correspondents in either direction.

2. **Confiance/non-confiance.** If the winning and losing of *confiance* constitute part of the narrative content, the related oppositions *confiance* / *coquetterie* (or candor / dissimulation) and *amitié* / *amour* represent the two primary types of epistolary style and relationship. These distinctions, as well as the blurring of these distinctions, are a function of the letter’s dual potential for transparency (portrait of soul, confession, vehicle of narrative) and opacity (mask, weapon, event within narrative).

3. **Writer/reader.** The epistolary situation evokes simultaneously the acts of writing and reading, as correspondents alternate, often within the same letter, between the roles of narrator and narratee, of encoder and decoder. Reader consciousness explicitly informs the act of writing itself. The movement from the private to the public in much of epistolary fiction lays bare another paradox: as a reflection of self, or the self’s relationships, the letter connotes privacy and intimacy; yet as a document addressed to another, the letter...
reflects the need for an audience, an audience that may suddenly expand when that document is confiscated, shared, or published.

4. I/you, here/there, now/then. Letter narrative depends on reciprocality of writer-addressee and is charged with present-consciousness in both the temporal and the spatial sense. The letter writer is engaged in the impossible task of making present both events and addressee; to do so he attempts to close the gap between his locus and the addressee’s (here/there) and creates the illusion of the present (now) by oscillation between the then of past and future.

5. Closure/overture; discontinuation/continuation of writing. The dynamics of letter narrative involves a movement between two poles: the potential finality of the letter’s sign-off and the open-endedness of the letter seen as a segment within a chain of dialogue. Finality is actualized in epistolary terms by motivated renunciation of writing, the death of the writer, the arrival of the addressee, whereas enigmatic silence realizes the letter form’s potential for open-endedness.

6. Unit/unity; continuity/discontinuity; coherence/fragmentation. The letter’s duality as a self-contained artistic unity and as a unit within a larger configuration make it an apt instrument for fragmentary, elliptical writing and juxtaposition of contrasting discrete units, yet at the same time the very fragmentation inherent in the letter form encourages the creation of a compensating coherence and continuity on new levels.

The definition of epistolarity is thus charged with paradox and contradiction. The opposite of almost any important trait can be equally a characteristic of the letter form. When Walter Scott contrasts epistolary to third-person narrative in Redgauntlet, he describes the letter as a slow-motion form. Scott justifies his switch to third-person narrative after a long epistolary section by comparing himself first to the explorers of Mont Blanc who go painfully through the snow “and anon abridge their journey by springing over the intervening chasms with the assistance of their pilgrim staves” and second to the “dragoons, who were
trained to serve either on foot or horseback, as the emergencies of the service required" (p. 159). Yet the acceleration that Scott felt he could produce only by switching to third-person narrative can be produced by the epistolary form, as we have seen in chapter 6 when we examined certain sequences of Lettres persanes (final harem letters), La Nouvelle Héloïse (3:5–7), or Lettres de la marquise (L1. 57–63) that accumulate and link together a series of major events. If the dialogue ritardando seems more characteristic of the epistolary form, letter sequences can become accelerando precisely because they break with the accustomed tempo (as in the ironic accelerated reseduction of Crébillon’s marquise). In fact, whatever the parameter, we will always find that epistolary narrative thrives in an atmosphere of contrary possibilities.

Throughout the history of the epistolary form, implicit or explicit concepts of the letter’s nature have governed the writer’s defense or description of his instrument. Such definitions of epistolarity—whether inferable from authorial comments like Scott’s,¹ correspondents’ reflections, or critics’ reactions—always reveal as much about the writer’s esthetic values as they do about the form itself. But is this not the danger of any ontology? When theoreticians of film began to reflect upon what is specifically cinematic, their definitions were bound up with esthetic choices. Whereas Eisenstein conceived the film image as a frame, within which an editor formally arranges lines, shapes, and movement, André Bazin believed it to be a window on the world. Eisenstein’s esthetic is formalist and privileges the cinematic work’s reference to itself as a work of art, whereas Bazin’s is realist, grounded in the shot’s constant reference to a real world that is being photographed. The telling distinction between these two major theoreticians’ answers to “What is cinema?” is obviously a difference in perception of screen space: whereas for Eisenstein the screen’s outer edge encloses the only reality, for Bazin it centrifugally impels the viewer’s awareness toward off-screen reality, which is conceived as continuous with the space of the screen.

The frame/window opposition is instructive: though such metaphors clearly elevate esthetic preferences into ontologies, they derive their appeal from seemingly objective formal properties—the physical nature of screen space and the photographic image—just as Merteuil’s alternate definitions of the
letter as portrait/mask are grounded in epistolary language's status as expression of oneself/to another. Moreover, such ontologies have clearly been formative as well as descriptive of two major film styles, from Lumière and Méliès on, just as the portrait/mask opposition underlies two distinct styles of epistolary writing. What we learn from these conflicting ontologies is not surprising: to create the ontological metaphor—"the film shot is a frame," "the letter is a portrait of the soul"—involves selective perception whereby some formal phenomena are highlighted and conflicting ones suppressed. Such selective perception is an integral part of style; as ontology, however, it is obviously reductive.

My own objective in exploring epistolarity has not been to suggest a simple ontology of the letter form but rather to provide a series of formal perspectives for reading epistolary novels, by tracking the pressure exerted by form on meaning in a broadly representative group of works. The relation between form and content in epistolary narrative is complex, and the conceptual dualities that I have just summarized in the preceding pages cannot do justice to that complexity. They do, however, remind us insistently of the extent to which the practice of writing and reading epistolary novels is governed by a formal dialectic, in which certain properties of the letter are developed in tension with others. In the preceding chapters I have tried to describe the conventions and field of play that create meaning in epistolary narrative. As a form, the letter constrains and permits the production of meaning in specific ways, which are best conceptualized as a dynamic or field of force set up by conflictual possibilities.

Epistolary language is polarly generated. We have noted throughout that the letter is both a reflection of the gap and an instrument for gap closing. Epistolary language and letter sequences are marked by hiatuses of all types: spatial separation between writer and addressee; time lags between event and recording, between message transmission and message reception; blank spaces and lacunae in the manuscript. The letter is a both-and, either-or phenomenon, signifying either bridge or barrier, both presence and absence. The external reader's perception of continuity in letter sequences is generated by their seeming discontinuity, and the continuation of a correspondence by the
internal writers and readers acquires meaning only in relation to potential discontinuation. Oscillation between trust and mistrust, writing and reading, forms the thematic material of epistolary narrative. If such narrative speaks so self-consciously of its dualities, it is logical that we as readers should attempt to understand it through the poles that generate it. The paradox of epistolarity is that the very consistency of epistolary meaning is the interplay within a specific set of polar inconsistencies.

**EPISTOLARITY: Approaches to a Genre**

Thus far, my work has had a dual objective: to identify fundamental parameters of epistolarity and to demonstrate their influence on the creation of meaning in a variety of individual works. In so doing, however, I hope also to be laying a foundation for more serious consideration of epistolary literature as a genre. If the preceding section concluded my case for epistolarity as an interpretative concept, in this section I would like to open up the case for a number of generic approaches.

Is there an epistolary “genre”? To ask this is to raise once again the question of what constitutes a genre. As Paul Hernadi’s encyclopedic survey of modern genre theory (*Beyond Genre*) reveals, there are at least as many theories as there are genres. Yet Hernadi is able to distinguish four principal concepts of genre—which he categorizes as expressive, pragmatic, structural, and mimetic—according to whether the theorist’s criterion for genre divisions is based on (1) the mental attitudes of the author, (2) the effects on the reader, (3) the verbal medium, or (4) the subject matter and “message” of the evoked world. If we look at the praxis, rather than the theory of genre criticism, however, we find that Hernadi’s last two concepts (structural and mimetic) underlie most studies of individual genres, which usually begin by identifying a genre either structurally as a fixed form (e.g., memoir novel, sonnet) or mimetically as a specifically evoked world (e.g., the western, the gothic novel). Whereas Claudio Guillén (*Literature as System*) and others have implied that for the practical critic the valid identification of a genre need not do more than discern some similarities between works, Tzvetan Todorov and Fredric Jameson have developed specific criteria similar to Hernadi’s structural and mimetic (thematic) bases for genre
description. In their respective work on fantastic literature and romance they have suggested specific guidelines for the identification and study of individual genres that it is useful to review and compare here.

Both Todorov, in his *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970), and Jameson, in his account of "Romance as Genre" (1975), begin by distinguishing between what they call *syntactic* and *semantic* approaches to an individual genre. For Todorov syntactic analysis accounts for the relations—logical, temporal, and spatial—between the parts of a work, whereas the semantic approach identifies its themes. Jameson similarly defines the semantic approach as one that aims to give an account of the meaning of a genre, that tends to deal with the "essence" of a genre in terms of a "mode." In contrast, the structural or syntactic approach is more scientific, more analytic, and deals with genre in terms of "fixed form." A semantic approach to comedy would deal with the comic "vision," opposing it to tragedy, whereas a syntactic approach would discover the precise laws of the comic, opposing it to the noncomic. Todorov's and Jameson's choice of the same terms may be coincidental; certainly their respective uses of them differ somewhat. Yet the fundamental distinction between the purely formal elements and the thematic thrust of a genre is maintained by both, as well as by Hernadi, and will be retained for our conclusions concerning the generic nature of epistolary literature.

Rather than prescribe one approach above the other, Jameson makes these two "seemingly incompatible tendencies" the basis for a fresh hypothesis about the nature of genre:

The latter would then be defined as that literary phenomenon which may be articulated *either* in terms of a fixed form *or* in terms of a mode, and which *must* be susceptible of expression in *either* of these critical codes optionally. The advantage of a definition like this consists not only in its exposure of false problems (thus, it would no longer make any sense to wonder whether the novel *as such* can be considered a genre, inasmuch as one cannot imagine any determinate literary mode which would correspond to such a "form"); but also in its capacity to generate new lines of research, for example, to raise the question of the nature of the *mode* to which such a fixed form as the historical novel may be said to correspond, or that of the *fixed form* of which a familiar mode like that of the romance may be said to be the expression.
In other words, though either a "semantic" or a "structural" description of a group of works may suffice to define it as a genre, the study of a genre does not become interesting until it includes both.

Following the implications of Hernadi's, Jameson's, and Todorov's methodologies, and tailoring their notions to our own needs, we can outline six distinct generic approaches to epistolary literature:

1. The expressive approach would focus on the mental attitudes that underlie the author's choice of the letter form.
2. The pragmatic would focus on the letter work's effect on the reader.
3. The semantic would study thematic constants in letter fiction.
4. The structural or syntactic would describe the parts of a work and their relations. (I use the terms semantic and syntactic loosely and metaphorically here, as do Todorov and Jameson in their genre studies.)
5. The historical approach would consider national, historical, or sociological variables affecting the origin, development, and decline of the genre.
6. The subgeneric would study subdivisions of the genre, using the same approaches that are applicable to study of the genre as a whole.

At the heart of genre study qua genre, however, are those two central approaches—the structural and the semantic—that form implicitly or explicitly the basis for most definitions of a genre and thereby constitute the basis for most of the other approaches.

If we return now to our original question—Is there an epistolary "genre"?—we should be in a position to answer it more meaningfully. Few would deny to epistolary literature the status of genre by Jameson's minimal definition. The epistolary novel is readily perceived as a fixed form (narrative implemented by letter sequences), as one type of verbal medium distinct from the diary novel, memoir novel, and theatrical dialogue, with which it has the closest formal affinities. The particular characteristics that distinguish this verbal medium from other types of discourse were
examined in chapter 4, and other formal traits that invest epistolary literature with a particular dynamic and shape were discussed in chapters 5 and 6. Thus the real question is no longer "Is there an epistolary genre?" but rather, "Is the epistolary genre susceptible to coherent semantic or other descriptions as well?" In the remaining pages I shall offer partial answers to this question, speculating on the directions that further inquiry into the letter genre might take and using as my basis the six approaches outlined above.

I shall begin by dealing somewhat summarily with possible expressive and pragmatic approaches. Recognition of the "intentional fallacy" and the "affective fallacy" has led critics to shy away from literary criticism based on the author's attitudes toward a work or its effect on a reader. Yet certain observations we regularly make about letter authors and readers could lead us to revive some modified version of these approaches. Critics dealing individually with Richardson and Rousseau, for example, have often pointed out that these men were timid and frequently preferred written to oral communication with friends; we might be tempted to investigate the relation between other letter novelists' personalities and their choice of the letter form. The real question, however, whether one subscribes to the notion of the intentional fallacy or not, is whether epistolary novelists share common mental attitudes that are identifiable and significant enough in their implications for the genre to make what Hernadi calls the expressive concept of genre a meaningful approach. The letter novel's traits likewise raise a number of questions about the reader's experience of an epistolary text: With whom does the reader identify—writer, addressee, or editor—and what are the determinants of reader identification in the letter-reading experience? Do epistolary narratives have particular ways of playing to (or against) the reader's desire for mastery, his creative pleasure in coordinating fragments, his voyeurism? Why are so many internal readers in epistolary novels authority figures—parents, judges, censors, confessor s, mentors—whose relationship to the letter writer seems to resemble that of the superego to the ego? In short, the mise-en-abyme within the novel of the writer-reader relationship invites speculation about the relationship of the real writer and reader to each other and to the text.
These speculations will remain vague and unsubstantiated, however, unless supported by concrete analyses, with a solid base in rhetorical theory, biography, reception history, psychoanalytic theory, phenomenology, or affective stylistics.

A semantic approach to the epistolary genre is more promising. The recurring themes and polarities that we have identified seem sufficiently limited and related to the form itself to suggest that the epistolary genre can be described as a genre with a particular arsenal of thematic and narrative content. It is to be hoped that other critics might build upon these preliminary findings to produce a more thorough and systematic account of the semantic nature of the genre and that critics with a more philosophical orientation will investigate the implications of these recurring themes and polarities.

The structural approach, which was the basis for our initial definition of the genre, will be dealt with more expansively in the next section.

In my own study I have dealt with historical matters only when they became pertinent to formal questions. A glance at history in its own right, however, raises some new questions about letter forms. Why, for example, does there seem to be an evolution in the eighteenth century from monologue to polyphony, returning finally at the end, with Werther's influence, to the epistolary monologue? In any historical study of generic evolution we would need to investigate national variables also; the development of the epistolary novel in Germany is bound up with the diary form, in France with conversational and rhetorical arts, and in England with an esthetic that valued realistic, immediate description of phenomena. In general the German letter writer is a diarist, the English correspondent a witness, and the French épistolier a verbal duellist. Whereas the German and English traditions tend to opt for the static method of narration (confidential letters), using language to present a seemingly unmediated transcription of internal and external reality, the French tradition of letter writing prefers the kinetic method (dramatic letters), in which the letter is used as a weapon and a mask. The difference between faith in the letter/language as candid portrait and skepticism regarding the letter/language as mask could also be roughly characterized as the difference between bourgeois and
aristocratic ideologies. Only with Rousseau and imitators of Richardson (e.g., Mme Riccoboni, Diderot) does the bourgeois strain, with its espousal of candor, transparency, and Puritan values, enter French epistolary literature; even so, it enters in a dialectical tension with "aristocratic," gallant values. Thus a history of the epistolary genre is not complete without consideration of the specific cultural, sociological, and ideological values that constrain its forms.

The life of forms in art is of course a complex phenomenon to explain. The historical work that has been done on the letter form has concentrated on its origins (Kany, Black, Day); very few critics have pushed beyond the eighteenth century. Indeed, most histories of the novel typically deal with the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as if they were sealed off from each other. There is a need for careful assessment of the changes in society and esthetic ideals that underlie the decline of a form such as the letter novel; there is a need for a study, in other words, that would bridge the gap between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel studies by investigating more thoroughly the evolutionary or dialectical relations obtaining between the two.

Until such a study would nuance our sense of the form's history, we can only observe prima facie that the epistolary novel stands in an essentially diametrical relationship to the dominant traits of nineteenth-century narrative (with its third-person omniscient narrator, objective presentation, attention to the role of physical setting and environment, concern with historical and social surroundings). The epistolary novel's most visible affiliations are with the modern novel. Long before Proust, Woolf, Joyce, and other modern writers, epistolary novelists were experimenting with elliptical narration, subjectivity and multiplicity of points of view, polyphony of voices, interior monologue, superimposition of time levels, presentation of simultaneous actions. If the use of the letter form in the nineteenth century sticks out as an anachronistic throwback, twentieth-century novelists such as Montherlant, Colette, Grass, Bellow, Natalia Ginzburg, and Thornton Wilder have been able to reappropriate the letter innovatively—as one of a panoply of narrative vehicles available to them, while nonetheless displaying the motifs that we have come to associate with the form. Although there has been some
research on the "included letter" in pre-eighteenth-century narrative, almost no one has investigated the reappearance of the letter in mixed forms in twentieth-century narrative. In short, there is ample material for a history (or histories) of the epistolary novel since 1800; such a history would be particularly valuable if it compared modern uses of the form to earlier uses and situated the epistolary novel carefully within the context of mainstream novelistic production of various periods.

Within the larger corpus of epistolary literature there appear to be subgenres, which exhibit certain structural or semantic similarities. In my own survey, for example, I have been struck by the frequency with which the content of letter novels divides into two basic categories—erotic and educational. At the center of erotic correspondence stands the lover-seducer; crucial to the educational sequence is the mentor or guide. Abelard was, of course, both tutor and seducer. So omnipresent is the myth of Abelard and Heloise in epistolary fiction that it is tempting to consider it the prototype of these two important lineages (Heloise and Abelard's correspondence being, significantly enough, divided by traditional scholarship into two groups: the love letters and the letters of direction or instruction). The erotic impulse generates the epistolary seduction novel, whose specific forms we examined in detail in chapter 1. The educational impulse assumes primarily three forms. In the first the letter writer functions almost uniquely as teacher, and the entire letter collection is perceived as a primer. Most of Mme de Genlis's and Restif's novels—which are dominated by sequences of instructional letters on the sciences, the arts, philosophy, and ethics—would fall into this category. In the second the letter writer functions as guide, and the novel assumes the form of a travelogue or compilation of essays on contemporary society (e.g. Humphry Clinker, Lettres persanes, Goldsmith's Citzen of the World, Henry James). In the third, more narrative or dramatic strain, the mentor enters into competition with other teachers for influence over a pupil. The most common epistolary mentor is the corruptor-debaucher, who is called "my dear mentor" by his naive tutee and whose letters expounding upon his libertine philosophy are written down to be reread: "ma lettre laissera par ce moyen des impressions plus profondes
qu’un entretien trop tôt oublié,” Gaudet asserts in *Le Paysan perverti*. The role of tutor-corruptor, which we associate with Laclos's vicomte and marquise, is basic to countless letter novels. The discovery of the corrupt mentor's letters by the representatives of virtue and their rebuttal letters of instruction to the protagonist are all part of the plot, which centers around the rivalry of two schools for a pupil. Restif's *Le Paysan perverti* is the best example of this organizational principle. Although works such as *Lettres portugaises* belong exclusively to the erotic strain, and Mme de Genlis's novels to the educational, works such as *La Nouvelle Héloïse* and Restif's *Lettres posthumes* combine the two types, thus returning to the initial Héloïse-Abelard model.

Probably the most complex yet cohesive subgenre of epistolary literature is what we might call the “novel of dangerous connections.” Laclos’s novel is the best-known example of this form, but countless minor novels (e.g., *Delphine, Les Malheurs de l'inconstance, Les Lettres du marquis de Roselle, Fanny Burney’s Evelina*) as well as *Clarissa* and *La Nouvelle Héloïse* can be seen to fit this type, as I shall briefly describe it. The type is definable by the character types or functions described in the table (p. 198) and by the following plot: Estranged from parents or husband, the heroine (or hero) chooses or is befriended by a surrogate parent. The hero and heroine write to respective confidants or correspond secretly and fall in love. Obstacles are posed by parents and the rival suitor. Conflict is expressed in the following ways: extended debate between the hero and heroine over the sexual nature of their relationship; rivalry between parents and confidants for the allegiance of the protagonists; opposition between an old and a new morality.

The interest of each particular work lies, of course, in the way in which the above functions are combined or split among characters, and in their psychological, ideological, and esthetic realization. Usually the outcome is tragic; Fanny Burney's *Evelina*, however, works essentially within this model in order to reverse its usual denouement, since the heroine’s close ties (epistolary and psychological) with her adoptive father give her the strength she needs to resist the dangers of London society and persist in the virtuous path toward marriage with a noble suitor. This form is a quintessential eighteenth-century one, influenced by classical
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theater and particularly adapted for the common eighteenth-century thematic opposition of libertinism to virtue. Yet many elements or variants of this subgenre can be found in Natalia Ginzburg's *No Way* (*Caro Michele* [1973]) and Bob Randall's *The Fan* (1977), two of the most recent revivals of the letter form. Essentially this type of novel portrays a network of destructive or ineffectual familial, erotic, and confidential connections through epistolary liaisons.

The epistolary genre is a highly conventional and imitative one, which delights in articulating its own imitativeness—hence titles like *La Nouvelle Héloïse, Le Nouvel Abélard, Shamela*. Recently, we have even witnessed the publication, three centuries after Guilleragues's landmark work, of the *New Portuguese Letters*. No historian of the genre can fail to note the importance of key texts like Guilleragues's *Lettres portugaises*, Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes*, or Goethe's *Werther*, which spawned countless imitations and variations. More often than not, imitators seized upon both the inner and the outer form, the narrative techniques as well as the content: countless love monologues were written in the wake of the Portuguese nun, and diarylike letters were produced by post-Wertherian suicidals. The six basic types identified by Jost in his typology of epistolary novels can be seen to have at their center one influential work that showed what could be done with the letter form and generated numerous imitations. This is obvious for Jost's "type portugais," "type Abélard," and "type Werther"; many of the works in the "type Clinker" category can be shown to have Montesquieu's work as historical model.

As we move further away from the period dominated by the letter form we find fewer instances of works that fit into a subgenre. The principle of imitativeness—rarer in the modern period when the letter form is not a "popular" genre—can nonetheless be found: e.g., Upton Sinclair's *Another Pamela; or, Virtue Still Rewarded*. Certain modern works, moreover, which present no surface similarities to earlier epistolary literature, reveal underlying structures that suggest that the form itself is exerting some thematic pressure: Herzog's epistolary trauma is strikingly similar to that of Saint-Preux, Tourvel, and Clarissa. The frequent recurrence of both structural and semantic similari-
ties is obviously both historically and formally conditioned, just as human behavior is to some extent both socially and genetically determined.

Literary genres and subgenres develop the greatest cohesion and complexity when they evolve within a limited sociohistorical context. Courtly lyrics, French classical comedy, American westerns—all developed their particular conventions within a fairly short time period and a specific cultural milieu. The epistolary novel, which flourished in the second half of the eighteenth century, developed recognizable conventions and a thematic cohesiveness that its predecessor, the memoir novel, did not have. Further historical, narratological, and semiotic work is necessary before we could offer more than partial explanations for this cohesiveness. But the simple conclusion should stand: in contrast to the autobiographical or memoir novel, which is definable essentially in terms of a narrative technique, letter fiction is describable as a genre and invites exploration as such.

TOWARD A THEORY OF EPISTOLARY NARRATIVE

It should be evident from the preceding section that all studies of the epistolary genre, whatever their approach, depend most fundamentally on some concept—intuitive or systematic—of the genre’s structural constituents. We cannot begin to study the life of the letter form in art (its origins, its decline) without some understanding of what the letter’s “forms” are. Thematic emphases in letter fiction, we have observed, tend to grow out of, rather than to dictate, the choice of the form. The most convincing pragmatic and expressive approaches are those that find some basis for authorial attitude or reader response in concrete textual phenomena, such as the mise-en-abyme of the writer-reader relationship within the form itself. In short, it is the structural or syntactic approach that is logically prior to all other approaches. In this final section we shall sketch the directions that a structural description of the letter novel might take and the problems we are likely to encounter in undertaking such a description.

The general model below should help clarify the parameters that have to be taken into account. The horizontal line represents (albeit not chronologically) the creation and reception of an epistolary narrative; the concentric circles represent degrees of
removal from the action of the novel. We thereby have distinguished three broad diegetic levels.\(^{(10)}\) (1) Clearly within the frame of the world created by the narrative (the diegesis) are the correspondents (writer and addressee). (2) Clearly outside the frame of the diegesis, on the other hand, are the epistolary novelist and his reader. (3) Between this clearly diegetic and extradiegetic territory lies the domain of the intermediary figures: the editor (who by selection and annotation participates in the creation of the text) and the publisher (intermediary in the transmission of the text).

Already this model encourages some historical distinctions and speculations. As we observed in chapter 3, epistolary novels posing as real-life products in the eighteenth century set up the intermediary editorial frames only to blur the distinction between the fictional world of the correspondents and the real historical worlds of the novelist-reader, by making the expansion of readership part of the diegesis, just as the creation of the Super Reader figure makes exegesis part of the diegesis. The critical climate of the time, which tended to define verisimilitude as
(authenticity, fostered this incorporation of the outer circles of our model into the inner circle. In fact, our model might encourage us to relate this “authentication” of the action of a novel to the phenomenon of “presentification,” which we studied in chapter 4, whereby the writer tries to create the illusion that both he and his addressee are immediately present to each other and to the action. In both cases we might speak of a vortex action that absorbs writers and readers into the narrative center; in both cases the action of the novel is authenticated by (pseudo)eradication of spatiotemporal distance between the narrated action and the writer, between the writer and the addressee, and ultimately between these two and the reader of the novel, who is encouraged to believe that only the time required for publication separates his world from that of the novel. Such tendencies suggest an eighteenth-century reading public whose dominant esthetic is contemporaneity; one might speculate on the dialectical relationship between the epistolary novel so popular in the latter half of the eighteenth century and the historical novel focusing on more distant events that ushered in a new kind of narrative in the nineteenth century.

Such tendencies typify also a public so interested in the private life of the ordinary contemporary individual that the movement from the fictional to the real world can be disguised as the movement from private to public reading, as the readdressing of private correspondences. The editor-publisher figure, by having one foot planted in the world of the correspondents and one in the world of the reader, seemingly guarantees the authenticity as well as the original privacy of the transmitted text. We might ask whether there is a comparable figure or diegetic domain in letter works published prior to or after the eighteenth century. The twentieth century has favored mixed forms that combine dialogue, letter, and straight narrative sequences (e.g., Mitsou, Herzog, Natalia Ginzburg’s recently published best-seller Caro Michele). It would be worth investigating narratorial presentation of letters in these works as well as the narrator’s relation to the outside reader to compare the esthetic ideals of the century that was dominated by the letter form with earlier and later periods.

Having scanned the basic diegetic levels of an epistolary
narrative, let us return to the inner circle that circumscribes the world of the correspondents. In the more elaborate diagram below I have added vertical dimensions that will help us visualize the basic narrative options available to the epistolary novelist. In the lower semicircle we would place all letter novels that develop a single action (e.g., a segment of the life of a single protagonist, a seduction, a voyage). In the upper semicircle we would locate all works developing multiple plots. Under and above each category of correspondent, moreover, we have indicated three numerical options. We thereby describe three fundamental choices that the epistolary novelist makes; in constructing his narrative he
chooses either to limit himself to one basic plot or to interweave more than one; and he chooses to have that story told by single (S), dual (D), or multiple (M) writers to one (S), two (D), or more (M) addressees.

What we have now (besides a cluttered diagram) is a typology of epistolary narrative. This typology owes a great deal to François Jost's classification of epistolary narratives in his article "Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle" (summarized in the Introduction). Jost distinguishes only six types by essentially two criteria: number of correspondents and method of narration ("kinetic" or "static," according to whether the action proceeds through letters to protagonists or whether letters merely report events to confidants). In my own diagram I have retained Jost's distinctions and examples but have systematized them, so that we can visualize not only those possibilities that have been actualized by well-known works but all theoretical possibilities. Some of these may never have been actualized, and for interesting reasons. We note, for example, that the "type Marianne" exists but there seem to be no novels composed by two or more correspondents removed from the action. This is largely because *La Vie de Marianne* and *La Religieuse*, like John Cleland's *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* (1745), grafted epistolary traits upon the memoir model, in which a single narrator recounts his life. Yet nothing precludes our imagining a novel that would interweave autobiographical letters or combine several correspondents' memoirs of the same past incident.

In addition, I have added another parameter to those that Jost's classification suggests or implies—that of the number of actions narrated (vertical axis). This enables us to distinguish, for example, between two novels that Jost places in the same category: *Lettres persanes* and *Humphry Clinker*. Although these two novels are similar in their travelogue composition (some of these similarities are discussed elsewhere in this study), the interweaving of letters that develop the harem plot and those devoted to a critique of French society is crucial to Montesquieu's novel. Smollett presents nothing comparable. On the other hand Smollett, who offers us not two but five travelers, develops fully the possibilities for multiple perspective, which Montesquieu had hardly explored. Usbek is involved in two different worlds, which
fragment his mind; Smollett’s characters are involved in one and the same world, of which they give us fragmented views.

If I insist on the importance of the number of actions it is not merely to distinguish between novels. Jost implies that the privilege of narrating simultaneous actions is reserved for the “type Laclos,” the kinetic polylogue. Yet we have just seen a static polylogue (i.e., *Lettres persanes*) that develops two actions. In fact, the epistolary novel has time and again experimented with the narration of multiple and simultaneous actions, and not only in multicorrespondent or kinetic novels. Balzac’s *Lettres de deux jeunes mariées* consists of the letters of two women who lead separate lives and whose reciprocal confidences constantly juxtapose two contrastive life-styles in diptych fashion. Let us contrast this novel with *Clarissa*, where two writers (Lovelace and Clarissa) likewise carry most of the narrative: *Clarissa* narrates a single action but offers us a female and a male perspective on it. In general, epistolary narratives of multiple actions (e.g., those above our horizontal axis) specialize in interweaving related actions, whereas those that narrate a single action emphasize the subject’s perspective on events.

At the center of our model, and undiscussed thus far, is the small circle marked “action.” How do we describe an epistolary “action,” i.e., the narrative content of an epistolary work? If we take our lead from structuralist narratology, we will be concerned to give an accurate account of that “story” (*histoire*) that is separable from its linguistic medium. Accepting the principle that there are a limited number of elements that generate stories and that can be expressed or translated into any medium, we would proceed to a structural analysis of the plots of a representative sampling of letter novels. This analysis would produce a morphology or a grammar describing the constituent elements of an epistolary narrative and the rules for their combination. Such an undertaking is obviously beyond the scope of this chapter. We can, however, speculate here on the possible conclusions of such a morphological study. Assuming that it will have followed the same methods of analysis as other narratologists have used, either we will find that our grammar of epistolary narrative looks just like other morphologies of nonepistolary corpuses or we will find that letter narrative favors certain plots and functional com-
binations above others. My own work suggests that the conclusion would depend on what we take as our corpus—all works in letter form (including those that are closer to diary or memoirs) or those that concentrate traits of epistolarity—i.e., exhibit the properties of the letter as we have elaborated them. The novelist who uses the letter as a diary or memoir to report external events as they happen or happened independently of the letter writing can choose any type of "story." The novelist who chooses to make the letter an integral part of the action, on the other hand, will have a more limited repertory; seduction, conspiracy, the formation and dissolution of relationships will be his central narrative material.

Before any analysis of narrative content could be undertaken, however, we would have to specify what constitutes a narrative event. What do we do with letter novels that do not tell "stories" in the way that Boccaccian novellas or Russian folktales do? Whereas some letter writers concentrate on telling what happened, others may spend most of their time emoting, justifying, describing the world around them, confessing, persuading—and, above all, writing. One could easily argue that structural analysis of any novel poses the same problem, since all novels are complex forms, having lyrical, descriptive, philosophical, and dialogue passages that do not preclude our analyzing them as narrative. Yet the letter novel presents a special case. As a fragmented, dialogical form, in the hands of novelists who would rather explore the letter's formal potential than use it to tell a story, epistolary literature begins to look like modern experimental works where nothing "happens" except that characters spend a great deal of time talking or writing and authors invest a great deal of energy playing with a medium's formal elements. If we limit our analysis of narrative content to the kind of anecdotal action that is described in most morphologies, we will account for very little of the text. Shall we conclude that most epistolary literature, and indeed much modern literature, is not "narrative"? Or do we rethink our definition of a narrative event?

If epistolary narrative problematizes the definition of the narrative events constituting its "action," it is for a simple reason: the storytelling impulse behind letter narrative is constantly constrained and modified by the letter's discursive nature. The
letter cannot be *histoire* without passing through *discours*. Its narrativity (defined as stories we can abstract from a narrative medium) is profoundly affected, if not limited, by its medium. The implications of discourse for narrative are numerous in letter fiction. Let us summarize the most important ones here:

1. Letter narrative proceeds through a *doubly oblique narration*. Narrated events are always reported by someone to someone. As Merteuil's different accounts of the Prévan episode illustrate, events are colored by addressee as well as by writer; in the context of epistolary discourse they are refracted through not one prism but two.

2. Letter narrative is *elliptical narration*. Paradoxically, many of its narrative events may be nonnarrated events of which we see only the repercussions. In the letters of Crébillon's marquise to her seducer, we never get an account of the actual scene of her submission, which is a climactic event; we must surmise it from a change in tone in her letters to her lover. In the epistolary situation where an addressee may already know of events, or a writer may be reluctant to report them, dialogue may simply reflect rather than report external events.

3. Thus far we have dealt with the implications of discourse for narrative insofar as the reporting of external events is concerned. Clearly, however, not all of letter fiction's narrative events are narrated events. In the epistolary work, acts of communication (confession, silence, persuasion, and so on) constitute important events; they are enacted rather than reported in discourse. Analytic models drawn from drama theory, speech act, or other types of communication theory may come closer than narrative models to describing what is "happening" in an epistolary work.

We should now be in a better position to describe how a letter narrative is put together. Any model we construct must take into account the epistolary novel's discursive as well as its narrative dimensions. In the following basic model we shall distinguish between three levels or registers of action in epistolary narrative: (1) the register of reported events ($e_1, e_2, e_3, \ldots$); (2) the register of the writer reporting them, since writing itself is a primary
activity in epistolary novels ($w_1$ = writer one, $w_2$ = writer two, and so forth); and (3) the register of the reader to whom they are reported, since reading is likewise an action ($r_1$ = first reader, and so on). 19

Let us begin by taking examples of letter narrative where there is minimal interference from discourse:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chronological register of event</th>
<th>Epistolary memoir</th>
<th>Epistolary diary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading</td>
<td>$r_1$</td>
<td>$r_1$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing</td>
<td>$w_1$, $w_2$, ...</td>
<td>$w_1$, $w_2$, ...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>event</td>
<td>$e_1$, $e_2$, ...</td>
<td>$e_1$, $e_2$,...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In an epistolary memoir like La Vie de Marianne, all events reported ($e_1$, $e_2$, ..., $e_n$) precede the first moment of writing and occupy the bulk of the writing; dialogue between the single writer and addressee is minimal, detracting rarely from the continuum of reported events. 19 In an epistolary diary like Pamela and Werther we begin to get more interference from the register of writing. Tomorrow’s events are unknown today; the writer’s expectations regarding events begin to alternate with his reporting of events, thereby giving discursive elements added weight in the text.

As soon as we have more than one writer or more than one reader, discourse begins to take over from and deform “story.” In the diagram below we have taken an imaginary epistolary novel that chains together letters relating a story composed of events 1–5 ($e_1$–$e_5$). Each segment of the diagram illustrates a common case of interference between discourse and story.

1. In the first segment all of our writers are introduced in three consecutive letters. Each reports the same event to his respective confidant, offering different, perhaps contradictory perspectives. (Humphry Clinker makes extensive use of this technique.)

2. Now two writers report the same event to the same reader. When Merteuil receives two reports of Cécile’s rape, one from Cécile and one from Valmont, she is in a privileged position as reader of both versions. Here, in contrast to the previously cited example from Smollett, it is the reader’s rather than the writer’s perspective that is highlighted; the narrative focus has been displaced from the register of events to the register of reading, and the reading event will generate consequent narrative events.

3. In this segment the same writer reports the same event differently to different readers (e.g., Merteuil writes two versions of the Prévan episode, one for Valmont and one for the general public).

4. A writer refrains from reporting an event ($e_5$) to a particular addressee or reports it out of sequence. (Clarissa undergoes an epistolary blackout after her rape and cannot report it until long afterward.)

The above diagram illustrates some of the implications of dialogue for narrative in cases where the story is constituted by reported events. In letters exchanged between lovers, or novels where the major vicissitudes are psychological and may result from acts of communication, our bottom line (the register of narrated events) would have to be bracketed entirely, since all action would be transpiring at the level of writing and reading. Lettres portugaises comes closest to this kind of purely discursive narrative. Yet even in novels of intrigue the nature of the medium requires much of the action to be enacted in discourse rather than reported. Valmont, for example, does not report to Merteuil the machinations whereby he gains access to Tourvel’s house in Paris; we as readers must surmise his plans through the letters we see from Valmont to Tourvel’s priest.

The complexities of the interrelationship between histoire and discours are particularly visible in epistolary fiction, where
activity in epistolary novels (\(w_1 = \) writer one, \(w_2 = \) writer two, and so forth); and (3) the register of the reader to whom they are reported, since reading is likewise an action (\(r_1 = \) first reader, and so on).\textsuperscript{17}

Let us begin by taking examples of letter narrative where there is minimal interference from discourse:

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3. In this segment the same writer reports the same event differently to different readers (e.g., Merteuil writes two versions of the Prévan episode, one for Valmont and one for the general public).

4. A writer refrains from reporting an event (\(e_i\)) to a particular addressee or reports it out of sequence. (Clarissa undergoes an epistolary blackout after her rape and cannot report it until long afterward.)

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The complexities of the interrelationship between \textit{histoire} and \textit{discours} are particularly visible in epistolary fiction, where
histoire can be generated only through discours, and where the actions constituting histoire are not simply narrated but often enacted, and occasionally nonnarrated. To put it another way, the writer of epistolary fiction has a fundamental problem: the letter novelist (A) must make his letter writer (B) speak to an addressee (C) in order to communicate with a reader (D) who overhears; how does he reconcile the exigencies of story (communication between novelist and reader) with the exigencies of interpersonal discourse (communication between correspondents)?

The epistolary novel is a product of communicative impulses that are not entirely compatible. If a single impulse takes over completely, we no longer have a work that is both epistolary and a novel. The very qualities that guarantee the letter work's epistolarity in the mimetic sense (predominance of discursive elements and absence of an editor, which produce what Barthes would call the "effet de réel" and make the letters look like real letters) work against its narrativity, making the entire concept of

![Graph showing the relationship between Discourse, Narrative, and Epistolary works](image)
an “epistolary fiction” as paradoxical as that of the nonfiction novel. Yet a writer like Laclos maximizes all four impulses in what is the most epistolary of all novels, simultaneously affirming and challenging the letter’s authenticity and narrativity. The as-yet-unwritten history of epistolary literature will perhaps give a clearer account of the interplay between these four impulses in various eras and areas.

The epistolary novel was born in an age when novelists like Diderot and Sterne had moved beyond storytelling to playful reflection upon history, fiction, and the very means by which fictional or historical events are recounted. There is ample evidence that the epistolary form is experiencing a renaissance in the postmodernist era when so much fiction is questioning the representational status of writing, when discursive self-consciousness is overtly challenging the novel’s traditional narrativity. The discovery of the letter as a narrative medium, like the discovery of the movie camera in our era, had three principal appeals: documentary, narrative, and formal. The aesthetic ideals behind letter works have much in common with those of cinéma-vérité, classical Hollywood narrative, and Eisensteinian formalism, according to the way the epistolary author composes and edits his “shots” (letters). (1) Lettres-vérité: the editor apologizes for the lack of style in the letters and emphasizes the aleatory construction of the work. (2) Classical narrative: the editing is invisible, and the disjuncture inherent to the form is disguised by narrative continuity whenever we pass from letter to letter following a plot line without noticing a switch in perspective. (3) Formalist esthetic: the artistic hand of the editor is visible in the style and structure of individual letters, in the architectural composition (montage) of the novel. The letter novel is one of the first genres constituted by discovery of a medium and exploration of its potential. In that, it resembles many of the experimental forms of the twentieth century that question the subordination of medium to message. It is yet another paradox of epistolarity that we should be able to characterize letter fiction as a relatively codified genre that is nonetheless experimental.

The visible, often contradictory impulses behind epistolary fiction can be generalized, with appropriate modification, to other narrative forms, if not to virtually all literature. Although epistolary literature seemingly constitutes a highly particular,
historically limited literary subgenre (whose particularities, indeed, have been the emphasis of my study), there is a very real sense in which it metaphorically "represents" literature as a whole. By its very *mise-en-abyme* of the writer-reader relationship, the epistolary form models the complex dynamics involved in writing and reading; in its preoccupation with the myriad mediatory aspects involved in communication, in the way that it wrestles with the problem of making narrative out of discourse, in its attempts to resolve mimetic and artistic impulses, epistolary literature exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature.

In fact, what makes this form so intriguing to study (as the concentric diagram at the beginning of this section implies) is the way in which it explicitly articulates the problematics involved in the creation, transmission, and reception of literary texts. By the very structural conditions of the letter-writing situation (which involves absence from the addressee and the constitution of a "present" addressee, removal from events and yet also the constitution of events) epistolary literature intensifies awareness of the gaps and traps that are built into the narrative representation of intersubjective and temporal experience. My work is only a prolegomenon to a study that would investigate more deeply—historically and philosophically—Jacques Derrida's suggestion in *Envois* that "l'histoire de la philosophie, comme la littérature, tout en rejetant la lettre dans ses marges, tout en affectant de la considérer comme un genre secondaire, comptait avec elle, essentiellement" (p. 69). Epistolary fiction tends to flourish at those moments when novelists most openly reflect upon the relation between storytelling and intersubjective communication and begin to question the way in which writing reflects, betrays, or constitutes the relations between self, other, and experience. At those crisis moments the letter form foregrounds—in its very consciousness of itself as a form—questions that are basic to all literature. Perhaps the final paradox of epistolarity is that the very parameters that help us define the form as a specific instance of writing should afford us perspectives on the discipline of "letters" in its broadest sense.

*la lettre, l'épître, qui n'est pas un genre mais tous les genres, la littérature même—Derrida, "Envois"*
1. Réal Ouellet, in "La Théorie du roman épistolaire en France au XVIIIe siècle," studies authorial conceptions of the form in the prefaces of some two hundred epistolary novels. His remarks are not conclusive. J. von Stackelberg, in a subsequent article, "Der Briefroman und seine Epoche," tries to distill from Ouellet's and his own research a relationship between sensibility and the epistolary form.

2. I have discussed these two styles in chapter 2 above and from a somewhat different perspective in my article "Addressed and Undressed Language in Laclos's Liaisons dangereuses." In that essay I use Laclos's novel as an opportunity to look more closely at the conflictual relationship between the rhetorical impulse (what I call "addressed language") and the autobiographical impulse (what I call "undressed language") in epistolary writing. In this article I also take up the complementary and related issues of "redressing" (rewriting letters) and "readdressing" (circulation of letters) and the infinite layers of differential meaning that these possibilities imply.


5. In fact, in English letter fiction we even find numerous novels whose principal correspondent writes as an observer primarily about the actions of a third party. The Memoirs of Sir Charles Goodville and his Family (1753), for instance, begins, "I have, at last, sat down, to fulfill the engagement I am under of giving you as distinct an account, as I am capable, of the remarkable transactions in the family of Sir Charles Goodville." F. G. Black, in his article "The Technique of Letter Fiction in English from 1740 to 1800," p. 304, makes the frequency of this type clear. It is rare in French fiction.

For a richly documented, subtle discussion of diary writing and its relation to fictional forms in eighteenth-century Germany, see James P. Pusack, "German Monologic Fiction in the Eighteenth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1977).

6. Two exceptional studies have appeared recently, however. Bernard Bray describes "Transformation du roman épistolaire au XXe siècle en France" in a 1977 article that I shall cite in more detail later; and L. Versini's Le Roman épistolaire (1979) notably brings out the popularity of the form with exiles from the French Revolution and with nineteenth-century woman novelists. (The implications of this phenomenon are worth exploring.)

7. See, for example, R. B. Johnson, Jr., "Anatomy of a Literary Device: The Included Letter."
8. See F. C. Green, "Montesquieu the Novelist and Some Imitations of the Lettres persanes."


10. I am using the terms *diegetic* and *diegesis*, as Gérard Genette and other narratologists (particularly those working with cinematic narrative) use them, to designate the fictional world of the primary narrative. This use differs from Plato's original conception of *diegesis*: in the third book of the *Republic*, when Socrates opposes *diegesis* to *mimesis*, he is essentially contrasting authorial presentation to dramatic representation.

11. Jost's distinction of the "type Marianne" from the "type Werther" (both of which have a single, "static" correspondent), is, however, based implicitly on what I have chosen to establish as an independent third parameter—the narrator's distance from the events narrated.

12. Indeed, since drafting this Conclusion I have come across *Les Noces d'or* (1974), by Arlette and Robert Bréchon, an epistolary duologue in which husband and wife exchange recollections of their conjugal life. The novel itself is an interesting "marriage" of the autobiographical impulse toward construction of the personal self through an account of the past viewed as a totality, and the epistolary impulse toward exchange, in which the *other* constantly interferes. The male correspondent articulates the complexity of this particular merger of the memoir and letter forms, where it is not just a question of one I or even two I's confronting relationships with the past I and present *you*, but of a we confronting its past and present composition. With an awareness of the implications of personal pronouns that is so typical of recent literature, the husband writes: "le *nous* de ce livre n'est pas la somme d'un *je* et d'un *tu*, mais un perpétuel compromis, le résultat d'une plus ou moins constante négociation" (p. 307). Of obvious interest, moreover, in this novel and other collaborative works (e.g., *New Portuguese Letters*, recently coauthored by the "three Marias") is the question of joint authorship and the relationship between those who sign the book and those who sign (or do not sign) the letters.


14. I am referring to work on large corpuses like Propp's on the folk tale, Souriau's on theater, and Todorov's on the *Decameron*. I do not mean to imply that structural analysts of narrative like Bremond and Todorov are unaware of the problems posed by complex forms. In fact, Todorov attempts two different (and not uninteresting) segmentations of *Les Liaisons* in *Littérature et signification* and concludes that these are unsatisfactory. Bremond's elaborate model for analysis in *Logique du récit* appears more appropriate for complex narrative, yet in fact most of Bremond's examples are drawn from anecdotal and episodic works.

15. I draw the opposition of *histoire* to *discours* from Benveniste's well-known essays on "L'Homme dans la langue" (section 5 of *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, 1:225 66). Benveniste's influential work has inspired many analyses and a great deal of discussion; moreover, since Benveniste's articles appeared G. Genette has used the two terms somewhat differently in his "Discours du récit" (*Figures III*).
16. Ronald Rosbottom is to my knowledge the only reader to have systematically applied a complex communication theory to analysis of an epistolary novel. See his “Dangerous Connections: A Communicational Approach to *Les Liaisons dangereuses.*” Rosbottom uses as a critical model recent work in interactional psychotherapy (the writings of the Palo Alto group of communicational therapists) to analyze most sensitively various communicational circuits in Laclos’s novel.

17. Elsewhere I have explored the implications of these three registers for time structures in epistolary narrative: “The ‘Triple Register’: Introduction to Temporal Complexity in the Letter-Novel.”

18. That there is nonetheless more digressive dialogue with the addressee in a work like Marivaux’s *Marianne* than in his *Paysan parvenu* is at least in part a function of the epistolary form of the former. Talbot Spivak (“Marivaux’s *Le Paysan parvenu:* A Study of Thematic Structure and Narrative Voice” [Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, 1976]) points out that Rousset’s concept of the “double register” (in which the older narrator’s voice remains distinct from the voice of the character whose life he is narrating) holds less validity for *Le Paysan* than for *Marianne.*

19. Bernard Bray, in “Transformation du roman épistolaire au XXe siècle en France,” describes a number of recent epistolary novels, including the form’s modern avatar, the “roman téléphonique,” and moves toward this conclusion. Jacques Derrida suggests in *Envois* a slightly different hypothesis, more closely tied to his own meditations throughout *La Carte postale* on communication circuits, dissemination, and the letter’s (language’s) potential to “ne pas arriver à destination”: “Dans l’histoire, c’est mon hypothèse, les fictions épistolaires se multiplient quand arrive une nouvelle crise de la destination” (p. 249). This speculation merits further exploration in careful historical terms.

20. Godard’s film esthetic of “on doit tout mettre dans un film” is not unlike Montesquieu’s epistolary esthetic: “Dans les romans ordinaires les digressions ne peuvent être permises que lorsqu’elles forment elles-mêmes un nouveau roman. Mais dans la forme de lettres, où les acteurs ne sont pas choisis, et où les sujets qu’on traite ne sont dépendants d’aucun dessein ou d’aucun plan déjà formé, l’auteur s’est donné l’avantage de pouvoir joindre de la philosophie, de la politique et de la morale à un roman” (“*Quelques réflexions sur Les Lettres persanes*”). Montesquieu has already discovered Godard’s formula “discours = cours discontinu”: “Au cours d’un film—dans son discours, c’est-à-dire son discours discontinu j’ai envie de tout faire, à propos du sport, de la politique, et même de l’épicerie. On peut tout mettre dans un film. On doit tout mettre dans un film” (*Jean-Luc Godard par Jean-Luc Godard* [Paris: Belfond, 1968], pp. 392–93).