Gustave Lanson’s earnest desire to relegate Mme de Sévigné’s passion for her daughter to a substrate level reflects his basic preoccupation with the nonessential side of the voluminous correspondence. Lanson was most fascinated by the anecdotal Mme de Sévigné, the part of the letters given over to describing the multifold events of the time—“Toutes ces anecdotes, ces narrations charmantes ou poignantes, sont un des documents les plus sincères que l’histoire puisse consulter”—and the ambiguous, strange relationship with Mme de Grignan is seen basically as an écart from the epistolary norm.

Certainly, Lanson’s taste seems to have fixed Mme de Sévigné and her letters into a mold that only recently has been deemed questionable. Most of the morceaux choisis collections refer constantly to the letters depicting the death of Turenne, the representation of Racine’s Esther, and, suspecting perhaps that it was at least necessary to allude once to the feelings of Mme de Sévigné for Mme de Grignan, the editors frequently include the famous episode of the crossing of the Avignon bridge. Seemingly, one reason for easily including the latter piece would be that
stylistically, through its reenactment of the little drama, it conforms to the general notion we have of Mme de Sévigné as a tableau painter, gifted in depicting a certain sense of color and movement through the written word.

But in the past few years, critical interpretations have centered on the primary, essential point of the correspondence: the mother-daughter relationship. Reading through the three volumes of the letters in the Pléiade edition, it is evident immediately that the anecdotal approach is more than merely limiting. Such analysis actually disfigures the work, for the anecdote serves only as a support, or even sometimes as a foil, for the one element that overwhelmingly dominates the letters to Mme de Grignan—the expression of the great love.

In terms of the general study I have proposed, it is fair to question whether the letters occupy the same position toward society as the works of the other writers. Do they offer a general view of man in his universe—both immediate and cosmic? Do they propose a code or style of living? Does the introduction of "je" alter the basic intention of the seventeenth-century moralists: an impersonal negating and subsequent reconstruction of social patterns most necessary to the fundamental well-being of the individual and his society? In reply it must be said that a very powerful view of life, of living, does emerge from the letters of Mme de Sévigné; and in fact, it is one that goes counter to the philosophical and religious thinking of the day. Mme de Sévigné identified living with loving.

The Jansenist, Epicurean, and mondain codes are all violated by this other life-view: Jansenism by Mme de Sévigné's heavy emphasis on human love; Epicureanism by her willingness to plunge into a total, highly intense involvement with another, thereby sacrificing repose and emotional liberty; and finally la mondanité by her refusal to establish an idiom allowing for the superficial transfer of sentiment without loss of inner control. Unlike the great majority of classical moralists, Mme de Sévigné opted, through her letters, for a radical approach to life, radical in that it embraced the passions without fear.
Nevertheless, her stance is not without ambiguity. Life as love is not exactly what Mme de Sévigné chose, or it is precisely what she chose if living can be completely synonymous with writing. There is a distinction between stressing her passion or stressing the writing that interpreted it, between Mme de Sévigné primarily as active “lover” or passive poet. Recent criticism has tended to emphasize one side at the expense of the other, sometimes forgetting that the feelings and their expression can be separated only with great difficulty. Roger Duchène in his *Madame de Sévigné et la lettre d’amour* accentuates her passion as a living force, so strong that she had to express it constantly. Left without any other means to do so, she opted for the letter. His study traces the history of Mme de Sévigné’s passionate love for Mme de Grignan. Letter-writing is seen as a means to filling in the terrible gap that Mme de Grignan’s departure for Provence had created. Beginning with the fateful day, Duchène skillfully follows the life of Mme de Sévigné’s unusually intense love: “Les lettres à Mme de Grignan permettent de suivre les étapes de l’évolution des sentiments de Mme de Sévigné. Après les lents progrès vers une meilleure entente de 1671 à 1676, vient la brusque rupture de 1677 avec, jusqu’en 1680, des sursauts et des paroxysmes. Et c’est enfin, dans une sérénité un peu grave, l’accord que seule attriste la pensée de la mort. La preuve de la vérité de l’amour dans les lettres, c’est cette courbe, dessinée au jour le jour, d’une affection s’étalant sur vingt-cinq années.”

Whereas Duchène is interested primarily in the curve of Mme de Sévigné’s love for her daughter and in examining the reasons for such fluctuation, Gérard-Gailly, in his introduction to the Pléiade edition of the letters, offers a Freudian analysis of the passion itself. Duchène describes from the outside; Gérard-Gailly from the inside. His reading centers primarily upon certain semi-erotic passages of the letters and he concludes: “Passion maternelle! Maternelle, sans doute, mais amoureuse aussi, et passion d’amant pour un autre être humain.” His views are reinforced by the fact that the more obvious “love” passages were re-
moved by Mme de Sévigné's earliest editors, who probably recognized their ambiguous value.

For other critics, notably Jean Cordelier, the love relationship between Mme de Sévigné and Mme de Grignan is viewed as the means through which the former was best able to fulfill a calling as a writer. Cordelier seeks to prove that the passion she experienced was only indirectly tied to Mme de Grignan, via the necessity of writing. Thus she loved the person who allowed her to realize her vocation.\(^5\)

Interpreting the question of language in a different vein, Bernard Bray explains that the erotic language Mme de Sévigné frequently used in the letters to her daughter was the result of a linguistic impasse. She was forced into the lyric note because "la marquise ne disposait d'aucun autre langage pour exprimer la douleur de l'absence."\(^6\) This interpretation is diametrically opposed to the Freudian analysis of Gérard-Gailly, and the center of focus shifts from the psychological to the socio-linguistic.

All the methods used to analyze the correspondence both succeed and fail in their attempts to understand the strange letters. Roger Duchène's exhaustive study maintains too strict a parallel between living and writing. He is so interested in the gaps between letters, in what mother and daughter were feeling at all times, that he forgets that Mme de Sévigné's primary identity is through letter-writing, and hence through the domain of the summary, the deliberate exclusion, not through any consecutive, all-inclusive pattern.

As for Gérard-Gailly's Freudian study, it too fails at a certain point. Without a doubt his perceptions do open doors, for very frequently Mme de Sévigné's "maternal" love appears ambiguous. The rivalry with M. de Grignan for control over her daughter, the fascination with Mme de Grignan's physical beauty, the references to kisses and embraces far beyond polite convention, point to a situation that seemingly reflects desires of incest and sapphism. Mme de Sévigné herself, on occasion, found it useful to clarify that her love was maternel, as if other thoughts had
indeed crossed her mind at some point. But the Freudian bent ultimately fails to tell the whole story, for the letters show that writing was a clear alternative—in fact, even sometimes a clear preference—to physical presence, and their love seemed to express itself most satisfactorily for both parties when the written word could interpret it. Thus a study of psyches and motives cannot reflect the entire problem, for it neglects the very crucial question of the necessity to remain in the domain of written communication, and, going one step further, in the domain of the imagination.

On the other hand, the theories stressing the writing experience are belied by Mme de Sévigné herself. Although in reality her great passion may have fared far better when on paper than at any other time, she nevertheless did believe that writing was a substitute for Mme de Grignan's presence, that it was only second best: “Quand je ne suis pas avec vous, mon unique divertissement est de vous écrire” (1:611). On the conscious plane, the marquise perceived that seeing was highly desirable, and writing, a palliative. Thus Jean Cordelier's neat little system transforming “je vivrai pour vous aimer” into “je vivrai pour vous écrire” stretches the truth. That writing emerges eventually as a superior alternative to being together is clear through the letters, but only at rare moments was it viewed as such by Mme de Sévigné. Most of the time, she yearned for her daughter's presence. Finally, Bernard Bray, in emphasizing that linguistic patterns alone dictated Mme de Sévigné's expression, cannot sufficiently take into account either the nature of the relationship or the view of living that Mme de Sévigné sought to communicate. Ultimately, all aspects involved in Mme de Sévigné's relationship with her daughter must be studied, not only the fundamental ties but also how and why this alliance expressed itself as it did.

It is difficult to ascertain the precise nature of Mme de Sévigné's feeling for her daughter prior to the latter’s departure for Provence, shortly after her marriage. In the
face of scholarship suggesting that Mme de Sévigné’s love for her daughter was an outgrowth only of Mme de Grignan’s marriage and subsequent departure, and thus of a loss of a person who for so many years had been dominated and dependent, other critics have attempted to show that the separation of the two women marked only a heightening of an already forceful passion.⁸

There is really no strong evidence either way. But does an understanding of the years that preceded the 1671 departure to Provence shed much light on the correspondence itself? The only important question—that of Mme de Sévigné’s possible desire to dominate her child—can be gleaned readily through the letters themselves, and references to past patterns of behavior do little to clarify that problem. However, by no means was the dependence-independence syndrome the sole, or even primary, reason for Mme de Sévigné’s faithful correspondence, a view that might be suggested by an overly detailed account of the years previous to Mme de Grignan’s departure.

What is significant is that the departure of Mme de Grignan for Provence on 5 February 1671 (where she was to follow her husband, who had just been named lieutenant-général by the court) was an abrupt move and a shock that was to release an expression of intense passion that, during the grand siècle, was paralleled perhaps only by the Lettres portugaises. The opening words of the first letter, written on 6 February 1671, one day after saying farewell to Mme de Grignan, set the note and tone of the twenty-five years of correspondence:

Ma douleur serait bien médiocre si je pouvais vous la dépeindre; je ne l’entreprendrai pas aussi. J’ai beau chercher ma chère fille, je ne la trouve plus, et tous les pas qu’elle fait l’éloignent de moi. Je m’en allai donc à Sainte-Marie, toujours pleurant et toujours mourant: il me semblait qu’on m’arrachait le cœur et l’âme; et en effet, quelle rude séparation! (1:189)

Each subsequent separation following a period of reunion evokes a similar outcry; and although as she becomes
accustomed to the absence of her daughter Mme de Sévigné consciously attempts to modify her acute misery and to modulate her tone, the letters are nevertheless, with varying degrees of intensity, primarily the vivid expression of the anguish engendered by the "eternal" separation. Through a process of défiguration that a collection of letters such as these cannot help but create, the reader is left with the impression that the periods of separation far surpassed in length the number of days when the two women were reunited. It is, however, the reverse that is true; sixteen years, nine months together, eight years, four months apart. But it is not time together or apart, more of one than of the other, that is really at stake here. The nature of the feeling was such that each period of separation seemed "forever" to Mme de Sévigné.

The motives governing Mme de Sévigné's correspondence with her daughter are no clearer than the precise nature of their relationship prior to 1671. At times it appears that the marquise was "engaged in a battle for a resisting heart," that she sought to maintain her daughter in a state of dependency inconsistent with the newly acquired freedom that marriage and distance had bestowed upon Mme de Grignan. Her frequently haughty, commanding tones suggest that this was at least partially responsible for the highly intense exchange of letters. At certain times—for example, when she unsuccessfully exhorts Mme de Grignan to join her at Vichy and then to return to Paris together for the remainder of the year—it is obvious that a battle of wills was a definite part of their relationship.

In a variation of the above theme, it could be postulated that Mme de Sévigné's obsessive passion for Mme de Grignan illustrates perfectly the fascination with an "absent" person, the fascination that Proust described at such length. Thus Mme de Grignan represents the creature who ultimately escapes total possession, what Albertine was for the narrateur of the Recherche. "Passion proustienne, non pas que la mère de Mme de Grignan ait rien d'une femme damnée . . . mais parce que son aventure apparaît comme l'illustration parfaite de l'analyse que
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Proust fera de la passion amoureuse, analyse qu'une brève citation de la Recherche suffit à rappeler: ‘On n’aime que ce qu’on ne possède pas tout entier.’ In this case, Françoise-Marguerite’s portrait, which Mme de Sévigné keeps close to her throughout the years and to which she makes frequent reference in her letters, would be the perfect symbol of être de fuite, she who is both present and absent, the ideal metaphor for possession and lack of it.

But if precise motivation cannot be determined (for doubtless Mme de Sévigné was moved to write by several reasons), other questions can be more readily resolved. Reading through the letters consecutively, one perceives two important points: (1) the letters to Mme de Grignan do not fit in at all with the ongoing trends of la mondanité and la galanterie; and (2) on the writing level at least, Mme de Sévigné’s involvement with her daughter was strikingly absolute and total.

That the marquise’s relationship with Mme de Grignan, as she expressed it in her letters, far transcends any notions of simple gallantry or artificial social structures has been most thoroughly documented by Roger Duchène in his recent comprehensive study of the letters. La lettre galante enjoyed much favor in seventeenth-century French society, where the salon life cultivated various socially acceptable “masks.” Thus it emerges as an extremely well-perfected means to avoid the more fundamental sentiments of a primarily erotic base. “Parler d’amour s’avère en conséquence à la fois nécessaire et impossible, sauf précisément par le biais de la galanterie, masque commode et qui permet d’oser beaucoup puisqu’elle est réputée jeu d’esprit innocent, admis et même recommandé par les conventions de la vie mondaine.”

Such a code is evident in the letters of the marquise, although not in those to her daughter. Rather, it is in her correspondence with her male admirers that she readily introduces la galanterie, particularly in that addressed to Ménage and to Bussy-Rabutin, her cousin. Those letters are filled with wit and teasing grace, with joking ambig-

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uities and puns. Especially in the letters to her cousin, Mme de Sévigné demonstrates a proclivity for a certain equivocal note, where frequent references of a sexual nature contrast with her very restrained, indignant manner when her cousin, provoked by her banter, steps beyond social rules. In the correspondence with her cousin, up until 1658 (in later years this tone is wholly absent from their commerce), the young marquise employs an art of adept word manipulation with great flair, referring to Bussy-Rabutin once, for example, he who had produced no sons, as “le beau faiseur des filles” (1:99).

The letters addressed to her daughter never joke about love or passion. Of course, Mme de Sévigné was writing then to someone of her own sex, and even if latent incestuous desires were present, the male-female element was absent. Hence there is an immediate reduction in any form of la coquetterie. But whereas quarrels or misunderstandings with Bussy-Rabutin or Ménage gave rise to a semi-serious, semi-teasing lilt, any disagreement between Mme de Grignan and her mother was a constant source of pain and bitterness. “Les rapports de la mère et de la fille,” writes Jean Cordelier,

ont tout d'une véritable liaison amoureuse: craintes sans fondement, jalousie sans cause, ergotages tendres, accusations aussi maladroites que sincères, protestations indignées, qui font de la Correspondance un chef-d'oeuvre de correspondance amoureuse, digne de figurer en bonne place dans toutes les anthologies de lettres d'amour.13

Mutual jealousy did indeed exert a strong influence throughout the letters—Mme de Sévigné's envy of Grignan; Françoise-Marguerite's antipathy toward Retz and Corbinelli, close friends and confidants of the marquise. Mme de Sévigné persistently lashed out at M. de Grignan, feeling that it was indeed her right to regulate even when he slept with his wife, to say nothing of the visits to Paris. The letters suggest, on the other hand, that Mme de Grignan was tormented by worry over her mother's “fidelity”:

[99]
Avez-vous bien peur que j’aime mieux Mme de Brissac que vous? Craignez-vous, de la manière dont vous me connaissez, que ses manières me plaisent plus que les vôtres? que son esprit ait trouvé le chemin de me plaire? Avez-vous opinion que sa beauté efface vos charmes? Enfin pensez-vous qu’il y ait quelqu’un au monde qui puisse, à mon goût, surpasser Madame de Grignan, étant même dépouillée de tout l’intérêt que j’y prends? (1:265-66)

In the opposite vein, there were moments of great tenderness—Mme de Sévigné’s pleas to her daughter to take better care of her health; the frequent self-denigration (“j’ai trouvé mille fois que je ne valais pas l’extrême peine que vous preniez pour moi” [2:259]) that alternated with periods of frenzied worry when letters failed to arrive on time or when the marquise believed that Mme de Grignan was somehow in danger, anguish that was frequently without cause. Mme de Sévigné’s imagination, her almost masochistic pleasure in torturing herself by creating dreaded adventures, demonstrate that the mood of the letters cannot compare with the cajoling, teasing tone of the correspondence with Ménage and Bussy. Mme de Sévigné’s letters to her daughter testify to an overwhelming absorption, which had nothing in common with the orchestrations of la galanterie.

Time after time, the marquise writes that her love, her obsession, for her daughter, is in a realm separate from any other domain of her life. To permit the development of such emotion, to allow the feelings to attain a purer state, she frequently sought out absolute solitude:

Quoique ma lettre soit datée du dimanche, je l’écris aujourd’hui, samedi au soir; il n’est que dix heures, tout est retiré; c’est une heure où je suis à vous d’une manière plus particulière qu’au milieu de ce qui est ordinairement dans ma chambre: ce n’est pas que je sois contrainte, je sais me débarrasser; je me promène seule, et quoi que vous disiez, ma très chère, je serais bien oppressée si je n’avais pas cette liberté. J’ai besoin de penser à vous avec attention, comme j’avais besoin de vous voir. (3:18-19)
Solitude, however, necessarily depended upon the absence not only of all who were irrelevant to the passion but also of l'objet aimé. Doubtless, a certain amount of fictionalization occurred. What the solitude and the free reign of the imagination offered was the preferred formulation of her sentiments. Being alone allowed for the satisfaction of both the emotional need (constant attention focused on Mme de Grignan) and of the artistic one (perfection of the means of expression). Either way, what is important is the desire to isolate in order to concentrate best on the obsession to the exclusion of all else.

Countless times throughout the long period from 1671 to 1696, Mme de Sévigné explicitly states the degree to which the passion possesses her:

*Enfin tout tourne ou sur vous, ou de vous, ou pour vous, ou par vous.* (1:235)

*Je vivrai pour vous aimer, et j'abandonne ma vie à cette occupation.* (1:283)

*C'est une chose étrange que d'aimer autant que je vous aime: on a une attention et une application naturelle et continue, qui fait qu'en nulle heure du jour on ne peut être surprise sans cette pensée.* (1:685-86)

*Quelle possession vous avez prise de mon cœur, et quelles traces vous avez faites dans ma tête!* (2:454)

*Je pense continuellement et habituellement à vous.* (2:460)

*Mon cœur est à vous... tout vous y cède et vous y laisse régner souverainement.* (3:10)

Even the infrequent recourse to précieux expression—as in the last example—cannot detract from the totality of involvement that left little room for other emotional demands. The preoccupation with Mme de Grignan, or perhaps more precisely with the image of Mme de Grignan, the almost deification of that image, is one of the most remarkable aspects of the entire correspondence. One perceives that the extreme concentration upon her daught-
ter, the quasi-religious fervor with which she endows the other woman's very being, was fundamentally vital to Mme de Sévigné, that this extraordinary effort and immersion was linked to the life flow.

Consciousness of her own body was very much a part of the marquise's passion. The love for her daughter is repeatedly tied to her own respiration—"Je souhaite, ma petite, que vous m'aimiez toujours: c'est ma vie, c'est l'air que je respire" (1:264)—and she "experienced it as consubstantial with her being, with her own identity."14

What the mail brings and takes away is life itself. As Harriet Ray Allentuch has shown in her study, separation was seen as a period of mourning, of physical pain: "Cette séparation me fait une douleur au coeur et à l'amé, que je sens comme un mal du corps" (1:201).15

Reunion, on the other hand, was viewed as spiritual and physical rebirth: "Quel voyage, bon Dieu! et quelle saison! vous arriverez précisément le plus court jour de l'année, et par conséquent vous nous ramenez le soleil" (2:259).16

In this identification of her love with the life process itself, Mme de Sévigné violates the precepts offered by the Jansenists, the Epicureans, and the mondain writers, all of whom placed another ideal—love of God, ataraxia, social perfection—above the intense emotional involvement absolutely vital to the marquise's sense of well-being. Even if, in part, the recourse to letter-writing reveals a decided preference for an attachment to what is absent, rather than a predilection for a permanent, "present" relationship, (a second marriage, perhaps), the commitment is nonetheless, of a different nature from those proposed by the other writers of the age.

The totality of the involvement, however, created certain problems, the most significant of which is the degree to which Mme de Sévigné altered reality—consciously or subconsciously—to conform to her emotional demands. Time, space, people, all undergo a radical transformation within the context of the letter.
The present is a nonexistent moment in the marquise's writings to her daughter. The passage of time is viewed within her own special confines, dependent upon her own private relativity:

Pour cette négligence et cette joie de voir passer les jours les uns après les autres, je la sens en moi et j'y fais réflexion à toute heure. Quand vous êtes ici, il n'y en a pas un que je ne regrette; je trouve qu'ils m'échappent avec une vitesse qui m'attriste. Une heure, un jour, une semaine, un mois, un an, tout cela court et s'enfuit avec une rapidité qui m'afflige toujours. . . . Présentement, ma bonne, que je ne respire que de vous revoir et vous pouvoir garder et conserver moi-même, je voudrais que tout cet intervalle fût passé; je jette les jours à la tête de qui les veut, je les remercie d'être passés. Le printemps et l'été encore me paraissent des siècles; il me semble que je n'en verrai jamais la fin. Je dors vite; et j'ai de l'impatience d'être toujours à demain, et puis de recevoir vos lettres, et puis d'en recevoir encore, et encore d'autres. (2:572-73)

But more is involved than simply an art of eloquent expression; for Mme de Sévigné the present assumes form and meaning only in relation to the past or the future, and is colored completely by either remorse or anticipation. Particularly in the earlier letters to Mme de Grignan, the ones written between 1671 and 1676, she alludes frequently to such states of mind. Thoughts that revolve upon the past are inevitably filled with great sadness of time lost: "Hélas! c'est ma folie que de vous voir, de vous parler, de vous entendre; je me dévore de cette envie, et du déplaisir de ne vous avoir pas assez écoutée, pas assez regardée" (1:230-31). She turns next to the future, since the past has not fulfilled and the present is suspended, a non-moment: "Il faut pourtant que je vous dise encore que je regarde le temps où je vous verrai comme le seul que je désire à présent et qui peut m'être agréable dans la vie" (1:282). And in one remarkable passage, written four years later, she shows with what ease she could make the transition from past to future, completely
negating the present: “Il est vrai que, depuis trois ans, nous n'avons été que quatre mois séparées, et ce qui s'est passé depuis votre départ. J'ai senti toute la joie de passer les étés et les hivers avec vous; et je sens encore plus le déplaisir de voir ce temps passé, et passé pour jamais, cela fait mourir. Il faut mettre à la place de cette pensée l'espérance de se revoir” (1:768-69).

The future reveals itself also as the undisputed answer to all problems, and, in fact, as a strong counterforce to a reality that is not only unsatisfying but frequently bitter. Even after a period of reunion that was particularly acrimonious, the future assumes a rosy glow, as Mme de Sévigné almost desperately invests time with qualities of transfiguration. The most recent reunion may have been a disaster, but time alone will change that, installing a reign of “truth” that the past has failed to achieve: “Eh, mon Dieu, ne nous reverrons-nous jamais en nous faisant sentir toutes les douceurs de l'amitié que nous avons? . . . Faisons donc mieux, ma bonne, une autre fois . . . faisons-nous honneur de nos sentiments, qui sont si beaux et si bons: pourquoi les défigurer” (2:280)? The problem, of course, lies in determining whether the reunion (in this case, unsuccessful) or the promise of another encounter (judged successful in advance) is the disfiguration of the truth. Living versus writing. The essential truth of the relationship, as Mme de Sévigné saw it, was revealed through the letters. That which did not adhere to the image was somehow inaccurate, false, défiguré.

Space, too, acquires new perspectives. That which is “dead” is really most alive. Through the resuscitative powers of memory, places that have a particularly strong association with Mme de Grignan and the past are those sites that most powerfully live within the marquise: “Il n'y a point d'endroit, point de lieu, ni dans la maison, ni dans l'église, ni dans le pays, ni dans le jardin, où je ne vous aie vue; il n’y en a point qui ne me fasse souvenir de quelque chose de quelque manière que ce soit; et de quelque façon que ce soit aussi, cela me perce le coeur. Je vous vois; vous m’êtes présente” (1:236).
But letter-writing achieves an even stronger transformation of reality. It was necessary, of course, in the correspondence with Mme de Grignan, to have recourse to the outside world, that is, to the world beyond Mme de Sévigné and her daughter. But did the marquise’s references truly reflect ongoing reality? On a double level, it appears that by her particular selection of those to be mentioned in her letters, she conferred identity, existence even, to a choice few alone, and that her choice was ultimately guided by her passion for her daughter. As Bernard Bray has shown, the correspondence is a closed work, a perfect reflection of the closed society at its root; and the letters refer constantly to the same basic group of friends, acquaintances, and family, common to both Mme de Sévigné and Mme de Grignan.**17**

And yet the distinction of who enjoys favor—naming—does not stop there. Particularly those friends who are most deeply involved with Mme de Grignan—or who at least give that appearance to her mother—are included in the letters. Mme de Sévigné attempted to render her passion a collective one, to give it a sense of social primacy that it did not, could not, have. She sought to extricate her obsession from the strictly individual by endowing it with qualities of communal preoccupation: “Si je vous disais tous ceux qui vous font des compliments, il faudrait un volume: M. et Mme de Chaulnes, M. de Lavardin, M. le comte des Chapelles, Tonquedec, l’abbé de Montigny, évêque de Léon, M. d’Harouys cinq cent mille fois, Jean Fourché, Chésières, etc.” (1:373). Those who refrained from such compliments were far less often alluded to, for Mme de Sévigné transformed the world according to her own highly limited standards.

This is the problem central to the correspondence, and one that at times did not escape Mme de Sévigné herself. Which is “more real”? Living or writing? Furthermore, is it through writing or being together that a more satisfactory version (vision) of life emerges? Although constantly seeking her daughter’s presence, on a conscious level at least, as that which would achieve the greatest
fulfillment for herself, Mme de Sévigné, on perhaps a deeper plane, was aware that letter-writing offered a viable and perhaps more sustaining alternative to living together. In fact, that perception was shared by Mme de Grignan, according to her mother: “Vous me dites que vous êtes fort aise que je sois persuadée de votre amitié, et que c’est un bonheur que vous n’avez pas eu quand nous avons été ensemble” (1:226). The preceding was written in 1671, and eight years later, a similar tone still prevails: “Je ne me souviens plus de tout ce qui m’avait paru des marques d’éloignement et d’indifférence; il me semble que cela ne vient point de vous, et je prends toutes vos tendresses, et dites et écrites, pour le véritable fond de votre coeur pour moi” (2:451). It is evident that those expressions of tenderness may have been more often written than said, and that Mme de Sévigné was more than willing to replace any signs of indifference or hostility—not uncommon during their periods together—with what was the preferred mark, although expressed in writing.

In a paradoxical way, then, absence allowed for a more satisfactory expression of love than did presence; and it can be said that writing did emerge as superior to being together, although on the conscious level the latter was the expressed, desired goal. But writing was heavily relied upon to communicate “true” feelings, those superior emotions free of any bitterness, which Mme de Sévigné judged to be the real mark of the relationship with her daughter. That she saw the possibility of achieving the perfection she had mentally established as inherent in her involvement with Mme de Grignan is evident in the unusual recourse to writing even when her daughter was in or nearby Paris. Expressing herself via the written word was a means of achieving both a certain liberty and self-constraint through the working over and the manipulation of terms. And it is a rather remarkable piece of writing that the marquise offers to her child while Mme de Grignan was visiting her:
Il faut, ma chère bonne, que je me donne le plaisir de vous écrire, une fois pour toutes, comme je suis pour vous. Je n'ai pas l'esprit de vous le dire; je ne vous dis rien qu'avec timidité et de mauvaise grâce; tenez-vous donc à ceci. Je ne touche point au fond de la tendresse sensible et naturelle que j'ai pour vous; c'est un prodige. Je ne sais pas quel effet peut faire en vous l'opposition que vous dites qui est dans nos esprits; il faut qu'elle ne soit pas si grande dans nos sentiments, ou qu'il y ait quelque chose d'extraordinaire pour moi, puisqu'il est vrai que mon attachement pour vous n'en est pas moindre. Il semble que je veuille vaincre ces obstacles, et que cela augmente mon amitié plutôt que de la diminuer: enfin, jamais, ce me semble, on ne peut aimer plus parfaitement. (2:408)

The perfect expression of her sentiments, the harmony, calm, and tranquillity which filter into that expression, can be obtained only through a letter. In choosing to communicate via writing, Mme de Sévigné implicitly states that although the relationship may seem imperfect, especially to Mme de Grignan, in essence it is sublime. The rest is appearance, sham, misunderstanding, a failure to relate. If the communication can be made more satisfactory, so too can the relationship; hence, the recourse is to writing. "Mes lettres sont plus heureuses que moi-même; je m'explique mal de bouche, quand mon coeur est si touché" (2:400).

This problem of what is "more real" is paramount in the letters. There is an ambiguity between absence and presence, imagination and reality, that is difficult to resolve. Aware of the possibility of défiguration, Mme de Sévigné proceeded, nevertheless, to (re)construct an elaborate, complex relationship far more successfully on the written level than on the "living" one. At the center of the correspondence is the altering of time, space, and the entire system of relating. Mme de Sévigné stressed the satisfaction of the individual psyche as the preeminent element in the structuring of a life "project," and consequently was governed only by that which could conform to it. The organization of her mental world had to fit the
emotional demands she imposed upon it. Moreover, her fantasizing, her reconstruction of the world around her through the use of the written word, was exactly the option of an Esprit, of a Saint-Evremond, or of a La Rochefoucauld, although her demands differed considerably from each of those writers. If we feel more keenly her attempt to transform the universe to certain needs, it is perhaps because her effort was so obviously an intimate one, painted as such, with no recourse to an anonymous on. The dream somehow seems more fragile, the attempt to rebuild more vulnerable, because she left herself so exposed.

If, however, the marquise's struggle resembles in structure those of other classical moralists, particularly in the firm belief in the power of the word, her desire to live through her love, and the incessant expression of it, was not at all consistent with the three prevailing “moralist” currents: Jansenism, Epicureanism, and la mondanité. The latter two were challenged by her refusal—conscious or subconscious—to be guided by desire for repose or social adaptability. The letters to Mme de Grignan are far too intense ever to be considered as part of the gallant code, and in her refusal to live a present-oriented life, uninvolved and disponible, she clearly violated the precepts of Saint-Evremond and the Epicureans. In both cases it was the overwhelming totality of her passion—one that left little room for anyone or anything else—that was in opposition to the current vogues.

Nor do either of the codes seem to have obviously affected her. This was definitely not the case, however, for Jansenism, which appears, at first, to have been the greatest obstacle to Mme de Sévigné’s involvement with her daughter. Clearly, her love for her child could never be tolerated by the Jansenists, for whom terrestrial love was viewed as a direct rival to man’s love of God. However, the marquise’s intellectual battle with Jansenism can be seen as the socialized form of her own private guilt, and as the sole force—sufficiently structured and well de-
veloped—able to control what she undoubtedly saw as a violent, potentially self-destructive passion. Recourse to the Jansenist ideals was her only means of counter-balancing her obsession, and although its tenets could not destroy her feelings, at least she could use them as a moderating power.

Mme de Sévigné experienced a vague, nebulous guilt concerning her passion for her daughter, although it is impossible to describe the precise source of that feeling. She had grave concern over the emotional demands and sacrifices that the relationship had placed upon both Mme de Grignan and herself. There are allusions to her own anxieties over the nature of her love, for example, when she finds it necessary to clarify for Françoise-Marguerite (and perhaps for herself as well) that when she says “amour” she means “amour maternel” (2:677-78). In any case, whatever the exact cause of the guilt, which runs through the letters, its most satisfactory expression was in religious terms.

The marquise thus came to perceive that her sentiments for her daughter were a violation of God’s law. Mme de Sévigné was fully aware that in loving, in adoring, her daughter as she did, she was going counter to the stern Jansenist principles and therefore was not truly surprised when Arnauld d’Andilly scolded her for “idolatry” toward her daughter, or when a priest refused her absolution and communion during Pentecost (1:276, 729). How deeply she was concerned over the reprimands is questionable, as is the entire question of her involvement with Jansenism. What can be said is that the rigorous, Jansenist code served as a slight braking force on what would otherwise have been a totally uncontrolled passion. That she felt guilty, as most critics view the situation, for violating the Jansenist principles is not certain; what seems far more probable, judging from certain tones in the letters, is that she experienced a rather strong sense of guilt, and that Jansenism was a sound philosophy for tempering, even only moderately, her obsessive passion.
But the long, emotional struggle with this braking force was not a very successful one. Aware that her feelings bordered on deification, Mme de Sévigné nevertheless failed to make use of the Jansenist tenets in any substantial way. Ultimately, she opted for idolatry and for the free expression of her emotions. By judging and conceding her failure in advance, by stating multifold times that she was too weak to oppose her passion, she thereby allowed for the liberty of living and expressing herself as passionately as she did: “Et quand nous sommes assez malheureux pour n’être point uniquement occupés à Dieu, pouvons-nous mieux faire que d’aimer et de vivre doucement parmi nos proches et ceux que nous aimons” (2:643). Jansenism was there to serve as a constant reminder to her of the extent of her involvement, to temper the tendencies toward uncontrol, but it was also pre-judged unsuccessful.

The only substantial comfort she obtained from the precepts of Jansenism was through the idea of a Providence that she came to see as “willing” the separation of mother and daughter. But this too offered only a means to emotional equilibrium that she could not easily realize. An increasingly strong reliance upon submission to Providence can be detected over the span of twenty-five years, thus giving rise to a theory of religious conversion.19 Nevertheless, it seems most accurate to conclude, as has Harriet Ray Allentuch, that the heavy dependence upon the ways of Providence was not only “a substitute for painful thoughts” but also a means to absolve both herself and especially Mme de Grignan of any responsibility. “If Madame de Sévigné conceived the suspicion that her daughter might not be doing her utmost to arrange the Grignans’ permanent return to Paris, she need only push the phantasm aside.”20

Too much time has been devoted, however, to the problem of Jansenism in Mme de Sévigné’s life and letters. The strict tenets were primarily a means to self-control. The central problem of the correspondence still remains
one of penetrating the nature of its origins and expression. A definite choice of structuring life was made, along grounds that were at once personal and general. The obsession with Mme de Grignan was individual, try as the marquise did to endow it with a sense of collective concern. But to base an entire adult life upon this passion, to write about it, to interpret it again and again, to explain, to justify, are needs whose limits are precisely and persistently intertwined in the double domains of love and language.

2. Ibid., p. 483.
4. Madame de Sévigné, *Lettres*, ed. Gérard-Gailly, 3 vols. (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1953), 1:41. All subsequent references are to this edition, and will be found in the text. The richest and most informed edition of Mme de Sévigné's letters is undoubtedly the recent, but not yet completed, one by Roger Duchène for Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Unfortunately, only the first volume was available when I wrote this chapter.
15. Ibid., pp. 40-41.
16. Ibid., p. 42.
19. Ibid., p. 235.