UIS-JE OBLIGÉE de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?" The letters of *la religieuse portugaise* are thus abruptly terminated, the final question a metacommentary on the entire project: a delineation of the multiple crosscurrents—conscious and subliminal—that filter through the nun’s mind, reflecting her one obsession (the betrayal) in shifting, rotating perspectives. The silence that follows is complete; there is no intervening explanation, no addendum, no conclusion by a third party, no hints of the future at all. Unlike *Les Liaisons dangereuses* and *Adolphe*, both works that concentrate upon obsessive passion and authoritatively allude to the punishments of the diverse characters, thereby offering a moral stamp, the *Lettres portugaises* fall into an ambiguous silence, total, but as troublesome as the muteness that overtakes *Bérénice*, expressed in Antiochus’ withered “hélas,” silence without clarification, without conclusion, without poetic order. This ambiguity alone would seem to have demanded critical notice, and yet it is only recently, in the article of Leo Spitzer in 1953, that the *Lettres portugaises* have been explored beyond the preliminary level of authenticity and beyond an insidious effort to re-create the tale of the nun in a heavy, supinely *romanesque* fashion.
The long debate over authenticity (Stendhal, Sainte-Beuve, Rilke, and various scholars convinced that the letters are indeed those of Mariane Alcaforado, “religieuse à Beja entre l’Estramadoure et l’Andalousie,” thus substantiating the claim of the original publisher, Claude Barbin; Rousseau, Barbey d’Aurevilly, and other critics sure that the letters are apocryphal) has been decided in favor of the latter group: Guilleragues, a seventeenth-century man of letters and friend to Racine, is now the accepted author. A careful reading of Guilleragues’ Valentins readily supports the case for his authorship of the Lettres, so frequently do certain basic themes recur. Literary history aside, however, the Lettres portugaises offer a complex web of psychological intrigue, layers of motivation and manipulation, and, above all, a decided pattern tracing the movement of a passion, inevitable in both its birth and death.

The work is short: five letters to the unfaithful French lover who has abandoned Portugal and his mistress to return to France. It is perhaps the brevity of these letters that inhibits the critical output, but their concision is precisely why they are of significance in a study of l’amour-passion in the classical age. More than any tragedy of Racine, they observe the demands of unity—the walls of the convent restrict the boundaries of space, and although approximately one year is allowed to elapse, there is never really any sense of time passing, only a monotonous, stagnated repetition, an amassment rather than a continuous flow. Temporally, spatially, everything is limited, closing in upon itself.

The restriction of time and space corresponds perfectly to the reduction in action. Beyond Mariane’s obsession there is nothing else: no decor to speak of, local flavor being almost totally excluded; no delineation of character, the French lover singularly colorless; no action exterior to the diverse movements, impulses of the passion itself. The reactions of the lover in the few brief lines he sends are never made truly clear—it is only his silence that is revealing. Mariane herself is interesting only in her mono-
mania. What emerges from the complete absence of decoration, from this total nudity of situation, is a barren, harsh exposure of *l'amour-passion*, with the incessant monologue repeating its one theme of betrayal. Ultimately, there remains only the voice of the passion itself, Mariane's particular drama serving merely as the backdrop.

And yet the *Lettres portugaises* offer the portrait of one struggle not only against *l'amour-passion* but also against the entire myth of passion. The myth is that of Tristan and Isolde, and Guilleragues was in firm command of the legend. The close alliance between *l'amour* and *la mort*, an alliance that Mme de Lafayette did not fail to develop, is of prime importance in the *Lettres portugaises*, not merely as the private struggle of *la religieuse*, but also as literary convention that operates as a powerful controlling force within her emotional universe. Moreover, it is understandable that the seventeenth century would find in the Tristan myth a satisfactory expression of the problem of *l'amour-passion*. In Denis de Rougemont's *L'Amour et l'occident*, a case is made for the medieval formulation of the Tristan legend: "Le mythe, au sens strict du terme, se constitua au douzième siècle, c'est-à-dire dans une période où les élites faisaient un vaste effort de mise en ordre sociale et morale. Il s'agissait de 'contenir,' précisément, les poussées de l'instinct destructeur: car la religion, en l'attaquant, l'exaspérait." The problem of *l'instinct destructeur* was strongly at issue in classical France. A revival of the Tristan legend as legend, that is, as literary convention, seems likely in an age caught up with the attempt at subduing, suppressing, unreason.

Passion, then, as a desired ideal, desired even for the suffering inherent in it, functions in the *Lettres portugaises* at once as a new, private force—Mariane's own particular conflict—and as a conventional one that may be even stronger—the entire socio-literary tradition of *l'amour-passion*. As in the Tristan legend, death comes to assume for Mariane the qualities of action and voluntarism that are most thoroughly contradicted by passion, by that which
is endured, by that to which we are resigned. Thus she believes that a self-determined demise, a suicide, alone can restore the autonomy of the self. Mariane craves death, or at least attempts to crave it. Her letters are filled with allusions to her failing health, to her wish to "die of grief." And yet, in the end, she assumes a radically new stance, strives to throw off her illness and her passivity in favor of calming the irrationality that has dictated her every thought since the departure of the lover.

Mme de Lafayette, in *La Princesse de Clèves*, adhered firmly to the Tristan legend, allowing the heroine to die at the end, but virtually through her own volition; not as a passive agent, but rather as the determining force of her own destiny. Thus Death becomes the sole counterforce to Eros. The nun of the *Lettres portugaises*, however, chooses her purge not in a transcendent death but rather through the outlet of her mind, through what Spitzer has seen basically as a Cartesian breaking-down process. In effect her deductions, her analysis (particularly strong in the fifth and final letter), her eventual acceptance of the nature of her obsession, all testify to a striving to curb the disturbing, irrational element of the psyche. At the end not only is her passion laid to rest, but along with it the entire Tristan legend of the *Liebestod*. Through the sorting-out process, Mariane achieves a new freedom, a way out of her own psychic disarray and, most importantly, a way out of the myths handed down by generations.

But although it is necessary to have established first the direction of the *Lettres portugaises*, to have shown that Mariane’s struggle is at once private and collective, that she is battling not only her own passion but the convention of passion also, it is nevertheless essential to trace the letters from their beginning rather than to remain fixed on the end passages, important as they may be. There are two principal structures in the five letters, reflecting two different time sequences. (There is really a third time structure, also, that of the reader who is the “recipient” of the letters, and whose forced complicity and guilt in the entire affair are natural results of the letter format.)
There is first of all the interval of the year, or slightly more than that, between the lover's departure for France—a departure that Mariane readily criticizes for its lack of true explanation—and the fifth letter, the final one in the series, which both closes out the past and opens onto the future, in a constant juxtaposition of remorse and anticipation. Within this time span, traceable from one letter to the next and especially noticeable in a contrast between first and last letters, various transitions occur, what Mariane refers to as "divers mouvements," and which may be fully analyzed by *la religieuse*, or which, passing beyond the conscious level of the nun, may be grasped by the reader alone. The central passage, or movement, is from celebration of death to reflection upon life, a transition most obvious between the third and fifth letters, but apparent also in the first two letters through reference to fainting, a "temporary" death. As offshoots of this one underlying theme are diverse transitions signaling changes in the emotional state of *la religieuse portugaise*. Early submission and passivity give way, in the end, to overt anger and aggression; from a sense of "other-worldliness," of transcendence beyond the ordinary life condition, Mariane slowly achieves a new sense of community and reality; finally, the extraordinary emotional turmoil that colors the first four letters, in different shades and gradations, succumbs ultimately to a longing for tranquillity and repose.

The gradual reenactment of the relationship between Mariane and *le chevalier* constitutes the second basic structure of the *Lettres*. The progression of the "love story" itself is in direct opposition to the state of the present relationship. As the events fade into an increasingly more distant past, as the lover establishes his physical and emotional distance from Mariane, she in turn more vividly recreates the drama of their encounters, and her erotic souvenirs assume an increasingly sharper coloration. Thus their romance remains nebulous, vague in the early letters and gradually affects precision and force. Only slowly does the reader learn of the secret meetings in the convent, and only slowly is the erotic nature of Mariane's preliminary
ties to her lover revealed. In a constant shifting of tem­
poral structure, Mariane moves back and forth between
the past—increasingly more fulfilling—and the present with its
rapid diminishing of satisfaction.

It is properly the rapid interchange of these two move­
ments that is, that creates, the passion. The keen remem­
brance of past desire, desire that was then gratified, pro­
vokes the sharp descent, repeated multifold times, into a
present void of fulfillment. In his analysis of Racine, and
particularly in the short section he devotes to the Lettres
portugaises as they may have influenced that writer,
Charles Mauron reminds that it is only impeded, ob­
structed love, love that is therefore not realizable, that
engenders the “passion” situation. L’amour-passion focuses
on objects that are at once absent and present, desired
and forbidden. “Le désir bloqué se mue en angoisse, refleu,
tourbillonne, se charge de persécution, de magie, de
remords.”\[8\] However, Mariane’s passion will eventually
wither from what Spitzer has called “inanition sentimen­
tale,” from lack of direct or indirect sustenance; and in
the end she does achieve, or is at least on the way to
achieving, a suppression of her feelings. A more detailed
study of the five letters is now necessary in order to trace
the nuances and modulations of Mariane’s extraordinary
preoccupation.

“Considère, mon amour, jusqu’à quel excès tu as
manqué de prévoyance” (p. 39). Even as the more intimate
tu quickly shifts to vous, the first letter remains familiar,
cajoling, précieux in its tone. The flirtatious nature of
this first communication will gradually give way to re­
proach, then to anger; but for now la religieuse is eager
to establish what she perceives to be the reciprocity of
sentiment. The unit of the couple is still strongly present
in her mind, intact, and the movement toward emotional
distance and separation, toward solitude, will come only in
a slow, steady progression of awareness. For the time being,
the Edenic situation is faithfully maintained: “Je suis
résolue à vous adorer toute ma vie, et à ne voir jamais
personne ...” (p. 41). Thus Mariane successfully excludes the world, that is, her family and her religion.

However, it is particularly the précieux-courtois tone that dominates the first letter, in sentences filled with allusion to an animated, significant (in the original sense) universe: “J’envoie mille fois le jour mes soupirs vers vous, ils vous cherchent en tous lieux” (p. 39). The ruling image is the Ovidian eye, the eye where love lodges, and, in an extension of the theme, where grief too resides. The entire introductory section plays on the eye metaphor:

Quoi! cette absence, à laquelle ma douleur, toute ingénieuse qu'elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste, me privera donc pour toujours de regarder ces yeux dans lesquels je voyais tant d'amour, et qui me faisaient connaître des mouvements qui me comblaient de joie, qui me tenaient lieu de toutes choses, et qui enfin me suffisaient? Hélas! les miens sont privés de la seule lumière qui les animait, il ne leur reste que des larmes, et je ne les ai employés à aucun usage qu’à pleurer sans cesse. (P. 39)

Although the intense passion does communicate itself in this section, as in the entire letter (the sense of obstacle, of blockage, is already anticipated by Mariane), it is on a decidedly reduced level, and the nun’s ties to her lover are revealed through metaphor-charged language. The whole letter, as Spitzer points out, is viewed as a caress—“Adieu, je ne puis quitter ce papier, il tombera entre vos mains, je voudrais bien avoir le même bonheur”—and her suffering is still minimal enough to be expressed in terms of pleasure—“Adieu, aimez-moi toujours; et faites-moi souffrir encore plus de maux” (p. 42).

But the consistent use of précieux imagery points to more than mere optimism on Mariane’s part. She emerges as dominated by the myth of l’amour-passion, by the myth of passion as a desired, sought-after ideal, superior to any other life choice. Guilleragues’ careful choice of metaphor, his overly lyric tones bordering on the banal, testify not only to Mariane’s naïveté but also to a sense of her control
by a potent code. Mariane is surely determined to love, determined by love, but it is as if determinism is here viewed as a seduction by powerful myths.

By the second letter, however, the coquettish tone has virtually disappeared, and Mariane's progression toward the crisis becomes increasingly stronger, charged now with bitterness and rancor. She has adopted the traditional posture of the female subjugated by the male, and her outcry is molded by this role of submission. It is not her pride that dictates her words, nor any sense of fear of punishment (this element is singularly absent from the work), but only her overwhelming preoccupation with the betrayal. The anguish is couched in metaphors of the woman-slave, and though the image ideally communicates the extreme limits of her depressive anxiety, it also echoes back to a long, literary tradition, (in the same way that later the allusion to a nun as the most perfect mistress, free from terrestrial preoccupations, will recall the medieval theme of the clerc as ideal lover): 10 “Ah! j'envie le bonheur d'Emmanuel et de Francisque; pourquoi ne suis-je pas incessamment avec vous, comme eux? je vous aurais suivi, et je vous aurais assurément servi de meilleur coeur: je ne souhaite rien en ce monde, que vous voir” (p. 45).

The persistent self-humiliation becomes increasingly more difficult to read, so much does la religieuse bow to the illusory perfections of her chevalier, her adoration bordering on idolatry, the cult of the lover replacing the one for God. Mariane herself announces a singular indifference for religion: “Je suis ravie d'avoir fait tout ce que j'ai fait pour vous contre toute sorte de bienséance; je ne mets plus mon honneur et ma religion qu'à vous aimer éperdument toute ma vie, puisque j'ai commencé à vous aimer” (p. 45). This chant, repeated in various fashion throughout the letters, becomes almost a litany of adoration, religious expression constantly intermingling with erotic, private desire. In an almost direct appropriation of Christ's words to his God, she exclaims at the end of the second letter: “M'avez-vous pour toujours abandonnée”
Indeed, the entire theme of abandonment, situated in this sacred decor, seems to exist frequently on a level of sacrilege.

The second letter also marks the birth of two concepts subliminally perceived by Mariane, fundamental, however, to the work. It is now that the first substantial explanation of the relationship is offered, and the vocabulary and images, before molded by *la préciosité*, thereby reducing their power, now assume an obviously erotic base:

Mes douleurs ne peuvent recevoir aucun soulagement, et le souvenir de mes plaisirs me comble de désespoir. Quoi! tous mes désirs seront donc inutiles, et je ne vous verrai jamais en ma chambre avec toute l'ardeur et tout l'emportement que vous me faisiez voir? mais hélas! je m'abuse, et je ne connais que trop que tous les mouvements qui occupaient ma tête et mon cœur n'étaient excités en vous que par quelques plaisirs, et qu'ils finissaient aussi tôt qu'eux; il fallait que dans ces moments trop heureux j'appelasse ma raison à mon secours pour modérer l'excès funeste de mes délices, et pour m'annoncer tout ce que je souffre présentement: mais je me donnais toute à vous, et je n'étais pas en état de penser à ce qui eût pu empoisonner ma joie, et m'empêcher de jouir pleinement des témoignages ardents de votre passion; je m'apercevais trop agréablement que j'étais avec vous pour penser que vous seriez un jour éloigné de moi. (P. 44)

As the distance separating the encounters grows, the memories become increasingly more vivid, Mariane experiences not only the diminishing of a reality found most satisfactory but, in reverse progression, a crystallizing of her emotional burn. Thus she (re-)creates her excitement through words, for they are all that subsist of the relationship, the sole elements that can, she believes, sustain her passion. The attempt at creation, at transforming her experience into “literature,” is truly the only means open to Mariane for loving.

Finally, the second letter firmly establishes the limits of the role of the lover in the nun’s world. The lack of a clear portrait, the scarce bit of information offered on him,
was not by chance. Rather, if the person was depicted minimally, this decision translates the nature of Mariane's involvement: the Augustinian *amabam amare*. The letter's concluding section definitively closes out any other possibility: "Faites tout ce qu'il vous plaira, mon amour ne dépend plus de la manière dont vous me traiterez" (p. 46). Her passion reveals itself as functioning totally independently of the lover's reactions. It has now assumed a quality of complete autonomy, a trait that will prevail throughout the remaining letters. In the end, of course, Mariane's freedom is only from herself, from her rigid, self-created existence. Moreover, as the passion comes to function separately from the world of the lover, the concept of "writing" assumes an even greater role, and each letter becomes ever more difficult to close.

One sentence, in particular, serves to illustrate the general mood and tone of the third letter: "Je ne sais ni ce que je suis, ni ce que je fais, ni ce que je désire: je suis déchirée par mille mouvements contraires" (p. 48). Mariane has begun some critical questioning, and has at least broken ground in her appraisal of the situation. The movement toward "uncoupling" is fully in action as she separates herself from the lover, the increasing distance in space (as the chevalier continues his home voyage) corresponding to the distance she now perceives in their emotional states. But she is also questioning the nature of her own attachment. Although, in the final words of the letter, Mariane returns to the passive, submissive state that has long been holding sway, nevertheless there is a heightened awareness of her continued detachment from the person of her lover, if not yet from her passion itself. "Traitez-moi sévèrement! Ne trouvez point que mes sentiments soient assez violents! Soyez plus difficile à contenter! Mandez-moi que vous voulez que je meure d'amour pour vous. Et je vous conjure de me donner ce secours, afin que je surmonte la faiblesse de mon sexe, et que je finisse toutes mes irrésolutions par un véritable désespoir" (pp. 49-50). This strong demand that the lover now force Mariane to new heights of feeling
translates her own confusion, as the nun slowly begins to see that she is freeing herself from the binds of the relationship.

Thus *la religieuse* now comes to perceive that the expression of her despair surpasses the feeling itself. At the same time, she feels urges toward life—"Je fais autant de choses pour conserver ma vie que pour la perdre" (p. 49)—that contradict what she believes would be an attitude more in keeping with the pose of the abandoned mistress. Convinced that she should seek death, as ordered by tradition, Mariane recognizes, nonetheless, that a part of her yearns toward life, that even her passion is one means of realizing an intense existence, and thus concludes: "Je déteste la tranquillité où j'ai vécu avant que je vous connusse" (p. 50). In the love affair with the French soldier, she had emerged from a nonexistence, symbolized rather obviously by the convent and which she is now reluctant to give up, only to return to solitude and sexual repression. Thus the letters take on great meaning for her, as the means not only to make the passion endure but also as the transition back to the emotional vacuum from which she was abruptly removed for a short time. But that transition is not yet wholly achieved, and for the present, the important reference to letter-writing itself—"Mon désespoir n'est donc que dans mes lettres"? (p. 49)—remains primarily an allusion to creation, to art, to a pleasure entirely divorced from the chevalier himself.

Writing is no longer only an outlet for Mariane, no longer that which interprets an inner state. Rather, it has assumed its own independent justification, has gone beyond that passion itself, in that it has prolonged what Mariane recognizes as the forced limits of her own feelings. Without writing there is nothing, and the inability to close the third letter (there are five *adieux* all followed by more words), translates her dilemma. The final sentence, paradoxically, is nothing less than an opening: "Ah! que j'ai de choses à vous dire" (p. 50).

Mariane's fourth letter, the longest of the series,
demonstrates her new understanding of the limits of love, and she now seems fully aware for the first time that a passion develops from obstacle, from refusal, from the partner's "no." In a sense this understanding legitimizes the chevalier's coldness and distance, for Mariane herself had too readily said "yes," although she twists further to claim that, knowing how vulnerable she was, he therefore never should have seduced her. The reproaches, however, fade as she allows herself to relive the entire first encounter and subsequent seduction, and clothes her description in the most romanesque terms, exciting herself again as she re-creates the day she first saw her lover executing some difficult maneuvers on his horse. As she pushes forth in her efforts to revive the past, she is by necessity thus forced into a deliberate exclusion of the present:

Mais je suis sans cesse persécutée avec un extrême désagrément par la haine et par le dégoût que j'ai pour toutes choses; ma famille, mes amis et ce couvent me sont insupportables; tout ce que je suis obligée de voir, et tout ce qu'il faut que je fasse de toute nécessité, m'est odieux; je suis si jalouse de ma passion, qu'il me semble que toutes mes actions et que tous mes devoirs vous regardent. (P. 54)

It is, of course, not only the present time she is excluding but rather the entire network of societal pressures exhorting Mariane to quit her narcissistic universe. In the final lines of the above quote ("je suis si jalouse de ma passion"), the truly autonomous nature of her world assumes its full measure. The passion itself, and not the chevalier long since departed, is definitively recognized as the force behind the monomania. Each letter is a stimulus for the next, and re-creation of the past affair through writing replaces any other possible form of existence: "Pourrais-je survivre à ce qui m'occupe incessamment, pour mener une vie tranquille et languissante? Ce vide et cette insensibilité ne peuvent me convenir" (p. 54). This overwhelming preoccupation with her narcissistic passion leads her to admit that she cannot conclude, that she can-
not stop writing, for each halt in the flow of words is a recognition of the emotional vacuum awaiting her, each end a descent back into the passion-free society that surrounds her. Hence, she concludes that “j’écris plus pour moi que pour vous” (p. 58).

From the start the fifth and final letter will be “different,” announced so by la religieuse herself: “Je vous écris pour la dernière fois, et j’espère vous faire connaître, par la différence des termes et de la manière de cette lettre, que vous m’avez enfin persuadée que vous ne m’aimiez plus, et qu’ainsi je ne dois plus vous aimer” (p. 61). Although in part the general content of the last missive repeats several themes earlier established, notably that her involvement functions independently of its supposed source, the lover—“J’ai éprouvé que vous m’étiez moins cher que ma passion” (p. 62)—nevertheless, certain new tones aggressively assert themselves. The theme of vengeance appears for the first time, Mariane imagining the satisfaction derived from the possibility of delivering the chevalier into her parents’ hands, or from that of taking, one day, a new lover. Significantly, for the first time, the Frenchman is dismissed by Mariane; but since his departure is an already established fact, the discharge can only be symbolic: “Je vous renverrai donc par la première voie tout ce qui me reste encore de vous” (p. 61). This sudden assertion of aggressiveness, this burst of anger, this attack on the lover, all are accompanied by increased lucidity on the part of the abandoned mistress. In particular, there is a deepened understanding of the precise nature of her obsession: “J’étais jeune, j’étais crédule, on m’avait enfermée dans ce couvent depuis mon enfance, je n’avais vu que des gens désagréables, je n’avais jamais entendu les louanges que vous me donniez incessamment” (p. 68).

Thus the fifth letter will be properly the means of rebellion, Mariane finally accepting, although almost against her will (“Que ne me laissez-vous ma passion?”), the lover’s abandonment. Henceforth, she will be guided by desire for life—the suicide idea is absent here—and it will
be precisely the new lucidity and reasoning process that will allow for her liberation. All thoughts are now directed toward the cure, however arduous it may be. That the task will indeed be difficult, that Mariane's present resolutions cannot be definitively ascertained are perceptions present throughout the letter; there is a persistent vacillation between a desire for silence and one for continued words. Perceiving that her new movement toward liberation, and toward emotional solitude, toward a life without her passion, is still only nascent and hence fragile, la religieuse falls back readily into the temptations of the old pattern, into the unending monologue. "Je veux vous écrire une autre lettre, pour vous faire voir que je serai peut-être plus tranquille dans quelque temps" (pp. 67-68). But the final section of the letter concludes on a different note: "Mais je ne veux plus rien de vous, je suis une folle de redire les mêmes choses si souvent, il faut vous quitter et ne penser plus à vous, je crois même que je ne vous écrirai plus; suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?" (p. 69).

Although the resolution is not yet firm, the seed is planted now for Mariane's freedom. However, the liberation that she seeks—a liberation that will paradoxically return her to the restraints of the convent—is less from the person of her lover than from the self-imposed shackles of her correspondence, from the solipsism that translated itself through the written monologue. By the end—indeed, from the beginning, but most evident in the concluding letter—all that remains are the words, and the final recognition is that even they have failed to maintain the force of the passion.

The direction that Mariane will now choose, although never directly stated, emerges clearly. She rejects any transcendence. Tristan and Isolde's Liebestod, Héloïse's movement toward spiritual purification, Mme de Clèves' descent into illness and death, are not the options of la religieuse portugaise. Rather, hers is a decision firmly grounded in the emotional and metaphysical framework of the seventeenth century.
In her strivings to achieve a new emotional freedom, one that will by necessity force her back into the convent and family, thus really liberating her only from herself, Mariane envisions precisely the goal of her efforts. She yearns now for repose, for tranquillity: "Je connais bien que je suis encore un peu trop occupée de mes reproches et de votre infidélité; mais souvenez-vous que je me suis promis un état plus paisible, et que j'y parviendrai" (pp. 68-69). Yearnings for emotional peace constitute one of the major currents of the classical moralist literature. The influence of Jansenism cannot be overlooked, although it is significant that the theme appears frequently in Saint-Evremond's works, a writer who at least consciously divorced himself from the heavier mood of the century. Descartes, Bossuet, Pascal, Méré, Mme de Lafayette, Saint-Evremond, all were caught up in a vast, sweeping trend toward emotional repose, toward strict effort at controlling irrationality, from Descartes' well-structured, compact beast-machine theory to Saint-Evremond's gamesmanship. Thus Mariane's letters come also to reflect this fundamental problem, and by the end of her correspondence, the struggle between reason and irrationality is fully absorbed. In the Lettres portugaises, the aspiration toward control appears as a decided reaction against Mariane's sexual awakening, and in this context the role of the convent is primary.

It is not that the convent functions as a striking inhibition of a religious nature. Mariane readily assures the chevalier that her ties to her religion are limited, at least in comparison with the emotions that bind her to him. There is, moreover, no fear of divine wrath, of punishment. But this does not mean that the convent is without significance; rather, the overwhelming sense of enclosure inherent to the convent setting is the ideal metaphor for translating Mariane's dormant state prior to the encounter with the Frenchman. Her bitter cry in the first letter, an outburst that contrasts with the generally teasing tone—"que ne me laissiez-vous en repos dans mon cloître?" (p. 41)—states perfectly her condition before and after the love
affair. The arrival of the French soldier was very much her Pandora's box. The convent is not omnipresent throughout the letters, but by the end its power has reemerged as a strong, controlling force, in the form of Mariane's sudden new remorse. Her passion is dying, on its way to being successfully cloistered, no longer a threat to Mariane nor to the society that envelops her.

It is as if Mariane and her obsession have been swallowed up, obliterated, by an imposing structure, given concrete form through the convent. But as has been previously shown, Mariane's battle is twofold: against the private obsession and also against the collective myth of l'amour-passion. The acts of destruction that occur in the final letter, or at least the menace of those acts—the urge to deliver the French soldier into her parents' hands, the desire to burn his letters and mementos, and the final, abrupt movement into silence—are impulses that counteract both Mariane's private anxiety and the legend of love. In swiftly moving, analytical language, la religieuse is extricated from the grips of her obsessive passion, and from the entire tradition of erotic love as a desired ideal. Her repression is thus total.

However, if Mariane's movements to free herself are tied in part to certain conventions, social and literary in nature, then it would appear that many themes of the Lettres portugaises would be decidedly conventional also. The limits of Mariane's anguish are defined by her referential system, a system dependent upon a constant juxtaposition of private depression with literary convention. She perceives her own entanglement in terms of a specific tradition, craving death, for example, not only as a release but as the correct form the battle must assume. This yearning, however, is persistently worn down by her concomitant struggle toward life, an existential choice that she correctly views as violating the code.

Guilleragues, it should be noted, is also the author of sixty-four Valentins, a literary adaptation of a game, as he explains in "Au Lecteur":

[140]
Il y a longtemps qu'on a inventé le jeu des Valentins; mais on les a faits depuis peu en vers: voici ceux qui me sont tombés entre les mains. Il faut, pour bien composer le jeu des Valentins, mettre le nom de trente hommes et celui de trente femmes, dans soixante morceaux de papier séparés, et copier séparément aussi les soixante madrigaux. Après avoir tiré séparément le nom d'un homme et celui d'une femme, on tire deux madrigaux, pour voir ce qu'ils disent l'un à l'autre. Si ce sont des choses tout à fait éloignées, ou tout à fait vraisemblables, les effets différents du hasard peuvent être quelquefois assez agréables, et j'espère que cette diversité d'épigrammes sur toute sorte de sujet te divertira.\textsuperscript{12}

The intention is clear; at stake is a game—by necessity structured, with predetermined rules—whose strategy demands easy recognizability. Convention is at a premium, for it is absolutely necessary that familiarity and generality submerge the particular. Curiously enough, in the thirty-two pieces directed to men by women, the basic themes of the \textit{Lettres portugaises} are readily duplicated. Abandonment is the background for both works, but even in their detail the two correspond. Thus Mariane's early, précieux desire to be duped finds a corollary in the \textit{Valentins}: "Vous voulez rompre notre affaire. / Hélas, cet aveu sincère / M'accable de désespoir; / Trompez-moi, je vous en conjur. / Et continuez de me voir: / Du moins abusez-moi, parjure" (p. 101).

In a similar fashion Guilleragues writes his epigrams to point to disillusionment, to fatality, to weak excuses for departures, to anxiety over a lover's lies. And Mariane's final resolution toward self-control is mirrored in yet another piece: "Puisque je ne suis plus aimable, / Il faut tâcher de n'aimer plus aussi" (p. 110). Thus tradition-laden themes of betrayal, of female masochism, of beguilement, of fate, and of death, all enter into an "original" work such as the \textit{Lettres portugaises} and into a heavily contrived one like the \textit{Valentins}. The easy conclusion would be that Guilleragues was simply limited in his expression, that he could barely move from "play" into something more
“serious.” But his use of convention in the letters is not in order to define, to explain, Mariane’s upset state; rather, it functions as the expression that la religieuse herself adopts in her struggle. Tied in by her own set of reactions to the betrayal situation, she is also bound by the tradition of writing her feelings, of translating passion into literature. Seeking to conform, she naturally has recourse to conventional language.

Yet her efforts are truly in vain, and the results fall far short of the expectations. Mariane’s is a double failure, for she is a double victim, one who is successfully manipulated by the chevalier, but also by myth-making. In the end she is definitively abandoned, unable even to deceive herself. Moreover, her one creation, the letters, have failed her as well, for they are able neither to sustain her passion nor to translate it into original art, freed from convention and capable of generating a heightened existence. That is why there is no ultimate transcendent death, no transcendence of any sort, but only the lucid acceptance of her solitude; and that is why the ending is not a conclusion, but only a rupture, a breaking off into silence. It is a termination that corresponds, curiously enough, to that of Racine’s Bérénice, a tragedy based precisely on an inability to say adieu (Antiochus and Titus both experience this difficulty). The word itself, just as in the Lettres portugaises, assumes an ironic importance, for closure of any sort is impossible. When finally Bérénice assumes control and utters her adieu, it is the entire tragedy that is accompanying her into the Orient, into silence. There can be no true “conclusion,” nothing but a cessation, and the rupture-end is as necessary to Guilleragues’ work as to Racine’s. Tragedy and letters are thus banished. There is no other way out, except to stop writing; otherwise, the play continues, and so do the letters. A cutoff must occur, and does.

It is thus not only to her passion that Mariane is bidding adieu (significantly, when the rupture does occur at the end of the fifth letter, there is no pronouncing the word,
for it was in itself too literary a stance for Mariane; her release had to be achieved by different means) but to art, for it has proved an unsatisfactory alternative, not able to sustain her passion or to subsist on its own without turning in a labyrinth of convention. Early in the letters, Mariane perceived that her death, a suicide, would be ultimately more authentic than her words—“mon désespoir n'est donc que dans mes lettres?” (p. 49)—that there was something not genuine in this creation. But thoughts of death revealed themselves, too, as strictly conventional, and Mariane's final decision, to stop writing, is truly the only authentic one. Silence alone can halt the cycle.


10. Ibid., p. 115.

