

2013

## Letters, Desire, and the Novel in the Late Nineteenth Century

Kayla Grant

*College of William and Mary*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis>

---

### Recommended Citation

Grant, Kayla, "Letters, Desire, and the Novel in the Late Nineteenth Century" (2013). *Undergraduate Honors Theses*. Paper 642.

<https://scholarworks.wm.edu/honorsthesis/642>

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, & Master Projects at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@wm.edu](mailto:scholarworks@wm.edu).

Letters, Desire, and the Novel in the Late Nineteenth Century

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English from  
The College of William and Mary

by

Kayla Grant

Accepted for \_\_\_\_\_  
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Suzanne Raitt, Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Melanie Dawson, Committee Chair

\_\_\_\_\_  
Giulia Pacini

\_\_\_\_\_  
Simon Joyce

Williamsburg, VA  
April 24, 2013

## Introduction: Letters, Desire, and the Novel in the Late Nineteenth Century

The letter as a literary form had, by the end of the nineteenth century, been all but abandoned in favor of the omniscient third-person narratives perfected by the great Realist novelists of the 1800s. Eliot, Dickens, Flaubert, and other canonical authors moved away from epistolarity and, with the exception of Sand's and Balzac's limited experimentation with the genre<sup>1</sup>, the epistolary novel was pronounced a dead letter. However, this transition in novelistic form was more a gradual evolution than a sharp break between eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, epistolarity and realism. The epistolary novel dominated European literature in the eighteenth century, enjoying an immense popularity and wide circulation that reflected and reinforced authors' reliance on the genre. In France Rousseau, Laclos, and Diderot produced seminal works of epistolary fiction<sup>2</sup>, while in England Burney and Richardson<sup>3</sup> explored epistolarity's potential for articulating individual subjectivity and dramatizing romantic intrigue. In the nineteenth century, that potential would become the foundation of realist narrative. In his influential *The Rise of the Novel*, Watt goes so far as to class Fielding's and Richardson's works among the first English texts to incorporate such hallmarks of the modern novel as an original plot, a central three-dimensional protagonist, and a cohesive temporal logic<sup>4</sup>. Epistolarity would seem to have served its evolutionary purpose in giving way to the modern novel; only vestiges of the once-prevalent genre remain as letters incorporated into the grander arcs of realist narratives.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (Honoré de Balzac, 1841), *Jacques* (George Sand, 1833).

<sup>2</sup> Such as *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761); *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782); and *La Religieuse* (1796), respectively.

<sup>3</sup> Burney's *Evelina* (1778) and Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) and *Pamela* (1740).

<sup>4</sup> "When George Saintsbury, for example, concludes that *Pamela* is indeed the first novel, he does so because the only answer he can give to the question 'Where are we to find a probable human being, worked out to the same degree, before?' is – 'Nowhere.' There are many equally probably and perhaps more interesting characters in literature before *Pamela*, but there are none whose daily thoughts and feelings we know so intimately" (Watt 442)

In this paper I will argue that, while those vestiges might initially seem minor, they are actually an indispensable component of the late nineteenth-century novel. Epistolary as a literary trope survives the Realist coup as more than a remnant of eighteenth-century forms that modern authors could not completely excise. In the three novels I will discuss – Guy de Maupassant’s *Une Vie* (1883), Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), and Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) – letters are excerpted and referenced in very intentional and critically suggestive ways. Yet while letters engage contemporary issues at the heart of these late nineteenth century novels, this is not to say that eighteenth-century epistolary is irrelevant. On the contrary, Maupassant, James, and Hardy all explore, question, or subvert traditional epistolary themes: namely, the construction of individual subjectivity and desire. Hunt has explored the importance of epistolary narrative in establishing and reinforcing Enlightenment-era notions of selfhood and community based on “empathy” and “psychological identification” (39). At the turn of the nineteenth century, at a time when new psychological research and concerns about modernity were questioning the foundations of subjectivity and of social relations, it is thus unsurprising that writers would turn once again to the letter form. Letters offer Maupassant, Hardy, and James a way to explore the psychology of intimacy, sentimentality, and sociability: in short, the psychology of desire.

Even before these nineteenth-century authors interrogated the relationship between letters and desire, eighteenth-century epistolary narratives connected the two. For example, Diderot’s *la Religieuse* (1796) and Richardson’s *Pamela* (1748) posit the letter as a product of and substitution for the (female) body. This link between the letter and the body, textuality and sexuality, informs Maupassant’s, Hardy’s and James’ later portrayals of romantic correspondence. However, the discourse surrounding letters and desire in the late nineteenth

century also differs from that of the eighteenth century; letters in these later novels often function as missives from the unconscious. Published in the last decade and a half of the nineteenth century, Maupassant, James, and Hardy's all novels all engage to some extent with their era's increasing interest in psychology, psychoanalysis, and "psychological realism" in literature. Writers were beginning to imagine the unconscious differently, particularly as a locus for suppressed desire. Letters become a way of introducing the "other" of unconscious desire into narrative; they provide a space where alternative desires and selves can come to the surface. In this respect, nineteenth-century letters rewrite the sexual intrigue that novels such as Diderot's and Richardson's emphasized by drawing attention to the psychological ramifications of writing to the beloved.

Psychoanalysis also intriguingly intersects with epistolarity in its particular focus on female psychology and, even more specifically, on the female reader. It is evident from the briefest glance into the epistolary canon that the classic epistolary hero is in fact a *heroine*; Richardson, Burney, and Diderot<sup>5</sup> all created isolated women for whom letter-writing was the only available expressive outlet. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, concerns about female pathology – namely, hysteria – caused the literary woman to be regarded with a certain anxiety and distrust. Kate Flint notes that from the mid-Victorian period onward, "reading features in writings on hysteria both as a contributory cause of insanity, and as an activity to be monitored closely in the hysteric herself" (58). Freud and Breuer corroborate Flint's argument that text and sex intersected in Victorian constructions of female pathology. In Breuer's case study on his patient "Anna O.," he observes her "sensitiveness for poetry" (14) and insatiable need to tell stories (21), while in *Fragment of a Case of Hysteria* Freud blames Dora's neurosis on being "over-excited" by reading scandalous books (182).

---

<sup>5</sup> *Pamela and Clarissa; Evelina; La Religieuse*

Concern for the effects of literature upon women's delicate psyches was based largely on the fear that women's excessive sentimentality and tendency to identify with literary heroines would lead them to confound the illusions of fiction – particularly romantic fiction – with reality (Flint 265). Sentimental reading was blamed for intellectual degradation, insanity, and moral corruption, as novels and poetry exposed women to narratives of desire and vice. These nineteenth-century conceptions of reading are especially significant in novels that incorporate letters, considering that since Richardson the epistolary form has been associated with sentimentality<sup>6</sup>. In *Une Vie*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and *The Turn of the Screw*, the heroines' engagement with epistolarity is intimately linked to turn-of-the-century anxieties about sentimentality and hysteria. These novels rewrite the sentimental literary heroine of the eighteenth century as a potentially unstable victim of her own reading and writing. All three women (Jeanne, Tess, and the governess), to varying degrees, suffer psychological trauma and experience outbreaks of pathology that result at least partially from the influence of fictional, historical, and above all epistolary texts over their lives.

In the nineteenth century, the sentimentality that eighteenth-century epistolary literature had upheld came under fire from realist authors, who saw it as hypocritical, and psychoanalysts, who saw it as dangerous. However, letters' fiction of sociability was also in question; the idealized "republic of letters" that Enlightenment thinkers believed could link European civilization in a social, intellectual, and affective dialogue no longer seemed relevant in the late 1800s. Ironically, the second half of the nineteenth century was a period of unprecedented expansion of postal services even as contemporary fiction expressed concern over social disintegration. Letters reached correspondents with greater speed and precision (by 1864 90% of

---

<sup>6</sup> *Clarissa* and *Pamela* are filled with affectionate demonstrations and trials of virtue intended to elicit readers' tearful sympathy (Gordon 488).

letters were delivered directly to recipients' houses<sup>7</sup>) and an International Postal Union (founded 1874) facilitated long-distance communication. However, improved transmission of the material letter seems to have been accompanied by uncertainty about the "arrival" of the letter's content. In the three novels I will discuss, the physical arrival of letters often fails to achieve the desired open communication between individuals; correspondence is fraught with misunderstanding and misreading. This confusion tends to undercut the letter as the basis of social and affective bonds, suggesting a disrupted society on the verge of breakdown – much like the hysterical female consciousness – rather than the rational community of readers that the "republic of letters" evoked.

While the three novels I discuss share a preoccupation with letters' potential to articulate desire, each emphasizes a particular aspect of epistolary discourse. Those aspects are: the affect, the chronology, and the transmission of letters. Maupassant's *Une Vie*, as the novel most explicitly concerned with fictions of sentimentality, unfolds how letters' emotional affect shapes the heroine's reality; Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, originally titled *Too Late, Beloved*, uses the delays that letters entail to reveal how fate and history circumscribe Tess' life; while James' *The Turn of the Screw* is concerned more with letters' non-arrival than their lateness, the fact rather than the timeframe of transmission. This corpus thus represents how the three essential conditions of epistolary communication – the letter's content, its movement across time, and its movement across space – gained new significance at the end of the nineteenth century. Maupassant, Hardy, and James use these conditions (in slightly different ways) to rewrite the potential for sentimentalism and sociability that early epistolary texts celebrated in order to address the psychological and social questions with which their culture was concerned.

---

<sup>7</sup> *Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era*, vol. 3, pp. 233

Other similarities also make an intertextual study of these three novels particularly appropriate and productive. All are written by male authors about female protagonists, exploring how those women navigate social and romantic cultural scripts. All dramatize class as well as gender issues, revealing how social divisions interact with and/or reinforce emotional estrangements. It would then seem natural, considering Maupassant, Hardy, and James' contemporaneity and their novels' resemblances, that these authors would have influenced one another; in fact, James was familiar with both Hardy and Maupassant. He wrote about Maupassant's strengths and weaknesses, specifically referencing *Une Vie*, in *Partial Portraits*, while in a letter to R. L. Stevenson he stated his opinion on Hardy: "the good little Thomas Hardy has scored a great success with *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which is chock-full of faults and falsity and yet has a singular beauty and charm" (*Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* 37). Whatever his criticisms, James had at least read and considered Hardy's novel. While any similarities between Hardy's Tess and James' governess (and for that matter Maupassant's Jeanne) might be quite unintentional on James' part, these heroines nonetheless share a great deal: specifically, a complex relationship to the reading and writing of letters and the reading and writing of desire.

*Une Vie*: Letters and the Legacy of Sentimentality

Quite frequently, it is by language that the other is altered; the other speaks a different word, and I hear rumbling menacingly a whole other world, which is the world of the other.

--Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 26

As with his comments on “the good little Thomas Hardy,” Henry James saw much to both praise and criticize in the works of Guy de Maupassant, a writer from whose carefully-wrought “nouvelle” plots James himself borrowed. While James admired Maupassant’s unflinching “hardness of form” (245) – his racy and concise style and refusal to indulge in unnecessary embellishment or sentimental moralizing – he also saw it as potentially problematic. Even as he complimented Maupassant’s devotion to brevity, James argued that the French author had at times “eliminated excessively” (278). He distilled his critique in the concluding words of his “partial portrait” of a contemporary (and likely a rival from whom he wished to distinguish himself): “M. de Maupassant has simply skipped the whole reflective part of his men and women – that reflective part which governs conduct and produces character... I mean for reflection addressed to anything higher than the gratification of an instinct” (285). James, the author of so intensely interiorized a novel as *The Turn of the Screw*, might well find that Maupassant’s characters lack depth; however, I would argue that James’ critique does not hold true for *Une Vie*. While Jeanne may not have the self-reflective tendencies and labyrinthine consciousness that we shall see in the governess of *The Turn of the Screw*, the subject of *Une Vie* is undeniably Jeanne’s inner life. In fact, Maupassant’s characterization of Jeanne is essentially that of a sentimental hysteric who dwells in fantasy and illusion (much like James’ governess). The “hardness” of *Une Vie*, however, lies in the fact that while the governess will eventually spin off into madness, with the distinction between the real and the fantastic never fully resolved, Jeanne’s story ends in disillusionment. The novel’s final lines of “la vie, voyez-vous, ça n’est

jamais si bon ni si mauvais qu'on croit" (278)<sup>8</sup> represent an attempt to cope sensibly with the inescapable brutality of a harsh reality.

A brief summary of *Une Vie* may be in order, as the novel is little read by English speakers today. At the beginning of the narrative, Jeanne has just left the convent where she has been educated to live with her parents in Normandy. Once home, she meets and marries the young aristocrat Julien, but experiences their wedding night as a psychological and sexual trauma due to her idealistic expectations of pure spiritual love. This disillusionment is quickly followed by a series of increasingly demoralizing tragedies; Julien commits adultery with Jeanne's servant Rosalie, then her friend Gilberte; Jeanne's mother and father die; Gilberte's husband brutally murders his wife and Julien; Jeanne's beloved son Paul abandons the family to live with a prostitute; and Paul fritters away the family inheritance to the point where Jeanne must sell her childhood home of les Peuples. Letters figure into this narrative structure in two central capacities; at the novel's beginning, the baroness and Jeanne are explicitly referred to as collectors of old letters, and at the end, Jeanne writes letters to the wayward Paul demanding his immediate return to les Peuples.

Epistolary in *Une Vie* is an important support for and representation of the heroine's psychological development, or rather, her degeneration. *Une Vie* explores female psychology within the context of very different epistolary relationships from those that James and Hardy later explored; while James' and Hardy's correspondents are lovers, Maupassant's are a mother, a daughter, and a son. However, in a decade that identified the parent-child relationship as a potential source of psychic trauma and a locus for intense emotional attachment, this epistolary communication ultimately invokes the same language of desire as the love letters in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and *The Turn of the Screw*. Moreover, as they form a link between generations,

---

<sup>8</sup> "You see, life's never as good or as bad as we think" (240).

these letters also represent the transmission of knowledge – in as pessimistic a novel as *Une Vie*, we dare not say wisdom – from mother to daughter or son, a transmission that echoes the nineteenth century’s fascination with scientific theories and financial issues of inheritance. The letters that Jeanne’s mother passes down to her daughter and those that Jeanne later exchanges with her son point towards the troubling inevitability of inheritance and the power the past can hold over the present. However, even as letters dramatize the potential transmissibility of the self and the question of “where an inheritable wisdom is to be found and how its transmission is to be acted toward” (Brooke 28), Maupassant observes that for his bourgeois protagonists preserving and remembering also entails rejecting and forgetting. As Jeanne and her mother collect their epistolary “relics” of the past, they ignore whatever in those texts might be unacceptable and unreadable in their lives. Their correspondence thus engages with the very problems of selection and collation, of deciding what must be remembered and what forgotten, that the ever-present editor figure of eighteenth-century epistolary novels implied<sup>9</sup>. Jeanne attempts to “edit” her own dreary existence, with the unfortunate consequence of catastrophic disillusionment.

Though Jeanne seems naturally to fill the role of heroine – however incapable and victimized a heroine she may be – the title of the novel does not distinguish her as such. Though often translated into English as *A Woman’s Life*, the original title does not even specify the gender of the person whose “life” Maupassant “fixes a hard eye on...and squeezes...either till it grimaces or it bleeds” (James 266). Assuming that *Une Vie* belongs to a woman, however, still leaves us with several central characters whose lives suggest the breadth of experience “a woman’s life” can encompass. Schor argues that in this novel Maupassant explores the various,

---

<sup>9</sup> Eighteenth-century novels commonly presented themselves as a “found” correspondence that the author/editor claimed to have collected and often censored. For example, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* begins with a “Préface du rédacteur »’s assertion that « cet Ouvrage, ou plutôt Recueil, que le Public trouvera peut-être encore trop volumineux, ne contient pourtant que le plus petit nombre des Lettres qui composaient la totalité de la correspondance dont il est extrait » (27).

but all more or less frustrated, permutations that female life takes in the nineteenth century. *Une Vie* offers a portrait not only of the pathetic aristocrat Jeanne, but also her faded mother, the forgotten spinster Tante Lison, and the earthy peasant Rosalie. These four female types play off one another as they each confront issues of class (having and losing money, property, and status) and sexuality (being submissive to a man, seeking or avoiding sexual pleasure). However, the relationship with which I am most concerned is that between Jeanne and her mother, the baroness. Through the direct line of inheritance that connects the two women, the baroness leaves Jeanne a legacy of sentimentality that ultimately causes Jeanne to embark on a life of delusion and subsequent disillusionment. This apparently genetic predisposition to sentimentalism appears not only in the baroness' and Jeanne's penchant for fits of wild affection, tears, and hysterical anxiety, but also in their reading practices: particularly their behavior towards the ultimate sentimental text, the personal letter.

The baroness' sentimental delusions are repeatedly linked to the reading material with which this woman of leisure fills her empty days. In the novel's second chapter, Maupassant describes the baroness' daily activities in detail; beyond promenading her manor's avenue of poplars at a stately pace, "elle demeurait souvent pendant des heures immobile, éloignée dans ses songeries; et son habitation des Peuples lui plaisait infiniment parce qu'elle prêtait un décor aux romans de son âme, lui rappelant et par les bois d'alentour...les livres de Walter Scott qu'elle lisait depuis quelques mois" (48)<sup>10</sup>. The baroness devotes herself to dreamy reveries that conflate reality – les Peuples – with romance – Walter Scott's novels. Her verb choice of "rappelant" (reminding) also suggests a certain illusory construction or hallucination of memory. While the forest and sea of les Peuples literally remind the baroness of novels she has previously read, this

---

<sup>10</sup> "Often she would sit motionless, for hours on end, lost in her dream world; and living at Les Peuples gave her enormous pleasure because it provided the scenery for her soul's imaginings. The surrounding woods...reminded her of the novels by Walter Scott that she had been reading for the past few months" (22)

language also suggests that she “remembers” Walter Scott’s novels *as* her own past, blended with real memories of les Peuples. The baroness’ obsession with aristocratic genealogy, which Maupassant later alludes to, supports the implication that the baroness romanticizes and dwells in the past. Besides Scott’s historical romances, other texts further contribute to the baroness’ “sentimental education” (to use Flaubert’s phrase) and her prevailing nostalgia. “Après avoir valsé dans les bras de tous les uniformes de l’Empire, elle avait lu *Corinne* qui l’avait fait pleurer; et elle était demeurée depuis comme marquée de ce roman...et elle aimait même certaines chansons grivoises de Béranger à cause des regrets qu’elles expriment” (47-8)<sup>11</sup>. The *Folio Classique* editor André Fermigier notes that “de *Corinne* à Walter Scott, en passant par Béranger, la culture de la baronne est parfaitement cohérente” (300)<sup>12</sup>. Fermigier implies that these three artists (Mme de Staël, Béranger, and Scott) form the foundation of the baroness’ “culture,” or rather her cult, of sentimentality.

The idea that the baroness might be “marked” by *Corinne* is particularly significant in that Staël’s novel is punctuated by love letters between the hero and heroine. Perhaps imagining herself as a present-day *Corinne* – a woman whose genius, exoticism, and romance make her the baroness’ opposite – the baroness romanticizes her life through an epistolary narrative: her old letters. She keeps these cherished letters, like a proper epistolary heroine, locked away in her private writing desk:

Dans les jours de pluie elle restait enfermée en sa chambre à visiter ce qu’elle appelait ses « reliques ». C’étaient toutes ses anciennes lettres...et elle disait d’une voix particulière: « Rosalie, ma fille, apporte-moi le tiroir aux *souvenirs* »...[la baronne] se mettait à lire lentement, une à une, ces lettres, en laissant tomber une larme dessus de temps en temps. (48)<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> “Having waltzed in the arms of every man in uniform under the Empire, she had read *Corinne*, which made her cry; and this novel had, as it were, left its mark on her ever since...and she was even quite fond of some bawdy songs by Béranger on account of their wistful sentiments” (22).

<sup>12</sup> From *Corinne* to Walter Scott, the baroness’ culture is perfectly coherent (translation mine).

<sup>13</sup> “On rainy days she would remain closeted in her bedroom, going through what she called her ‘relics’. These were all the old letters she had kept...and in a special voice she would say: ‘Rosalie, my dear, bring me my memory

This scene reveals the baroness' tendency to read her letters, like her novels, as sentimental histories of a "past" she longs to recuperate. The ritualistic quality with which the baroness' habits endow letter-reading – it is a repeated act that she initiates with a "particular voice," and only on rainy days, when she chooses to reopen these closely-guarded secrets – transforms it into a sacred journey into the past. Presumably, these "relics" or "souvenirs" of the baroness' bygone youth awaken memories of a time when she danced "dans les bras de tous les uniformes de l'Empire." These days are so very bygone, however, that she reads the letters more as an epistolary novel than as a personal mnemonic: one by one, straight through to the end.

By re-reading her letters, the baroness establishes a connection between memory, nostalgic romanticization, and the letter. Just as the baroness' fictional reading fuels her sentimental longing for a past which only ever existed in the novels of Staël and Scott, these letters sustain her romantic day-dreams of youthful flirtations. The almost pathological nature of the baroness' "habitual dreaminess," which Freud and Breuer identified as a precursor of hysteria (*Case Studies* 8), is further reinforced by her apparent hypochondria. She fetishizes "*son hypertrophie*" or obesity as something that "*lui fût speciale*" (47)<sup>14</sup>. Her overdramatization of the physical ailment parallels the overblown sentimentality that influences her reading practices, as Maupassant suggests: "*à mesure que sa taille s'était épaissie, son âme avait pris des élans plus poétiques; et quand l'obésité l'eut douée sur un fauteuil, sa pensée vagabonda à travers des aventures tendres dont elle se croyait l'héroïne*" (47)<sup>15</sup>. The baroness' body and mind are both swollen – the first literally, the second with romantic visions – with the baroness' extreme

---

drawer'...[the baroness] then slowly began to read the letters, one by one, occasionally shedding a tear over them" (22-3).

<sup>14</sup> "her' hypertrophy," "belonged to her as something unique" (22).

<sup>15</sup> "As her figure had grown stouter, so her soul had taken wing on more poetic flights of fancy; and when corpulence at length confined her to an armchair, her thoughts began to rove through a series of amorous fantasies of which she imagined herself the heroine" (22).

obesity mirroring her excess sentiment. Schor argues that the baroness incarnates “the sentimental woman [who] somatizes her readings...[she] suffers from a hysterical ailment” (56). The baroness’ body can be imagined as a swollen text, a repository for the “romances langoureuses où l’on parle de captives et d’hirondelles” (48)<sup>16</sup> and the letters which she has accumulated and carefully preserved. She bears the weight of memories she refuses to abandon, but which she lingers over, like her novels, “mouill[ant] infailliblement les paupières” (48)<sup>17</sup> with a sentimental tear.

The significance of the baroness’ literary sentimentalism cannot be underestimated because she passes it, along with her habit of preserving “relics”, down to her daughter Jeanne. The daughter, like the mother, is prone to romantic reverie; though Jeanne’s pastimes involve more swimming and walking than weeping over fiction, she nevertheless reproduces her mother’s tendency to historicize life in storybook fashion. In fact, Fermigier draws attention to the “contraste entre l’exceptionnelle vitalité physique de Jeanne et sa nullité psychologique et intellectuelle” (300)<sup>18</sup>. The novel’s first chapter introduces us to Jeanne, a robust young woman whose appalling sexual ignorance and girlish dreams will lead her into an ill-considered marriage with a man she hardly knows. The first night after her return home from being “educated” at a convent, we find Jeanne “à rêver d’amour”<sup>19</sup> at her window, gazing out on the moonlit grounds.

L’amour! Il l’emplissait depuis deux années de l’anxiété croissante de son approche...elle n’avait plus qu’à le rencontrer, lui...Et il lui sembla soudain qu’elle le sentait là, contre elle; et brusquement un vague frisson de sensualité lui courut des pieds à la tête...Tout à coup, là-bas, derrière le château, sur la route elle entendit marcher dans la nuit. Et dans un élan de son âme affolée, dans un transport de foi à l’impossible, aux hasards providentiels, aux pressentiments divins, aux romanesques combinaisons du sort, elle pensa : « Si c’était lui? » (39)<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> “Langorous romances about swallows and captive maidens” (22)

<sup>17</sup> “[which] never failed to bring a tear to her eye” (22)

<sup>18</sup> Contrast between Jeanne’s exceptional physical vitality and her psychological and intellectual nullity (translation mine)

<sup>19</sup> “dreaming of love”

<sup>20</sup> “Love! For the past two years it had filled her with growing anxiety at its approach...all that remained was for her to meet him...And all at once it seemed to her that she could feel him there now, beside her; and a sudden

Having just lost herself in reverie, imagining the handsome knight who will someday come to whisk her away, for a moment Jeanne actually believes that her desire has materialized a lover. In fact, the passage's language suggests that Jeanne has departed into a kind of delirium. The quivering "élan" (surge) of sensuality that momentarily overwhelms her suggests that she has inherited from her mother, indeed from nineteenth-century sentimental literature itself, hysterical tendencies that make sexuality a realm of delirium and delusion.

Jeanne's vision of her future husband comes shortly after she contemplates the tapestry surrounding her bed, which depicts Pyramus and Thisbe: "elle se sentit heureuse d'être enfermée dans cette aventure d'amour qui parlerait sans cesse à sa pensée des espoirs chéris, et ferait planer, chaque nuit, sur son sommeil, cette tendresse antique et légendaire" (36)<sup>21</sup>. It is impossible not to find in Jeanne's hope that the romantic legend will "speak to her soul," and her sense that she is truly "*dans* cette aventure d'amour," the source of the "romanesques combinaisons" that inspire her hallucination. Kappeler, for example, argues that "the tale seems to give imaginary control to Jeanne through its repetitive dynamics which become intensified thanks to the particular medium of the tapestry which in itself invites rereading" (95). As her mother does with Scott and Staël's novels, Jeanne reads her life as a "repetition" of the tale of Pyramus and Thisbe; Jeanne interprets the quotidian event of a stranger's arrival as if it belonged to a "romanesque" fantasy. Jeanne's absorption of the tapestry's ethos of tragic love suggests that her sentimentality originates with narrative.

---

quivering of indeterminate sensual longing ran through her from head to toe...Suddenly, over there behind the house, coming from the road, she could hear footsteps in the night. And as her startled soul thrilled in a transport of belief in the impossible, in providential accidents, in divine presentiments and romantic combinations of circumstance, she thought: 'And if it were he!'" (14).

<sup>21</sup> "She felt happy at the thought of being enclosed within the confines of this love story which would forever speak to her of the hopes she had nurtured, and that each night this ancient legend of tender devotion would look down upon her as she slept" (11).

The fact that Jeanne, like her mother, collects letters, also underscores the significance of sentimental reading (whether of novels, the tapestry's "text," or personal correspondence). While Jeanne's father counsels her to "brûle tes lettres, toutes tes lettres, celles de ta mère, les miennes, toutes. Il n'y a rien de plus terrible, quand on est vieux, que de remettre le nez dans sa jeunesse" (179)<sup>22</sup>, Jeanne instead "gardait sa correspondance, préparait sa « boîte aux reliques », obéissant, bien qu'elle différât en tout de sa mère, à une sorte d'instinct héréditaire de sentimentalité rêveuse" (179)<sup>23</sup>. The "boîte aux reliques" represents a legacy of sentimentality passed from the baroness on to Jeanne, a legacy of hysteria, delusion, and romantic fancy. Furthermore, by re-reading their letters both Jeanne and her mother betray an impulse to narrative; they imagine their lives as sentimental novels, and as textual support call upon carefully preserved documents that allow them to "remettre le nez dans sa jeunesse." These "relics," as sacred as any saint's, represent a memorialized and romanticized life far less dreary than the ones they actually lead.

The remainder of Maupassant's novel, however, repeatedly crushes Jeanne's illusions; though whether Jeanne ever fully accepts the "nullité" of her sentimental worldview is doubtful. The first of this series of disillusionments is Jeanne's sexual trauma on her wedding night, a brutal near-rape that dispels her idealized image of love; unfortunately, during her sheltered youth Jeanne "ne songeait encore qu'à la poésie de l'amour" (78)<sup>24</sup>. Next, Jeanne finds that her friendship with Gilberte is a mere façade for Julien and Gilberte's adultery. Though she accepts this "double trahison" (175)<sup>25</sup> with relative calm, Jeanne concludes, "tout le monde était donc perfide, menteur, et faux. Et des larmes lui vinrent aux yeux. On pleure parfois les illusions avec

---

<sup>22</sup> "Burn your letters, all of them, from your mother, from me, all of them. There's nothing worse when you're old than going back over your youth" (145).

<sup>23</sup> "kept her correspondence, and although she was quite different from her mother in every way, she was putting together her own 'box of relics', out of a kind of hereditary instinct for dreamy sentimentality" (145).

<sup>24</sup> "still thought only of the romance of love" (49)

<sup>25</sup> "double betrayal" (141).

autant de tristesse que les morts” (175)<sup>26</sup>. In both these incidents, Jeanne’s pain of disillusionment equals or even exceeds the pain of mere misfortune because her illusions so dominate her reality; she weeps for them as she would for the dead.

However, it is only after a third crisis that Jeanne finally abandons whatever enfeebled dreams of love she may have harbored; as Maupassant observes afterwards, “sa dernière confiance était tombée avec sa dernière croyance” (192)<sup>27</sup>. This last catastrophe – the revelation of the baroness’ infidelity – not only sullies Jeanne’s memory of her cherished mother, but also represents Jeanne’s betrayal by memory itself. When Jeanne discovers her mother’s “fall into carnality” (Schor 68) by reading the letters in her old “boîte aux reliques,” the letter is transformed from a record of sentimental inheritance into a legacy of sexual “perfidy” that potentially contaminates Jeanne herself. In a moment of terrible recognition, Jeanne must overwrite a sentimental with a carnal narrative, or rather re-read a sentimental narrative *as* carnal, crushing the last vestiges of her faith in romance. This is not to say that Jeanne subsequently abandons her heritage of sentimentality; however, she rebuilds her castles in the air on the cult of maternal rather than romantic love. After this final confirmation that sexuality is truly “perfide, menteur, et faux,” she begins to view it only as a means to motherhood<sup>28</sup> and centers her world increasingly on her son Paul as a “safe” beloved.

The scene of reading that reveals the baroness’ adultery is a uniquely grotesque one, a perversion of eighteenth-century scenes of reading in which letters read aloud establish a select,

---

<sup>26</sup> “So everybody, then, was perfidious, mendacious, insincere. And tears sprang to her eyes, for sometimes one weeps bitterly over the passing of illusions as over the dead” (141).

<sup>27</sup> “Her last vestige of trust in others had vanished with her last vestige of belief in another human being” (159).

<sup>28</sup> For example, Jeanne resumes sexual relations with her husband despite her disgust for him/them because she wishes to have another child (193).

intimate community of readers<sup>29</sup>. Here, Jeanne's verbal reading to her mother's corpse parodies any possibility of communication; reading aloud only emphasizes Jeanne's extreme isolation and loss. Though this scene begins as if it will preserve the innocent sentimentality of the mother-daughter relationship, it ends by shattering it:

Elle les [les lettres] déposa tous sur le lit, entre les bras de la baronne, par une sorte de raffinement sentimentale... Elle s'attendrissait à ces détails qui lui semblaient des révélations; comme si elle fût entrée tout à coup dans toute la vie passée, secrète, la vie du cœur de petite mère...elle se mit à lire tout haut, à lire pour la morte, comme pour la distraire, la consoler. (188)<sup>30</sup>

The discourse of sentimentality in this passage recalls Jeanne's and the baroness' other reading practices: letters represent "sentimental refinement," tenderness, intimacy, memories conceived as romanticized "revelations," and a source of consolation in the unhappy present.

The letters' content, however makes public reading singularly inappropriate and shocking. Jeanne's attempt to understand her mother's intimate "vie du coeur" ironically brings her into contact with undesired knowledge; the scandalous secret that her mother committed adultery with the baron's friend, placing Jeanne's father in the position in which Julien places Jeanne with respect to Gilberte. Jeanne's reaction is immediate and intense: "et soudain, la tête éperdue, elle rejeta d'une secousse ces papiers infâmes, comme elle eût rejeté quelque bête venimeuse montée sur elle...elle sanglota abîmée dans un désespoir insondable" (189)<sup>31</sup>. Jeanne's instinctive response to destroy, to reject this knowledge materially if she cannot intellectually, ironically accomplishes what her father once advised her to. As the baron predicted, no good can come of the impulse to "remettre le nez dans sa jeunesse"; the baroness'

---

<sup>29</sup> For example, in Burney's *Evelina* Lord Belmont reads his deceased wife's letter aloud to Evelina at the moment when they recognize their familial bond and forge an emotional one (531).

<sup>30</sup> "She placed them all on the bed, between the arms of the Baroness, out of a sort of sentimental courtesy...These details [within the letters] moved her as though they had been revelations, as though she had suddenly entered Mama's secret past, her heart's history...she began to read aloud, to read to her dead mother, as though to amuse her, to bring her comfort" (154).

<sup>31</sup> "Distraught, she immediately flung these vile documents from her, as though she were casting off some poisonous creature that had attacked her...she sobbed her heart out, plunged into fathomless despair" (155).

letters poison Jeanne's memories like "quelque bête venimeuse." Cogman notes that in an identical scene in Maupassant's short story "La Veillée" (likely the basis for the reading scene in *Une Vie*), "the shocked response of these narratees [who read their deceased mother's letters] is in effect a desire not to hear, parallel to the desire of the mass of humanity (as Maupassant sees it) not to know, an 'automatic hypocrisy'" (38). Jeanne's sentimentality manifests itself in 'automatic hypocrisy': a refusal to recognize the unreality of illusions until disillusionment intrudes so violently that it cannot be ignored, only desperately and fruitlessly pushed away.

As a result of her discovery, Jeanne experiences "a double loss of her mother: physical death and the death of the ideal" (Schor 66). I would argue that this last loss is actually more psychologically damaging for Jeanne, who realizes with horror that she can no longer love her mother with the same pure unencumbered heart. She asks herself, "la connaissance de l'affreux secret n'amoinerait-elle pas son amour filial? L'embrasserait-elle [sa mère] des mêmes lèvres pieuses? La chérirait-elle de la même affection sacrée? Non. C'était pas possible! et cette pensée lui déchira le cœur" (190)<sup>32</sup>. Jeanne's sentimental conceit of the letter as a repository for a romanticized past betrays her, replacing sweet memories with a repulsive truth. As a woman who weeps for "les illusions avec autant de tristesse que les morts," Jeanne suffers as much from losing her mother's idealized image as from losing her mother's physical presence. Furthermore, Jeanne's faith in the letter as a secure archive turns out to be misplaced; the sentimental power of epistolary discourse is no more reliable than the other illusions to which Jeanne falls prey.

The baroness' letters contain a legacy of "carnality" that displaces the legacy of sentimentality that letters previously signified for Jeanne. Schor argues that "these letters, these relics all testify...to the mother's 'fall into carnality,' which is to say *jouissance*, and for the

---

<sup>32</sup> "Wouldn't the knowledge of Mama's terrible secret diminish her daughterly love? Would she kiss with the same respectful lips? Would she cherish with the same, devout affection? No. That was impossible! And it broke her heart to think so" (155-6).

child...there is no more shameful and above all no more painful family secret” (68).

Undoubtedly Jeanne’s intense, horrified reaction to the “venomous” letters derives in part from a fear of contamination, a fear that the carnality which so disgusts her is, along with letters and epistolary fetishism, her inheritance. As Jeanne’s revelatory sexual “jouissance” during her honeymoon and subsequent betrayal by the adulterous Julien suggest, Jeanne suffers from her carnal as much as her sentimental inheritance.

This correspondence between Jeanne and the baroness – in which letters are transmitted from mother to daughter after death rather than exchanged, an inheritance in their own right – informs the epistolary relationship that develops at the end of the novel. The correspondence between Jeanne and her son Paul reveals that letters always engage the complex dynamics of memory and forgetting, or “automatic hypocrisy,” that inform Jeanne’s psychological responses to the catastrophe of her life. Interestingly, we understand Paul’s character almost entirely through Jeanne’s letters to him, his letters to her, and her reactions to those letters; from the moment Jeanne leaves a young Paul at his school in Havre, he rarely reappears in the flesh. Certainly his adult life and marriage to a prostitute take place in the novel’s world only inasmuch as letters report these events to Jeanne and the reader. This radical separation of mother and son allows Maupassant to delve into Jeanne’s inner world, ultimately revealing her inability to abandon romantic narratives of self even as she elevates the cult of maternity over the cult of love. While Paul’s departure is a necessary plot element that produces fresh conflict in the novel, it also has formal ramifications: Perry argues that “separating characters in epistolary fiction forces them to carry on their relationships in their imaginations, rather than act them out in their real lives” (100). The transition to a quasi-epistolary structure – seven fully excerpted letters and

numerous other partial quotations punctuate the novel's last fifty pages – represents a turn inward as Jeanne increasingly favors memory and fantasy over knowledge and reality.

Letters always involve imagination and memory in the writing and reading process; correspondents write to a person they remember from the past, and must imagine how that person will react to the letter being sent to them in the present. Altman usefully summarizes this concept: “the power of memory to blur temporal distinctions is inherent to epistolary narrative where lovers [or simply correspondents] are separated, since memory is all one has left in absence. Memory, imagination, and hope make of past and future the only living present for the letter writer separated from the lover” (131). It is immediately obvious that for Jeanne, the Paul who writes to her from Havre is very much the child whose memory “is all [she] has left in absence.” Paul is also, after Julien's betrayal, all Jeanne has left on which to focus her sentimental energies. Upon the birth of her son Jeanne is as hysterically, deliriously affectionate towards him as she once was towards the lover whose approach she hallucinated outside her window, or towards Julien in the first days of their courtship. “Dès lors elle n'eut plus qu'une pensée: son enfant. Elle devint subitement une mère fanatique, d'autant plus exaltée qu'elle avait été plus déçue dans son amour, plus trompée dans ses espérances” (156)<sup>33</sup>. In this passage, Maupassant makes it clear that Jeanne's maternal “fanaticism” arises from the same sentimental impulses as her prior romantic delusion; she merely substitutes Paul for Julien as the object of her obsessional reveries. Entirely disgusted with the “besoins charnels” (176)<sup>34</sup> that she observes first in Julien, then Gilberte, and finally in her own mother, and unable to recover from the disappointment of her romantic ideals, Jeanne turns to a new and seemingly purer form of love: an idealized maternal bond. However, just as Jeanne's now-abandoned narratives of poetic love

---

<sup>33</sup> “From that moment on she had but one thought: her child. She immediately became a fanatical mother, and was all the more besotted for having been deceived in her passion and disappointed in her hopes” (123).

<sup>34</sup> “carnal need” (143)

were blended with childhood reminiscences of her time at the convent, dreams of love, and the legendary romance of Pyramus and Thisbe, her image of maternity rejects the present in favor of fond memories. Thus, long after Paul has passed out of childhood, she continues to baby him: “bien que Paul eût la tête de plus que sa mere, elle le traitait toujours comme un marmot, lui demandant encore: « Tu n’as pas froid aux pieds, Poulet? »” (229)<sup>35</sup>. The diminutive nickname Jeanne gives her son indicates that she insistently dwells in memory.

Kappeler diagnoses Jeanne’s particular hysteria as an inability to recognize and distinguish the other as other: as separate from herself and from the image she carries within herself *of* the other. She claims that “Jeanne in her symbiotic organization cannot accept the otherness of the other; she appears surprised and struck by it over and over again” (101). Kappeler’s argument would certainly explain why, even when Jeanne seems to acknowledge Paul’s adulthood, she repeatedly falls into the same patterns of thought that demonstrate her inability to move beyond nostalgia. Before Paul leaves the novel entirely and becomes only an epistolary presence, Jeanne has one such moment of quickly-forgotten recognition: “pour la première fois elle s’apercevait qu’il était grand, qu’il n’était plus à elle...Quoi! C’était son fils, son pauvre petit enfant” (229)<sup>36</sup>. Though Jeanne observes her son’s growth with horror and fear that he is increasingly “other” – further and further away from both her physical womb and the womb-like family unit at les Peuples – she refuses to change her behavior accordingly. She sends Paul money whenever he asks for it and refers to herself as “ta vieille mere que tu as fait bien souffrir” (244)<sup>37</sup> to reproach him for his attempts to break away from her stifling maternal caress.

---

<sup>35</sup> “Although Paul was a head taller than his mother, she always treated him like a small boy and still asked him ‘Are your feet warm enough, Pullie?’” (193)

<sup>36</sup> “For the first time she realized that he was grown up, that he no longer belonged to her...Was this her son, the same dear little child” (194).

<sup>37</sup> “your old mother, to whom you have caused so much suffering” (208)

Jeanne's inability to accept Paul's otherness and her need to cling to memories of her darling "Poulet" are most obvious in the medium that inherently engages memory: the letter. Jeanne's hysterical reactions to Paul's letters and her attempts to interpret them within the framework of an idealized past reveal that the written word can both preserve and betray memory. After receiving a letter from Paul in which he requests an extravagant sum to pay the debts he incurred by gambling and philandering, Jeanne says, "il lui avait écrit! Donc il ne l'oubliait pas. Elle ne songea point qu'il demandait de l'argent. On lui en enverrait puisqu'il n'en avait plus. Qu'importait l'argent! Il lui avait écrit...et on relut, mot à mot, ce papier qui parlait de lui...[Jeanne sauta] de la complète désespérance à une sorte d'enivrement d'espoir" (233)<sup>38</sup>. Jeanne's willingness, indeed her desperate need to forget the "otherness of the other" in an "enivrement d'espoir" causes her to interpret the letter as a re-establishment of the maternal intimacy she has devoted her life to. She views the text "comme le début des soulagements promis par l'abbé" (233)<sup>39</sup>, a reversal of the misfortunes that have alienated her from each of the two men she has loved (Julien and Paul). Rather than recognizing the emotional distance that Paul wishes to place between them, Jeanne deludes herself into believing that this letter represents a *rapprochement*, a breach of absence. Jeanne's joyful cry of "il reviendra" (233) indicates that "ce papier *qui parlait de lui*" (my italics) promises, and metaphorically *is*, an emotional and a physical return. Jeanne's reaction also betrays her excessive, unwarranted faith in memory as the basis of love when she exults, "donc il ne l'oubliait pas." Her desire to

---

<sup>38</sup> "He had written to her! So he had not forgotten her. She did not give a thought to the fact that he was asking for money. If he had none, they would send him some. What did money matter! He had written to her...and word by word they went over it again, discussing every syllable of this piece of paper that had brought them news of him...[Jeanne went] in an instant from being in a state of complete despair to being almost intoxicated with hope" (197-8).

<sup>39</sup> "the first stage in the relief that the Abbé had promised" (197).

remember and regain Paul is bound up with her desire to *be remembered*, to achieve significance in life by persisting in others' memory.

Jeanne cannot accept the loss of Paul's affection, which his long absence and the baron's observation that Paul loves his fiancée "donc mieux que nous" (233)<sup>40</sup> make so obvious to the reader. While the baron's re-interpretation of Paul's letter as an empty promise forces Jeanne to re-connaître, literally to recognize or re-know Paul's difference from the child she remembers, she immediately constructs a new narrative with which to regain intimacy.

Une douleur subite et épouvantable traversa le coeur de Jeanne; et tout de suite une haine s'alluma en elle contre cette maîtresse qui lui volait son fils... soudain cette réflexion du baron avait évoqué cette rivale, lui avait révélé sa puissance fatale; et elle sentit qu'entre cette femme et elle une lutte commençait acharnée, elle sentait aussi qu'elle aimerait mieux perdre son fils que de le partager avec l'autre. (234)<sup>41</sup>

In order to cope with Paul's betrayal, Jeanne rewrites her earlier romantic disappointment; whereas she surrendered Julien to Rosalie and Gilberte, Jeanne decides to fight for the new object of her affections. Casting herself once again as the rejected lover who this time refuses to "partager avec l'autre," Jeanne links her discourse of maternity with that of romance. While this romance would seem to be purified of the carnality that haunted her relationship with Julien, it emerges from the same sentimental narratives that informed Jeanne's first love.

From this point onward, letters from Paul personify not only Jeanne's imaginary "Poulet" but also the imaginary woman whom Jeanne blames for separating her from her son: "Jeanne, dans ces lettres glacées, sentait cette femme embusquée, implacable, l'ennemie éternelle des mères, la fille" (234)<sup>42</sup>. Paul's letters, into which Jeanne reads a narrative of a darling son and a wicked seductress, become a repository for the hysterical fears and desires that cloud Jeanne's

---

<sup>40</sup> "more than us" (198).

<sup>41</sup> "Jeanne felt a sudden, terrible pang in her heart, and all at once she was filled with burning hatred against this mistress who was stealing her son from her... suddenly the Baron's remark had called this rival to mind and revealed her fatal power; and she sensed that a fierce struggle was now beginning between this woman and her, and felt too that she would rather lose her son than share him with this other person" (198).

<sup>42</sup> "In these cold letters Jeanne could sense the woman lying in ambush, implacably, the eternal enemy of mothers, the harlot" (199).

mind. This image of the “rival,” whom Jeanne imagines jerking Paul’s puppet strings and “sans cesse reten[ant] son fils” (258)<sup>43</sup>, allows Jeanne to protect her own remembrance of an affectionate young “Poulet.” With the construct of this female other, never seen, Jeanne can delude herself that “un grand effort pour reprendre son Poulet” (257)<sup>44</sup> might succeed. Within this fantasy Paul remains just that: “son Poulet,” in need of maternal protection, a man she can hope to win back as she could not Julien.

As this flurry of letters plays out an epistolary drama, however, Jeanne becomes increasingly detached from reality and invested in memory. As I will argue, in *The Turn of the Screw* and *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* the governess and Tess experience psychological fragmentation due to the complexities of epistolary reading. Similarly, Maupassant’s accelerating use of letters at the end of the novel structurally represents Jeanne’s descent into madness. Through letters, new voices – Paul’s, Jeanne’s, Rosalie’s – interrupt Maupassant’s free indirect discourse and disturb its linearity to parallel the disintegration of Jeanne’s psychic unity. The increasing frequency of letters, which tend to forefront psychological rather than material events, also indicates that Jeanne (somewhat unsurprisingly) dwells more and more in the mind as the exterior world deprives her of family and property. Maupassant thus describes how the villagers call Jeanne “« la Folle, » sans trop savoir pourquoi, sans doute parce qu’ils devinaient, avec leur instinct de brutes, sa sentimentalité malade et grandissante, ses revâseries exaltées, tout le désordre de sa pauvre âme secouée par le malheur” (248-9)<sup>45</sup>. The reference to Jeanne’s “sentimentalité grandissante” and “revâseries” recalls her mother’s physical and imaginative expansiveness; Jeanne’s inheritance finally manifests itself by transforming her into her mother.

---

<sup>43</sup> “continually prevented her son from leaving” (220).

<sup>44</sup> “one final effort to get her Pullie back” (219).

<sup>45</sup> “the madwoman’ among themselves, without knowing exactly why but no doubt they sensed, in their brute, instinctive way, her increasingly morbid sentimentality, the dreamy exaltations to which she was now given, the utter disarray to which her poor soul had been reduced by relentless misfortune” (212).

If the letters that she exchanges with Paul do not immediately cause this intellectual degradation, which caps off a long series of misfortunes and disillusionments, they certainly illustrate the psychological processes by which it occurs. Barthes offers a way to understand Jeanne's psychology when he suggests that her self-effacement, indeed the loss of self that erases her even from the novel's title, is intimately linked to her obsessive focus on the epistolary other. He says, "I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever" (49). Jeanne's insistence upon reading Paul first as a beloved son, then as a substitute lover, constitutes a projection of herself and her wishes into the other. Ultimately, however, this carefully preserved self-delusion causes Jeanne to lose her hold upon the present reality. Not only does she frighten the villagers by her strange and melancholy attitudes, but she also begins to live entirely in memory by mentally reconstructing her past. Having found her old calendars – another of the relics that this sentimentalist has conserved – she attempts to remember and narrate her life day by day.

Elle réussit, à force d'attention obstinée, d'efforts de mémoire, de volonté concentrée, à rétablir presque entièrement ses deux premières années aux Peuples, les souvenirs lointains de sa vie lui revenant avec une facilité singulière et une sorte de relief. Mais les années suivantes lui semblaient se perdre dans un brouillard, se mêler, enjamber, l'une sur l'autre; et elle demeurait parfois un temps infini...l'esprit tendu sur l'Autrefois. (271)<sup>46</sup>

Jeanne's painstaking labor of remembering and chronologically ordering her life recalls her mother's letter by letter re-reading of her own past. Both mother and daughter view their lives as narrative and prefer a flight into memory over painful reality. As Jeanne struggles to work through this chronology, however, she also tries to understand the passage of time, a problematic concept in her letter-reading as well. Within Paul's letters Jeanne confounds past and present,

---

<sup>46</sup> "By virtue of dogged concentration, much searching of her memory, and a concerted will to succeed, she managed to reconstruct her first two years at Les Peuples almost in their entirety: the recollections of her distant past flooded back with remarkable clarity, as though etched in relief. But the following years seemed lost in a fog, each one merging and overlapping with the other; and sometimes she would spend endless hours...as her mind reached out to yesteryear" (232).

unable to recognize the effects of time upon her relationship with her son; here, she similarly fails to clearly separate years that “se mêler, enjamber, l’une sur l’autre.” While both letters and calendars would seem to mark the passage of time by registering key events and emotional changes, Jeanne’s nostalgic preoccupation with the past prevents her from reading those chronologies; instead of temporal logic, we see the repetition and return of the past.

The relics that Jeanne treasures up from her past as she rattles around the empty Peuples (calendars, old furniture) belong to the same sentimental trove as the letters which she long ago began to preserve. Schor suggests that “the relics and other material traces (old calendars, gold pin, Poulet’s ladder)...are part of a mnemonic machine destined not only to supplement failures of memory, but to make up for a failed life. In keeping with her faith in the redemptive powers of memory, Jeanne saves her memories the way others place stock market shares in a vault” (71-2). While Jeanne’s memorabilia would seem in some way to legitimize and historicize her life as a text, ultimately the sway memory holds over her reality is only a source of repeated disillusionment. Jeanne’s nostalgia also renders her life a repetition, in many respects, of her mother’s; both women become sentimental hysterics incapable of rational readings. By dramatizing the degrading effects of Jeanne’s inheritance of sentimentality, however, Maupassant is also reacting to his own sentimental inheritance: the very tropes of Victorian narrative that he finds so hypocritical. *Une Vie* represents an attempt to expiate epistolary sentimentality by revealing its truly shocking failure to account for life’s brutality. The novel’s aphoristic final lines support Maupassant’s realist project: “la vie, voyez-vous, ça n’est jamais si bon ni si mauvais qu’on croit” (278)<sup>47</sup>. This sentiment recognizes the poverty of the “croire” and the value of the “être,” suggesting that the illusions by which Jeanne sustains her life always fail to account for its complexity. If in the deeply pessimistic *Une Vie* Maupassant depicts life as *less*

---

<sup>47</sup> “You see, life’s never as good or as bad as we think” (240).

romantically, more desperately “mauvais,” than it really is, it is perhaps because he wishes to oppose himself to Jeanne’s excessively “bon” sentimentality.

*Tess of the D’Urbervilles*: Letters and Anachronism

Life is a letter sent to death.

--Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card* 356

In *Une Vie*, Jeanne is a victim of her own sentimental reading in that fictional and epistolary texts determine her expectations for and responses to life. However, she is also a victim of her own history; the letter signifies an inheritance of sentimentality that ultimately transforms Jeanne into her mother. As a kind of hearkening back to a nostalgically-remembered past – as when the Baroness rereads her old letters, or when Jeanne persuades herself that Paul is still a child – sentimentalism is inevitably yoked to history, implying the past’s influence over the present. This historical valence is particularly important in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*. In Hardy’s novel, history profoundly shapes the trajectory of Tess’ life and causes her to unconsciously (but inevitably) repeat narratives that overwrite her individuality. Tess’ “victimization by texts,” as Boumelha calls it, becomes possible through a unique feature of epistolary communication; it necessarily entails delay.

That the letter traverses time and space is both its *raison d’être* and its critical flaw as a mode of transmission. The distance between author and addressee both motivates and frustrates communication; because letters must be delivered by post, a relatively slow process today and even more so in the 1890s, the information they contain is never quite up-to-date. The present that the writer sets down is past by the time the reader receives it, and any number of changes in either correspondent’s situation could have rendered the letter irrelevant. The letter, thus, is always an anachronism that functions according to an outdated chronology without regard to

current events. The havoc wrought by these written vestiges of a present that no longer exists – but that the addressee, in the absence of further information, must interpret *as if* it were present reality – is a common plot device in the epistolary canon. The untimely arrival, misplacing, and interception of letters is central to eighteenth-century epistolary novels such as Burney’s *Evelina*, in which the heroine’s guardian’s delayed letter of advice causes Evelina to make a radically independent decision regarding marriage.<sup>48</sup>

In *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, a novel in which the dilations of distance and historical time shape the heroine’s fate, the letter’s troublesome temporal dimension is especially relevant. Hardy’s novel documents a world in transition, on the cusp of modernity but still oscillating between theological and Romantic paradigms. The seasonal “migrations” (378) of itinerant farmworkers, the conflicts between evangelism (incarnate in Reverend Clare and, briefly, Alec d’Urberville) and pantheistic humanism (represented by Angel Clare and to an extent Tess), and the contrast between the idyllic agricultural community at Talbothay’s dairy and the brutal industrialism of Flintcomb-Ash all signify upheaval. Hardy’s Wessex may still be an old world – Blackmoor Vale retains its “superstitions” and its “old character” in its “heavy soils” (365) – but it is an old world confronting a new one that will inevitably displace it, like the “tomorrows” that Tess imagines coming one after another with a warning to “beware” (140). Even as society stumbles toward modernity, however, the past exerts a continued and inescapable influence on Hardy’s present. The novel’s portrayal of historical repetitions – the cycles of agricultural labor, Tess’ violation as a reenactment of the rapes her d’Urberville ancestors committed – inscribes individuals within the deterministic arc of history. Doomed to destruction, like her pre-industrial way of life, Tess is also doomed to repeat the tragic lives of the brutalized “peasant girls” (82)

---

<sup>48</sup> Because her guardian Mr. Villars’ letter of consent is delayed, Evelina accepts Lord Orville’s marriage proposal independently (511).

that came before her: a fate she acknowledges when she says, “what’s the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part” (142).

Letters in *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* complicate the novel’s deterministic bent. As Hardy’s Wessex society disintegrates in the face of modernization and Tess’ individuality dissolves into “a long row” of other tragic female lives, letters would seem to reverse or at least disrupt that process. The eighteenth century’s republic of letters was founded upon empathy and subjectivity, trusting in the letter to forge social bonds and construct the rational Enlightenment individual: the very opposite of the dissolution that Hardy depicts. Hardy does, in fact, gesture toward letters’ potential to reestablish broken connections and to affirm the writer’s privilege of narrative self-determination. Tess’ desperate letter of appeal to Angel, for example, stakes a radical identity claim in the midst of a narrative that dramatizes other characters’ (Angel and Alec’s) failure to understand Tess for who she is. In it she argues, “I am the same woman, Angel, as you fell in love with; yes the very same! Not the one you disliked, but never saw. What was the past to me as soon as I met you? It was a dead thing altogether. I became another woman” (352). As Freeman contends, the novel’s other characters are “blind” or “indifferent” (315) to Tess’ true nature as a complex but essentially “pure woman.” Tess’ letter seeks to articulate a personal interpretation of her story, in which she is neither the despised fallen woman that Angel believes her nor the seductress that Alec chooses to see. It also calls Angel back to Tess, recalling Jeanne’s passionate plea to Paul; like all letters, Tess’ is predicated on a desire for intimacy unavailable in the beloved’s absence.

However, like Maupassant Hardy is in the process of interrogating sentimental faith in the letter as a mode of personal *rapprochement*. Though Tess tries to assert authority over her

story, demanding that Angel acknowledge her individuality and renew his love for her, her *prise de parole* is subsumed to Hardy's deterministic arc; it fails. As Thompson notes, Hardy emphasizes the difficulty of "performing any individual action in this intensely deterministic world, whose processes seem bent on decreation, on eradicating the heroine altogether" (738). Tess' letter to Angel is just such an attempted "individual action" that, in an indifferent world, comes to nothing; she and Angel are reunited only after it is, tragically, "Too late, too late!" (400). Like history itself, Tess' own and other characters' letters work mechanistically to bring about Tess' fate. Boumelha suggests that the following epistolary texts act as causal forces in the novel: "Joan Durbeyfield's well-meant but ill-conceived letter of advice... Tess's confession that slips beneath the doormat, the series of written warnings and denunciations that Tess and others send to Angel in Brazil" (xxvi), a list to which I would also add the letter in "rather masculine" handwriting (54) that calls Tess to work at Trantridge and initiates Alec's seduction. While these letters would seem to reach towards communication and intimacy – particularly Tess' lost confession – ultimately they only contribute to Tess' gradual effacement. As anachronisms that by definition speak from the past, letters serve as yet another expression of historical determinism; in Thompson's phrase, they "impose themselves relentlessly upon [the] present" (744).

To understand how letters and history work in concert to "eradicate" Tess, we must recognize that letters represent just one of the novel's many texts. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* as a novel, and Tess as a character, is overdetermined by textual history; Biblical allusions, Greek myth, poetry, and metaphors of imprinting and inscription proliferate. Freeman and Thompson have both drawn attention to the ways that these allusions shape reality in the novel, causing Angel and Alec to "misread" Tess as a fulfillment of historical female stereotypes. Boumelha

explains in her introduction to the Oxford edition that “monuments of human culture preside over the stages of Tess’s decline, culminating in the siting of her arrest at Stonehenge. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Tess is victimized by texts. The phases of her tragedy can be counted off by means of letters and quotations” (xxv-xxvi). Letters, then, act alongside the many other textual elements in the novel – from the allusion to *Paradise Lost* as Angel and Liza-Lu flee the site of Tess’ execution to the painted words “Thou, Shalt, Not, Commit” (92) that so terrify Tess after her “fall” – to victimize Tess.

Tess herself is repeatedly figured as a text in the novel, one which other characters interpret according to their own cultural prejudices. Hardy describes Alec’s attempts to seduce Tess as “imprinting the desired salute...the kiss of mastery” (61), suggesting that the virginal Tess in her “white muslin” (60) is as yet a blank page on which time and suffering have made no mark. Later, Hardy returns to the same metaphor during the rape/seduction scene. “Why it was that upon this beautiful feminine tissue, sensitive as goassamer, and practically blank as snow yet, there should have been traced such a coarse pattern as it was doomed to receive...many thousand years of analytical philosophy have failed to explain” (82). Hardy is deliberately ambiguous as to whether “coarse pattern” refers to Alec’s brutality or to Tess’ fate in general, as worked out over the course of the novel. Regardless, he implies that Tess’ body has become a record of her history that other characters, and we the readers, read and interpret.

Hardy is insistent as to the “correct” interpretation of Tess’ textual body; according to the novel’s subtitle she remains, despite the damning tracery of her sexual liaison, “a pure woman.” Hardy’s “reading” of Tess, however, contrasts with those of Alec and Angel, who fall back upon historical, theological, and romantic texts to understand Tess’ character. While in her letter to Angel Tess demands recognition of herself as a woman in a complex situation, throughout the

novel Angel relies on textual constructs of femininity that misinterpret Tess both when they idealize and when they demonize her. Thompson identifies biblical and mythological constructs as “disease[s] in language” that obliterate reality and “impose themselves relentlessly upon a present that they are ill-equipped to define” (744). That diseased language frequently appears when Angel speaks to Tess: “he called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names, half-teasingly – which she did not like because she did not understand them. ‘Call me Tess,’ she would say askance” (146). Angel understands Tess through these mythological figures just as Alec later calls Tess a temptress and references the biblical “witch of Babylon” (343). Despite Tess’ request that she be called only “Tess,” her culture’s images of femininity override her individual identity. As a result, she is doomed to repeat the lives of her textual predecessors; she says:

What’s the use of learning that I am one of a long row only – finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part; making me sad, that’s all. The best is not to remember that your nature and your past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands’, and that your coming life and doings’ll be like thousands’ and thousands’. (142)

Tess’ famous assertion of her own insignificant role in the vast, repetitious cycles of history reveals how history exerts pressure on the present and potentially eradicates her selfhood. The stories of Artemis, Demeter, and the witch of Babylon are such powerful constructs in part because Tess does “not understand them.” Exiled from culture by poverty and misfortune, she can never quite grasp the chronologies she inevitably re-enacts.

The novel includes five excerpted letters: Joan’s letter of advice to Tess, Angel’s parents’ letter enclosed with the heirloom diamonds, Tess’ letter of appeal, Marian and Izz’s warning to Angel to protect Tess, and Joan’s brief note to Angel informing him that Tess has gone away. The first of these illustrates how Tess’ correspondence serves only to circumscribe and efface her selfhood. When Tess requests her mother’s advice on whether or not to disclose her past to

Angel before marrying him, Joan's letter and Tess' response indicate the extent to which Tess is victimized by letters' historicizing power. The letter, written in Joan's "wandering, last-century hand" (210) and peppered with expressions of affection and practical instructions, seems to belong to a tradition of parental epistolary advice<sup>49</sup>. However, instead of establishing an open rapport between mother and daughter, the letter proposes a "reading" of Tess' tragedy. Tess initially rejects this reading as morally unacceptable, but later capitulates to it as the conventional narrative. That narrative serves to negate the specificity of Tess' experience of sexual violation; for example, Joan's letter refers to it only as her "trouble," a euphemism that invalidates Tess' intense emotional reaction to her violation. Joan proposes a pragmatist view of rape that Tess, struggling to reconcile sentimental concepts of pure womanhood with her reality, cannot understand. Joan's "wandering, last-century" hand suggests that her version of Tess' history comes from another time and place, as Tess' reaction implies: "oh mother, mother!" she exclaims, exasperated at her mother's simplicity. "She was recognizing how light was the touch of events the most oppressive upon Mrs. Durbeyfield's elastic spirit. Her mother did not see life as Tess saw it. That haunting episode of bygone days was to her mother but a passing accident" (210). Joan's letter is the site of two representations of Tess, and indeed two worlds, clashing; Hardy's novel represents a society in transition, and one of the touchstones for that transition is the question of feminine purity.

Joan's letter argues against Tess' moral scruples about concealing her past from Angel on the basis of conventions that Joan herself has obeyed: Joan, too, conceals a "trouble" in her past. "I did not tell everything to your father... Many a woman, some of the Highest in the Land, have had a Trouble in their time; and why should you Trumpet yours when others don't Trumpet

---

<sup>49</sup> Such as the kind of mentor-child correspondence carried out between Evelina and Mr. Villars in Burney's *Evelina* or even the guidance in libertinage that the Marquise de Merteuil gives the Vicomte de Valmont in Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*.

theirs? No girl would be such a fool, specially as it is so long ago, and not your Fault at all” (210). Joan’s text counsels Tess to understand her experience as an insignificant historical repetition, the very idea that so depresses Tess when she tells Angel of her sense that her “past doings have been just like thousands’ and thousands.” Tess’ violation recapitulates not only the troubles of “many a woman,” however, but also a much more immediate antecedent’s. By implying that she also came to marriage “impure” – and, like Tess, refusing to clearly explain whether or not her act was consensual – Joan reveals that Tess has inherited a legacy of carnality. Joan’s letter recalls the textual “relics” of sentimental romance and sexual transgression that the baroness passes down to Jeanne in *Une Vie*; these texts exemplify the letter’s capacity to transmit past into present across historical and generational time. Joan’s letter points simultaneously toward Tess’ and her mother’s radical cultural difference and their disturbing convergence as the past reasserts itself. This paradoxical view of the past is characteristic of Hardy, whose novel portrays both the deterministic progression/degeneration of history and the influence of historical cycles.

Despite the shocking similarity of their histories, Tess initially rejects her mother’s narrative. However, the written word exerts an irresistible authority over Tess and she finally obeys her mother’s injunction to hide her “Trouble” from Angel: “silence it should be. Thus steadied by a command from the only person in the world who had any shadow of right to control her action, Tess grew calmer. The responsibility was shifted; and her heart was lighter than it had been for weeks” (211). It is simply easier for Tess to capitulate to convention and historical precedent than to assert personal authority over her story; the drive to repeat her mother’s past is overwhelming. However, it is also so easy for Tess to agree with her mother because Joan’s text manifests Tess’ own unconscious desire to conceal her “trouble” from Angel

in order to preserve their love. Tess repeatedly fails to tell Angel of her past, despite her scruples; for example, at the moment when revelation seems imminent, “her courage... failed her, she feared his blame for not telling him sooner; and her instinct of self-preservation was stronger than her candour” (207). While I would not argue that Tess’ unconscious somehow “writes” Joan’s letter, which has a very real material presence, her submissive response to it suggests that it is a receptacle for “instinctive” but repressed desires.

Joan’s letter imposes a “reading” of Tess’ tragedy upon her daughter that Tess blindly accepts as a historical repetition. This episode reveals an impulse to victimized self-abnegation, even to self-annihilation, that Hardy’s use of epistolarity throughout the rest of the novel also exposes. This textual effacement appears not only in Tess’ willing surrender to the written word, but also in her *refusal* to write letters: most importantly, the epistolary silence between her and Angel. Twice in the novel Tess gives up an opportunity to assert her purity and individual value: once when she destroys her letter of confession, and once when she fails to write to Angel in Brazil. Instead of rewriting the false histories that Angel constructs – the first of a perfectly innocent, perfectly blank Tess, the second of a repulsive sinner – Tess allows them to stand. However, whereas Joan’s and Tess’ correspondence signifies a breakdown in communication, between Tess and Angel silence paradoxically becomes a discourse of desire (albeit an ineffective one, as their love story still ends in tragedy).

Tess’ and Angel’s epistolary silence is a cruel parody of amorous epistolary discourse in that the traditional prerequisites for a lovers’ correspondence exist – absence, adventures and trials, and of course passionate love – yet fail to create the expected rapport. On the contrary, Angel insists that Tess *not* write to him and she obeys his command as part of her “punishment” for hiding her tainted past. In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Barthes explores the nature of the absence

that seems to inform Tess' and Angel's love relation: "the other is in a condition of perpetual departure...I who love, by converse vocation, am sedentary, motionless, at hand, in expectation, nailed to the spot, in suspense...To speak this absence is from the start to propose that the subject's place and the other's place cannot permute; it is to say: 'I am loved less than I love'" (18). Barthes argues that absence is felt more deeply by, and inspires more yearning in, the lover who remains. Though Tess moves frequently in search of work, she is undeniably the abandoned party who must "wait" for Angel to decide whether they can ever resume married life. However, Barthes' assumption that the condition of absence is endemic to writing, to "speaking the absence," is inverted in *Tess*.

Barthes says, "there where you are not – this is the beginning of writing" (100); yet while Tess does eventually write to Angel, initially she expresses her love through a perverse silence. Tragically, Angel misinterprets Tess' silence as an absent text. He believes that the lack of discourse presupposes an alternative situation, one in which Tess writes appealing and affectionate letters frequently. "Greatly perplexed" (360) by Tess' silence, Angel fails to recognize that that silence is itself a letter to the beloved. Tess takes Angel's ban on writing literally, to the point where the act of not-writing becomes an act of obedient, self-sacrificing devotion. As a result, the cultural script of amorous epistolary discourse becomes a "text" that victimizes Tess by implicitly devaluing her loving silence. Hardy explains, "her silence of docility was misinterpreted. How much it really said, if he had understood! That she adhered with literal exactness to orders which he had given and forgotten; that despite her natural fearlessness she asserted no rights, admitted his judgment to be in every respect the true one, and bent her head dumbly thereto" (360). Tess' repression of her "natural fearlessness" and her "dumb" obedience *to the letter* of Angel's law simultaneously simultaneously negate her desire

and express it. Hardy's description of Angel's reaction to Tess' silence as "misinterpretation" reinforces the sense that Tess' refusal to write constitutes a misread text.

Tess' absolute obedience to Angel's command is motivated by her disregard for her own interests in favor of her husband's, however he may misunderstand her silence. Her unspoken desire for the absent other is thus linked to a desire for self-annihilation: an eroticized death wish. Throughout the novel, Tess recognizes death as the proper ending for her and Angel's love story, a conclusion that would seem to offer the union impossible in life. When a sleep-walking Angel carries Tess over the river to her family vault, Tess thinks:

If they could both fall together into the current now, their arms would be so tightly clasped together that they could not be saved: they would go out of the world almost painlessly, and there would be no more reproach to her, or to him for marrying her...The impulse stirred in her, yet she dared not indulge it, to make a movement that would have precipitated them both into the gulf. (268)

Tess views death as the only respite from the implacable fate that divides her and Angel. She similarly links death with a longed-for union to Angel in her last moments at Stonehenge, when she says that if Angel were to marry Liza-Lu "it would almost seem as if death had not divided us" (416). Despite Angel's answer to the contrary, she holds onto the possibility that she and Angel, "who love each other so well" (417), will see each other again after death. At Stonehenge, Tess does nothing to escape her doom; she rather accepts it as a welcome nothingness in which she and Angel, even if they do not literally meet again, will at least be free of the cultural conventions that render them social pariahs. Tess believes that "bygones would never be complete bygones till she was a bygone herself," free of the "implacable past" (327). Her self-effacement in abstaining from writing, then, is an extension of this death wish. Epistolary self-annihilation is the only way, in Tess' view, to indicate total submission to the beloved's will, "admitt[ing] his judgment to be in every respect the true one."

Tess' self-effacement is also literalized in her willingness to physically deface herself. When Tess believes that Angel will not come back to her she progressively reduces her bodily presence, first by making herself ugly; she snips off her eyebrows and exclaims, "O no – I don't care! I'll always be ugly now, because Angel is not here, and I have nobody to take care of me. My husband that was is gone away, and never will love me anymore" (299). Tess' disfigurement implies an utter disregard for her own body that becomes explicit when Tess cries to Angel, who has finally returned to her, "these clothes are what he's [Alec's] put upon me: I didn't care what he did wi' me!" (401). Tess asserts that she "didn't care" about her own physical appearance and even existence, dissociating entirely from a reality too painful to bear. As Law argues, Tess' body is the site of sexual, social, and historical oppression; her body is subject to a "brutal domination" (Law 251) first by Alec, then by the industrial machinery at Flintcomb-Ash. In response, Tess institutes "a split between self and body" (Law 251) that would seem to preserve her soul for Angel even as she abandons her body to the world's ravages. Just as death seemed to offer Tess liberation when she imagined tumbling into the watery depths with Angel, psychological dissociation represents a coping mechanism for Tess' bodily abuse.

Tess' literal physical self-effacement points toward her metaphorical epistolary self-effacement; Tess' refusal to exist textually and her attempts to disappear bodily reinforce one another. In maintaining her "silence of docility" Tess dwindles into a mere creature of Angel's imagination, rather than the real woman he finds so offensive. Angel finds that far from Tess he experiences "a growing fondness for her memory" (361); epistolarity and desire complement one another in that they both imply absence, which makes the heart grow fonder through the process of idealizing memory. In this case, absence allows Angel time to reflect upon and re-read past events in a more sympathetic light. Thus, letters are the site of both a radical split between self

and other – the site where absence conditions writing – and the site of an attempted reunion; through epistolary silence Tess tries to disappear into Angel’s image *of* Tess. Furthermore, just as Jeanne’s letters to Paul engaged her in the projection of desire into an imagined correspondent, Tess’ discourse of desire constructs the “other” as an externalized figure of her unconscious. As we noted in *Une Vie*, letters always necessitate the invention of the other; during both *destination* and *réception*, the other’s imagined presence motivates and shapes writing. Here, in the absence of a response to Tess’ silent “letters,” Tess effectively plays the role of both self and other; Angel as “censor” becomes the personification of Tess’ own masochistic need to punish herself for her sexual impurity.

Tess *does* eventually write to Angel, the results of which serve only to reinforce the self-destructive tendencies that texts provoke in Tess: the concept of the word in *Tess* as “crushing! Killing!” (92). Tempted almost beyond her strength by Alec, Tess finally writes Angel the novel’s longest excerpted letter. While this rupture might be expected to salvage a stable identity for Tess by allowing her a voice, ultimately this text only speeds her dissolution. As I have argued, the introduction of an alternative voice implicitly questions the realist project of a historicizing explanatory narrative by suggesting that, even if an “implacable past” is controlling Tess’ life, she has an essential self that must be acknowledged. The existence of Tess’ letter is an assertion of “your faithful heartbroken TESS” (357) as an identity, rather than of Artemis or Demeter. However, even as Tess attempts to make an identity claim and effect change in the course of her history through writing, that claim cannot combat her inevitable eradication.

The letter’s impotence is evident in Hardy’s first sentence after excerpting it, which effectively distances the letter as an object of public exchange from the passionate plea that the “faithful heartbroken TESS” has just completed. Hardy informs us that “the appeal duly found its

way to the breakfast-table of the quiet vicarage to the westward, in the valley... where to Tess the human world seemed so different (though it was much the same)" (358). Once Tess posts her letter, time, space, and the Clares as intermediaries diminish her "appeal's" emotional immediacy and render it an object as fit for the "breakfast-table" as for her beloved's hands. The banal logic of postal delivery evacuates the text of Tess' presence. The letter represents a desperate staking of Tess' self on the vicissitudes of time and space, both of which, in Hardy's deterministic world, conspire against her.

While Angel eventually reads Tess' letter and returns to England, the letter fails to achieve its immediate desired effect of sentimental persuasion; in fact, we do not even witness the scene of reading that would report Angel's emotional response. The reading scene that Hardy later offers is one of re-reading, at which point Tess' letter was both written and received many weeks ago. Angel "hunted up the old letter sent on to him in Brazil, which Tess had written from Flintcomb-Ash, and re-read it" (392). Without evidence of a tangible effect such as the expected tears, guilt, and immediate return, or even of any particular attachment to this letter (which Angel seems to have almost forgotten about, as he must "hunt it up"), we have only Angel's assertion that "the sentences touched him now as much as when he had first perused them" (392). Hardy follows this somewhat indifferent description of Angel's reaction with a reprinted excerpt of Tess' original letter, a reduction of the original text that further effaces Tess' postal self. Excerpting the letter implies that Angel is quite literally reading between the lines for the Tess he desires; it is only after this second review that "Clare determined that he would no longer believe in her more recent and severer regard of him; but would go and find her immediately" (392). Rejecting the "severer" Tess who writes, "O why have you treated me so monstrously, Angel!" (377), Angel prefers a sentimentalized, suffering, victimized Tess to a wronged and angry wife.

While Angel earlier reads Tess through narratives of the seductress (Eve) or the idealized virgin (Artemis), here his epistolary reading similarly diminishes Tess' individual complexity.

Tragically, at the same time as Angel re-reads Tess' letter, deciding to forgive and reclaim his wife, Tess finally falls into Alec's clutches. The painful irony of this temporal disconnect implies that the star-crossed lovers are doomed to live chronologies they can neither understand nor resist; the letter as anachronism reveals the influence of the "implacable past" in Hardy's deterministic world. Angel perceives the past within Tess' letter as the present and hurries back to his "faithful heartbroken TESS," while Tess mistakenly believes that Angel's former severity is unalterable in the present. Hardy's original title for the novel, *Too Late Beloved*, points toward the problematic chronologies that the novel dramatizes through letters: Tess writes to Angel too late, after an extended silence; her letter arrives too late; and Angel himself, as a personified response to Tess' letter, arrives too late to prevent Tess' catastrophic marriage to Alec. If, as I have argued, letters represent the past, it is a past that returns again and again to trouble the heroine's present.

#### *The Turn of the Screw: Letters and the Problematics of Transmission*

And if the other does not come, I hallucinate the other: waiting is a delirium.  
--Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse* 39

As we saw in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, letters reveal the problematics of transmission across time and space; whether letters are delayed, misunderstood, or simply never arrive (in the case of Tess' confession), correspondence represents a very tenuous link between reader and writer. By exposing obstacles to communication, epistolary discourse stages a central theme of nineteenth-century literature: transmission. Letters appear in nineteenth-century literature as an

extension of the era's interest in genetic and epistemic transmission, that is, in inheritance, social and affective bonds, and the relationship between past, present, and future.

The "frame" structure taken up by many nineteenth-century writers similarly represents transmission. In this conceit, the text's main sequence of events is narrated by a character external to it yet who – perhaps orally, perhaps via a document or letter – has somehow come into possession of special knowledge. Framing, as Brooks observes, potentially involves multiple degrees of mediation through multiple narrators and narratees:

The nineteenth-century novel in particular will play out repeatedly and at length the problem of transmission, staging over and over again the relations of fathers to sons (and also daughters to mothers, aunts, madwomen, and others), asking where an inheritable wisdom is to be found and how its transmission is to be acted toward ...the claim to understanding is incorporate with the claim to transmissibility. One could find some of the most telling illustrations of this claim in the nineteenth century's frequent use of the framed tale, which, dramatizing the relations of tellers and listeners, narrators and narratees, regularly enacts the problematic of transmission. (Brooks 28)

Brooks contextualizes the popularity of the "framed tale" in the nineteenth century within a larger cultural anxiety about possessing and imparting wisdom, and particularly about whether the past is a reliable source of wisdom. By staging the process of transmission and the acts of interpretation it necessitates, framing also stages the inheritance of texts. Maupassant's use of letters as sentimental legacy transmitted across generations suggests, however, that Brooks' analysis of the "framed tale" particularly applies to epistolary narrative. Altman makes this argument when she contends that, "by its very mise-en-abyme of the writer-reader relationship, the epistolary form models the complex dynamics involved in writing and reading ...it explicitly articulates the problematics involved in the creation, transmission, and reception of literary texts" (212). Altman's language is strikingly similar to Brooks'; both critics refer to a "problematics of transmission" and its implications for the writer-reader relationship.

As this language of transmission might lead us to expect, framing was central to many eighteenth-century epistolary novels as both a seal of authenticity and a screen to protect the

author from accusations of indecency. Laclos in *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and Burney in *Evelina* claim editorial roles, prefacing their novels with affirmations that they have merely collected and collated true correspondences<sup>50</sup>. Much later, Derrida subverts this traditional premise of authenticity by writing in *The Post Card* that “you might consider them [the letters that comprise the text], if you really wish to, as the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence...from which whatever was spared or if you prefer ‘saved’...will have been...due to a very strange principle of selection, and which for my part, even today, I consider questionable” (3-4). Derrida’s parody of an epistolary text helps illustrate the complex dynamics that come into play when framing conditions epistolarity. *The Post Card* refuses to accept the editor of epistolary narrative as a trustworthy presence, but rather demands that we interrogate the “principle of selection” to which framing subjects supposedly “authentic” letters. Though James’ text predates Derrida’s by nearly a century, it also explores the implications of framing by repeatedly displacing the “origin” of the governess’ story and blurring the distinction between the governess’ memoir as an authentic transcript of reality – a “straight” ghost story – and as a “fiction” of imagined ghosts.

In *The Turn of the Screw*, Henry James rewrites eighteenth-century framed epistolarity and exploits the nineteenth-century frame tale’s thematic potential by using letters and frames interconnectedly; his frame is a letter and the frame encloses in turn a story about letters. The novella includes six letters or references to letters: 1) in the prologue that frames the governess’ narrative, Douglas sends to town for a transcription of the ghost story (which thus becomes a letter); 2) the governess is ordered by her master never to write to him concerning her doings at

---

<sup>50</sup> Laclos says, “cet ouvrage, ou plutôt ce Recueil, que le Public trouvera peut-être encore trop volumineux, ne contient pourtant que le plus petit nombre des Lettres qui composaient la totalité de la correspondance dont il est extrait” (27), while Burney says, “whatever may be the fate of these letters, the editor is satisfied they will meet with justice ; and commits them to the press, though hopeless of fame, yet not regardless of censure” (97).

Bly; 2) the governess receives a brief letter from the master, enclosing Miles' letter of dismissal from school and reiterating his desire that she not contact him; 4) the governess fails to post Miles' and Flora's letters to their uncle, the master, viewing them as mere literary exercises; 5) the governess observes Miss Jessel's ghost apparently in the act of writing to her "sweetheart" (57); and 6) the governess at last writes the master a letter explaining the horrific events at Bly, which Miles steals and destroys. Concentrated at the beginning and end of the story, these letters "frame" the governess' narrative as catalysts for crisis and resolution. Yet these letters all appear *within* the very first epistolary communication: within the larger frame that introduces the governess' tale as a ghost story to while away an evening. This frame is, of course, itself a letter transcribed and sent via a "chain of transmission" (Felman 124). The governess writes her story to Douglas, who then has it sent to him from safekeeping so as to read it aloud to the narrator, who then takes it down as he or she hears it. This process of post-poning the moment of narrative, of filtering writing through multiple destinateurs and destinataires<sup>51</sup>, and of theatricalizing the scene of reading is an important reference point for the other letters of *The Turn of the Screw*.

*The Turn of the Screw* as the governess' first-person narrative begins only after James has contextualized it within a social drama of conversation and reading "round the fire" in "an old house as had gathered us for the occasion" (1) and prefaced it with two separate introductions, as well as inserting temporal and geographic dilations that further postpone the story's beginning. Thus, the reading of *The Turn of the Screw* is as vividly depicted as the actual events of the governess' story; James constructs a drama of transmission. The first deferral that postpones Douglas' account occurs when, after raising his audience's expectations, he pulls back: "I can't

---

<sup>51</sup>Derrida's terms for senders and recipients, which I find useful in that they make the bond between two correspondents linguistically visible; they are linked in a relationship of "destination."

begin. I shall have to send to town.’ There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his preoccupied way, he explained. ‘The story’s written. It’s in a locked drawer – it has not been out for years’” (2). The suspense into which Douglas’ hesitation throws his audience recalls the title of James’ novella, suggesting the affective power of storytelling: “if the child [in another guest’s story] gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to *two* children --?” (1). *The Turn of the Screw* thus directs the reader’s attention to its own affective machinery. The technical presentation and interpretation of the narrative take center stage, just as the desire to emotionally manipulate his audience motivates Douglas’ storytelling.

The narrative frame establishes the lens through which the governess’ story must be read: as a story about (epistolary) “reading-effects” (Felman 124). Douglas’ oral narration of the governess’ manuscript, written in her own hand, posits the letter as an *affective* text. Ironically, however, in *The Turn of the Screw* letters fail to effect the very communication and emotional intimacy that the eighteenth-century republic of letters was based on. In both *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* and *Une Vie*, letters consistently fail to establish intimacy between correspondents. For James, too, a form that in the eighteenth century forged social bonds, built communities of correspondence, and established affective relationships, marks their disintegration by the end of the nineteenth. As Williams argues, the story-telling conceit would seem to establish a discrete community (“circle”) of readers round the fire through the “social force of narrative” (50). Douglas’ story creates social bonds between his auditors through affective reading, building a collective emotional investment that survives his two-day postponement. By the time Douglas begins to speak, the group has been reduced the select few who are really under his enchantment of suspense: “the departing ladies who had said they would stay didn’t, of course, thank heaven, stay: they departed, in consequence of arrangements made,

in a rage of curiosity, as they professed, produced by the touches with which he had already worked us up. But that only made his little final auditory more compact and select, kept it, round the hearth, subject to a common thrill” (4).

Douglas’ “little final auditory” recalls eighteenth-century novelists’ investment in the social ideal of the “republic of letters,” founded on the letter’s potential to link individuals in a sentimental and intellectual dialogue. Writers such as Burney used epistolary narrative to imagine a community of correspondents that, in *Evelina*, eventually becomes a familial community linked by love, marriage, and kinship as well as the personal sympathy that letters fostered. However, in *The Turn of the Screw* the community that Douglas’ affective reading creates is never fully enclosed. The language of circles, of select grouping, and of “common thrills” that the frame uses to delineate an intimate group of auditors engaged in communication and interpretive reading – like the correspondents of the “republic of letters” – is never resumed at the end of the novella. Rather than truly framing the governess’ story with an introduction and a conclusion, which would reinscribe the tragedy and horror of the events at Bly in a socialized world, the frame simply disappears. The narrative circle is never closed; the ghost story, and presumably its auditors, are left suspended without a proper conclusion. The sociable realm that Douglas’ preface introduces never responds to or rationalizes the shocking and possibly supernatural nature of Miles’ death.

The governess’ story itself mirrors the breakdown of social relations in the frame. The little society at Bly, in its idealization of sympathetic communication, conversation, and artistic pursuits, alludes to the affective communities that eighteenth-century epistolarity held up for emulation. The governess, Flora, and Miles pass their days in story-telling, charades, games, lessons, and music (37), all three showing themselves to be “extravagantly and preternaturally

fond” (37) through “demonstrations” (37) of affection. So isolated, so “charming” (14) is this society of “perfect intercourse” (45) into which the governess refuses to introduce the mere mention of evil, that for the governess “the only form that in my fancy the after-years could take for them was that of a romantic, a really royal extension of the garden and the park” (14). However, like Douglas’ physically and emotionally “close” social circle, Bly’s social ideal disintegrates, becoming tragic and absurd. As the governess begins to suspect that her charges’ affection is feigned and their conversation “studied” (37), that they “knew” (52) how to play upon her susceptibility to their charms, their intimacy becomes a kind of psychological torture that the governess must endure. She says, “there appears to me moreover as I look back no note in all this more extraordinary than the mere fact that, in spite of my tension and of their triumph, I never lost patience with them” (52). The possibility of insincere communication between the governess and the children – her sense that all their stories and charades merely conceal horrors – destroys this community. The novella ends in death and silence, with the governess’ distrust finally made explicit in her accusation of Miles and with the affective community of readers, assembled at the beginning of the novella, effectively nowhere.

However, the governess also enforces the very intimacy that she finds so troubling by refusing to post the letters Miles and Flora write to their uncle. She says, “I let our young friends understand that their own letters were but charming literary exercises. They were too beautiful to be posted; I kept them myself” (52). By foreclosing the affective and communicative potential of letters, the governess constructs a perverse image of an epistolary community; she diverts letters from their proper destination, negating the free discourse on which the republic of letters was predicated. The disintegration of sociability at Bly, then, results from acts of *censorship* and *non-*

*correspondence*: the children's and the governess' non-correspondence with the master who might set things to rights.

This dissolution, of course, parallels another: the governess' descent into madness. *The Turn of the Screw* explores the disturbing emotional and psychological as well as social ramifications of epistolary discourse; the letters that the governess writes to and receives from the master are implicated in her increasing hysteria. Non-correspondence, it seems, also conditions the governess' communications (or lack thereof) with the master. While the governess longs for *affective* correspondence with the master – she wishes him to recognize her merit and appreciate her charms – the master's insistence that she never write to him forces her to carry out her epistolary romance imaginatively. Much like Maupassant's Jeanne, the governess filters epistolary discourse through her own romantic fantasies. That textual delirium ultimately precipitates the governess' hysterical hallucinations of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, who, as Felman, Kauffman, and Newman have argued, represent the governess' repressed sexual desire<sup>52</sup>.

The governess' response to the first and only letter she receives from the master, in which he tells her never to write to him, reveals the degree to which affective epistolary readings shape her reality. However, rather than establishing a rapport between the governess and the master, this letter simply gets inscribed within the romantic fantasy the governess has already begun to construct. On first arriving at Bly, she says that she was received “as if I had been the mistress...[this] suggested that what I was to enjoy might be a matter beyond promise” (7). Marriage with her employer, even before she has embarked on her new work, seems within the realm of possibility. Unsurprisingly, then, the scene of reading that accompanies the letter from

---

<sup>52</sup> Felman, Kauffman, and Newman have argued that Miss Jessel represents the sexual desire the governess forbids herself; Kauffman writes that Miss Jessel is “the dark, determined, and vengeful double which each dutiful, diligent heroine tries to repress” (182)

the master is one of emotional tumult, filled with a language of violence at odds with the worrying, but certainly not earth-shattering, information that Miles has been dismissed from school. “I broke the seal with a great effort – so great a one that I was a long time coming to it; took the unopened missive at last up to my room and only attacked it just before going to bed...it gave me a second sleepless night. With no counsel to take, the next day, I was full of distress” (10). The governess offers no explanation for the mixture of trepidation and courage with which she “attacks” the headmaster’s letter, nor for the confusion into which it plunges her. As Miles’ caretaker, she *should* view her role as a straightforward disciplinarian; it seems likely that her excessive anxiety arises from the master’s curt words, asking that she “deal with” the situation, rather than from Miles’ supposed misdeeds. The governess herself acknowledges her longing for personal and professional recognition; she wishes that the master would “smile and approve...I only asked that he should *know*” (15). The master’s failure to provide the affirmation, indeed the love, that she craves provokes the governess’ increasingly feverish struggle against whatever “demons” (47) might exist at Bly. This desperate attempt to prove her virtue and win the master’s notice seeks to resolve, or at least to distract her from, the real source of her unhappiness: unrequited love.

After this initial epistolary disappointment, the governess’ responses to relatively easily explained events – Miles’ dismissal, his late-night wanderings in the grounds, Flora’s adventure on the lake – grow increasingly hysterical. Thus, this letter suggests that “delirious” reading fractures the governess’ hold on reality. She reads the master’s letter as an amorous rupture that intrudes on a fantasy of possible intimacy, when in fact it is evidence that the amorous bond has only ever existed in her mind. Barthes’ description of the lover’s emotional relationship to writing in *A Lover’s Discourse* applies to the governess’ apparent madness: “I hallucinate what I

desire. Each wound proceeds less from a doubt than from a betrayal...I thought I was suffering from not being loved, and yet it is because I thought I was loved that I was suffering” (187). The governess suffers from the delusion that she is or could be loved, rather than from the abandonment of not being loved: hence her disappointment at the master’s epistolary negligence, which would mean little were her romantic hopes not already raised.

Early in the novel James establishes the governess as, like Jeanne and the baroness, a sentimental reader. Her tendency to view Bly through the filter of romantic novels, thus, underwrites the sentimentality that conditions her epistolary reading. Upon first beginning to entertain suspicions of supernatural occurrences, she asks, “was there a ‘secret’ at Bly – a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, an unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement?” (17). Though the governess’ ironic quotations around “secret” implies a certain awareness of her susceptibility to fantasy, she nevertheless compares her experiences to those of the tormented heroines of Radcliffe’s and Brontë’s novels. Petry reads the novella as a parodic reworking of *Jane Eyre*, from the governess’ baseless love for her master to her sense of duty to combat whatever evil might reside at Bly. Unfortunately, “at some point...James’ governess crosses the line between emulating a positive role model whose background superficially resembles hers [Jane Eyre], and subconsciously imitating her in circumstances far more mundane than those found at Thornfield. And at the moment she crosses that line she becomes, as it were, mentally unstable: she hallucinates ghosts” (64). Petry’s argument implies that we can understand Bly’s ghosts as “reading-effects,” or, the effects of “reading” reality through the tropes of sentimental gothic fiction.

The governess’ narrative voice also reveals her tendency to conceptualize reality through fictive constructs. She says that her initial impression of Bly was “a castle of romance inhabited

by a rosy sprite, such a place as would somehow, for diversion of the young idea, take all colour out of story-books and fairy-tales” (9) and later thinks that “it would be as charming as a charming story suddenly to meet some one. Some one would appear there at the turn of the path and smile and approve” (15) as she walks in the garden. Explicitly comparing her life to a “story” and implicitly herself to a heroine, the governess blurs the line between fantasy and reality. Later, the governess is nodding off over Henry Fielding’s sentimental novel *Amelia* when she encounters Miss Jessel’s ghost on the stairway; reading romances directly manifests the representation of her own repressed sexual desire. The governess’ reality is as overdetermined by texts as Tess’; however, while Tess was victimized by others’ tendency to read her character through historical and cultural constructs of womanhood, the governess rather *falls victim* to misinterpretations of her own.

The governess’ reading – both fictive and epistolary – inspires romantic delusions in which she as courageous heroine wins the smiling approval of the unattainable master’s “handsome face” (15). The governess’ longing for an amorous epistolary discourse with the master becomes even more obvious when she sees Miss Jessel in the schoolroom. Her first thought upon seeing this stranger, seated at her own desk, is that she is “some housemaid who might have stayed at home to look after the place and who...had applied herself to the considerable effort of a letter to her sweetheart” (57). If the figure of Miss Jessel allows the governess to externalize her desire for the master, this scene takes on the significance of a wish-fulfillment fantasy. Even if, as literal readers of *The Turn of the Screw* argue, the ghosts are real, the governess’ baseless assumption that Miss Jessel is writing to a sweetheart suggests that just such a task may be much on the governess’ mind. The governess’ preoccupation with and intense emotional responses to the writing and reception of romantic letters suggests that she reads

herself as an epistolary heroine as much as a modern Jane Eyre. However, when reality fails to conform to her fantasy of epistolary intimacy, as Petry writes, she “crosses that line...she hallucinates ghosts” in order to achieve it.

In addition to misinterpreted letters, James uses unread letters to signify letters’ failure to establish intimacy. *The Turn of the Screw* abounds in letters that never arrive; the headmaster’s letter to the master is redirected unopened to the governess, the children write letters to their uncle that the governess never posts, and Miles burns the governess’ letter to the master. These letters symbolize disrupted communication and foreclosed connections, much like Tess’ unread confession to Angel. The dead letter is thus a figure for non-correspondence, whether literal or emotional. However, the novella’s most important non-correspondence is one in which communication is not merely disrupted, but flatly prohibited: the master’s refusal to allow the governess to write to him. This prohibition represents, as much as the other dead letters, the repression of affective bonds and of the governess’ desire for the master. However, while thus far I have discussed only the governess’ delirious reading of the master’s letter as a lover’s discourse, now I would like to turn attention to the governess’ *writing* as delirium; for, despite the master’s orders to the contrary, the governess does write back.

The governess’ (unsent) letter to the master is, as Kauffman argues, *The Turn of the Screw* itself. By writing a confessional narrative filled with claims to virtue, courage, and devotion to service, the governess composes a love letter to the one person to whom she must not write. Kauffman argues that “While she [the governess] has no intention of sending him the manuscript, he [the master] still pervades her consciousness as her fictional audience” (183). The governess’ consciousness of the other is the constitutive force of her epistolary narrative. However, as with Tess and Jeanne, the subjective fragmentation that imagining the other entails

results in delirium and self-annihilation. When Tess and Jeanne write, their longing for union with the beloved erases their selfhood and causes them to reject lived reality. The governess' pleas for recognition, expressions of frustrated desire, and self-exonerating confessions, unread by the man she idealizes, similarly induce her retreat into the imaginary intimacy of a one-sided correspondence.

The governess' insistence that she always acts out of devotion to the children and, transitively, their uncle, suggests that desire for the master's love and acknowledgement "pervades her consciousness" as she composes her narrative. She theatricalizes her courage in a way that only makes sense if there is an addressee she wishes to impress with a sense of her virtue. She describes encountering Quint's ghost "with all the marks of a deliberation that must have seemed magnificent had there been any one to admire it" (39), drawing attention to her own bravery and implicitly expressing her *wish* for the master as audience; for who would admire her calm and discretion if not the master who asks that "she should never trouble him" (6) about the children? The governess further emphasizes her selfless motives when she explains her sense that "by offering myself bravely as the sole subject of such experience, by accepting, by inviting, by surmounting it all, I should serve as an expiatory victim and guard against the tranquility of the rest of the household. The children in special I should thus fence about and absolutely save" (25). The self-exculpating, self-sacrificing nature of the governess' narrative reveals her desire to win the master's approval, at any cost. In fact, as the story comes to its tragic denouement, the governess worries as much about the master's knowledge of her behavior as about "saving" the children: "'...Flora has now her grievance, and she'll work it to the end.' 'Yes, Miss; but to *what* end?' 'Why, that of dealing with me to her uncle. She'll make me out to him the lowest creature -?'" (72). The governess' all-consuming consciousness of the master is characteristic of

epistolary narrative, a form in which the knowledge of the other as reader – or at least as an apostrophized fantasy – shapes expression. The governess imagines intimacy with the master through narrative, through a constant subconscious reference to him as addressee.

The master's refusal to communicate with the governess not only prompts her one-sided correspondence, but also inspires an ethic of self-sacrifice apparent in her willingness to both "serve as an expiatory victim" and to censor her passion. As Douglas explains, the governess agrees to sacrifice her own peace of mind for the master's sake by confronting the evil at Bly alone: "his main condition...neither appeal nor complain nor write about anything...she promised to do this, and she mentioned to me that when, for a moment, disburdened, delighted, he held her hand, thanking her for the sacrifice, she already felt rewarded" (6). The master's condition of non-correspondence is strikingly similar to Angel's when he leaves Tess for Brazil. Just as Tess masochistically subjects herself to Angel's command, the governess demonstrates an impulse to self-abnegation linked to love for her epistolary tormenter. In fact, both Douglas and the narrator agree that the absence of real or real epistolary interactions between the governess and the attractive but aloof master is "just the beauty of her passion" (6).

The governess takes a certain satisfaction, like Tess, in submitting her will to the master's. She thinks to herself (on the fateful evening when she first sees Quint, incidentally):

It was a pleasure at these moments to feel myself tranquil and justified; doubtless perhaps also to reflect that by my discretion, my quiet good sense and general high propriety, I was giving pleasure – if he ever thought of it! – to the person to whose pressure I had yielded. What I was doing was what he had earnestly hoped and directly asked of me...I dare say I fancied myself in short a remarkable young woman and took comfort in the faith that this would more publicly appear. (15)

This passage offers considerable insight into the governess' psychology of desire; she avoids speaking directly of love, euphemizing it with the unconsciously explicit "giving pleasure," yet sexualizes their business relationship as a "yielding to pressure." However, the source of her "pleasure" is not only her admiration for the master himself but also the masochistic joy of

obeying his command of silence, a command which she insists upon obeying even when she believes the children's souls to be at risk. Even when the governess finally brings herself to apprise the master of events at Bly, her letter, like so many others, never arrives.

The governess' narrative-as-love letter is, like her letter of explanation, never posted. As a failed transmission, it merely gets passed along to another unrequited lover, Douglas, whose unspoken attraction to the governess parallels her own for the master. Like Tess' unread letter of confession to Angel, a narrative that would have both revealed the depth of her love for Angel and claimed a moral identity for its writer, the governess' censored story never establishes the interpersonal bonds that eighteenth-century writers suggested letters could create. Unable to connect with their lovers, both Tess and James' governess necessarily engage in a perverse discourse of desire: silence.

The censorship of both the governess' desire for expression and her expression of desire ultimately results in an outbreak of pathology: her supernatural visions. If *The Turn of the Screw's* "ghosts" are indeed hysterical manifestations of the governess' unspoken love for the master, then repression is inevitably their source. As I have noted, this idea is first suggested by Quint's appearance just when the governess has been fantasizing about the master learning of her virtue and devotion; her longing for the master's presence manifests itself in an image of male sexuality. Her beloved's absence, figured in the failure of romantic communication, inspires hysterical fantasies. Barthes articulates the connection between absence and imagination when he argues that whenever lovers are separated "trivial delays" such as "rendezvous, *letters*, telephone calls, returns" (37) (*italics mine*), imaginative processes are engaged. "The being I am waiting for is not real...And if the other does not come, I hallucinate the other" (39). As Kauffman demonstrates, "the master in Harley street...is largely an imaginative construction of the

governess', for she creates an entire personality for him on the basis of two interviews and then proceeds to worship not the actual man but the image, the idol she has invented" (177). The governess' letters are implicated in her "imaginative construction" of the master, which builds a romance on the scaffolding of the most minimal of relationships. However, the process of imagination also suggests hallucination; in the absence of the beloved's presence, the governess "sees" him – or rather the desire he represents – as a ghost. Quint, and his unsettling sexual relationship with Miss Jessel, thus manifests the governess' frustrated desire for emotional and epistolary intimacy with the master.

The governess' censored desire inevitably returns in the hallucination of alternate selves – Quint and Miss Jessel – who embody a sexuality she denies herself. Silence and censorship are central components of repressed trauma, as Freud's and Breuer's case studies suggest; Freud's hysterics often struggled with oral and/or written communication and referred to psychoanalysis as a "talking cure" (Breuer 20), as if to suggest that narrative could overcome the silence of unspoken feelings. However, Felman argues that censorship is also the very condition of the unconscious. The master's prohibition on correspondence is "a contract of *disconnection*, of *non-correspondence*. Constitutive of an aporia, of a relation of non-relation, the Master's discourse is very like the condition of the unconscious as such: Law itself is but a form of Censorship" (145). Though the master's real existence is never really in question, despite the fact that the governess is certainly an unreliable narrator, he can be read as the symbol if not the personification of the governess' unconscious. The master's censorship gives rise to a *self-imposed* censorship much like Tess' masochistic self-erasure, as the governess seeks approval through the not-speaking and not-writing of her desire. Even when she alludes to her interest in the master, it is only to repudiate it through mockery. Moments such as the governess' declaration that "ah then I hope

her [the last governess'] youth and beauty helped her!' I recollect throwing off. 'He seems to like us young and pretty!'" (12) should be read, not as evidence of the governess' comfort with her sexuality (as anti-Freudians such as Heilman claim<sup>53</sup>), but as a self-conscious disavowal of its real intensity.

Letters figure so prominently in *The Turn of the Screw* because, like the ghostly souls of the dead, they never arrive. Epistolary communication and epistolary desire, caught in limbo between destinateur and destinataire, simply circulate endlessly through the novel, destroyed or misdirected, their address having been erased or censored. It is with this knowledge that we can finally understand the fraught transmissions that frame the governess' narrative – the governess to Douglas, Douglas to himself, Douglas to the narrator, and of course the narrator to us the readers – as symptomatic of all communication in the novel. These failed transmissions speak to the perilous nature of all language, the possible misreading or non-arrival of messages intended to forge a personal bond yet subject to internal or external obstacles. Whether letters arrive "too late" as in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, are woefully misinterpreted as in *Une Vie*, or simply never get there at all as in *The Turn of the Screw*, they dramatize the difficulty of breaching the divide between self and other. Through physical and temporal detours letters materialize the mediation that the spoken word seems to, but never does, overcome: all language is subject to reading and misreading, to the potential of words to influence beyond the speaker's intent. The thematics of epistolarity suggest that we can conceptualize the letter, as Derrida would argue, as "not a genre but all genres, literature itself" (48).

---

<sup>53</sup> Heilman writes that Freudian readers of *The Turn of the Screw* such as Edna Kenton and Edmund Wilson "[do] violence" (436) and commit "hysterical blindness" (434). He insists that "unambiguous passages" (436) in the novella do exist, passages that point to the real existence of the ghosts and thus the importance of "salvation, the supernatural, evil as an absolute" (444) over the governess' personal longings.

## Conclusion

I opened this discussion with the observation that the epistolary form was, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, a dead letter. As Hunt notes, the epistolary novel experienced a surge in popularity between the 1760s and 80s, following the publication of *Pamela* in 1740, then declined just as rapidly in the 1790s (40). However, this apparent obsolescence implicitly raised a question: what, then, are letters doing in novels written a century later? In my extended response to that question, I explored how three late nineteenth-century novels incorporate and interrogate epistolary forms, alternately exploiting and repudiating eighteenth-century epistolarity. While Maupassant, Hardy, and James engage with epistolary discourse differently, and emphasize different aspects of that discourse, they nonetheless share a marked interest in the letter's potential to signify desire.

In *Une Vie*, Maupassant questions letters' affective potential; he critiques the sentimentality that eighteenth-century epistolary novels celebrated, but that tragically produces Jeanne's absurd illusions of intimacy. Instead of love letters, Jeanne encounters confessions of adultery, and instead of an epistolary family romance with Paul, Jeanne experiences only rejection and disillusionment. In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, letters similarly fail to establish intimacy. However, rather than refusing to respond to Tess' desperate letters as Paul does to Jeanne's, Angel responds "too late"; thus, Hardy incorporates letters' status as anachronisms into the machinery of fate that ultimately eradicates Tess. In *The Turn of the Screw*, self-imposed or external obstacles to transmission – the inability to send the master the love letter she longs to – result in the governess' withdrawal into imagination and finally her psychological disintegration. What the governess shares with her predecessors is the very unfulfilled desire that, according to Kauffman, motivates all epistolary discourse (176). Neither the governess nor Tess nor Jeanne

manages to carry out successful epistolary romances, despite their longing for their respective beloveds (the master, Angel, Paul); space, time, and the Other himself interfere.

The challenges these novels pose to epistolary discourse rewrite Enlightenment-era confidence in the letter's potential to forge sentimental and social bonds. However, we must also acknowledge that this interrogation and undercutting of the "republic of letters" existed even within the eighteenth century. Even epistolary classics such as *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* suggested that, as Cook argues, "on the one hand, [the letter] was considered the most direct, sincere, and transparent form of written communication... But the letter was simultaneously recognized as the most playful and potentially deceptive of forms" (16). The seemingly sincere letter could always dissimulate rather than unfold emotion, or at the very least be misinterpreted by its reader. The "self" within the letter was potentially unstable, unreliable, and constructed. What is intriguing about nineteenth-century epistolarity is that it engages the early problematization of epistolary discourse in new ways. As the rise of psychology and psychoanalysis presented nineteenth-century writers with a new language for subjectivity and desire, they incorporated letters into contemporary conceptions of selfhood. While in the eighteenth century letters represented the conflict between philosophies of individuality and self-reinvention (through epistolary dissimulation) and the need to preserve social bonds (through epistolary honesty), in the nineteenth century letters make desire central to the writer's subjectivity. By writing to and imagining the beloved, Jeanne, Tess, and James' governess struggle to articulate, censor, or cope with sexual desires that, in their buttoned-up society, they are all equally ill-equipped to understand.

A new vocabulary for desire and the sense that, as Freud believed, desire was the foundation of individual psychology, made epistolarity particularly relevant at the turn of the

nineteenth century. Ironically, this was also the period when improvements in communications made the obstacles typically associated with correspondence much less significant. In a world where letters arrived quickly and consistently, it seems surprising that Maupassant, Hardy, and James would depict everything that can go wrong in epistolary discourse: from delays to interceptions to misreading. However, I would argue that this emphasis on the perils of letter-writing represents an attempt to explore the limits of a genre on the cusp of disappearance; with the advent of industrialization and modernization, and with the telegraph seemingly about to revolutionize communications<sup>54</sup>, letters may have already seemed somewhat quaint. Maupassant, Hardy, and James could then be seen as forerunners to Derrida, whose *The Post Card* is essentially an experiment testing the formal and thematic potential of epistolarity. As a work of philosophy written in epistolary form, but also a work *about* epistolarity as a specific type of coded discourse that constructs the self and the other, *The Post Card* investigates what happens to the letter and to philosophical thought when they occupy the same textual space. It is not so great a stretch to suggest that this is precisely what Maupassant, Hardy, and James have done by combining epistolarity and the nineteenth century novel. By exploring what letters as a genre and as a thematic discourse bring to contemporary debates about selfhood, sociability, and desire, these writers simultaneously hearken back to and modernize epistolary models. Paradoxically, however, letters are so crucial in the late nineteenth-century novel partly because they are systematically destroyed, diverted, or delayed; letters are always absent, hopelessly misread, or tragically “too late, too late!”

---

<sup>54</sup> Britain’s telegraph companies were nationalized and placed under the Post Office’s auspices in 1870, while in 1885 cheap six-penny telegraphs were first introduced (*The British Postal Museum and Archive*).

## Works Cited

- Altman, Janet. *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form*. Ohio State University Press, 1982. *Swem Online Collection*.
- Armstrong, Nancy. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.
- Beer, Gillian. *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth Century Fiction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Boumelha, Penny. Introduction. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. By Thomas Hardy. 1891. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Breuer, Joseph and Sigmund Freud. *Studies in Hysteria*. Trans. A. A. Brill. New York: Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1936.
- The British Postal Museum and Archive*. Web. 7 April, 2013.
- Brooks, Peter. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984.
- Burney, Frances. *Evelina, or, a Young Lady's Entrance into the World*. 1778. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000.
- Cogman, P. W. M. "Maupassant's Inhibited Narrators." *Neophilologus* 81.1 (Jan. 1997): p35-47.
- Cook, Elizabeth Heckendorn. *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987.

- Felman, Shoshana. "Turning the Screw of Interpretation." *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*. Ed. Shoshana Felman. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982.
- Flint, Kate. *The Woman Reader: 1837-1914*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Freeman, Janet. "Ways of Looking at Tess." *Studies in Philology* 79.3 (Summer 1982): p311-323.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ('Dora')." *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W. W. Norton, 1989. *Google Books*.
- Gordon, Scott Paul. "Disinterested Selves: *Clarissa* and the Tactics of Sentiment." *ELH* 64.2 (Summer 1997): p473-502.
- Hardy, Thomas. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1891.
- Heilman, Robert B. "The Freudian Reading of The Turn of the Screw." *Modern Language Notes* 62.7 (Nov. 1947): p433-45. Web.
- Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007.
- James, Henry. *Partial Portraits*. London: Macmillan, 1899.
- . *The Turn of the Screw*. 1898. New York: W. W. Norton, 1999.
- Kappeler, Sima. "The Return of the Stranger: Maupassant's *Une Vie*." *Dalhousie French Studies* 30 (Spring 1995): p93-106.
- Kauffman, Linda. *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986.
- Laclos, Choderlos de. *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. 1782. Gallimard, 1972.

- Law, Jules. "A Passing Corporeal Blight': Political Bodies in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." *Victorian Studies: A Journal of the Humanities, Arts and Sciences* 40.2 (Winter 1997): p245-70.
- Maupassant, Guy de. *Une Vie*. 1883. Gallimard, 1974.
- . *A Life*. Trans. Roger Pearson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.
- Newman, Beth. "Getting Fixed: Feminine Identity and Scopic Crisis in *The Turn of the Screw*." *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 26.1 (Fall 1992): p43-63.
- Perry, Ruth. *Women, Letters, and the Novel*. New York: AMS Press, 1980.
- Petry, Alice Hall. "Jamesian Parody, Jane Eyre, and *The Turn of the Screw*." *Modern Language Studies* 13.4 (Fall 1983): p61-78.
- "Postal Services." *Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era*. Vol. 3. Danbury: Grolier Academic Reference, 2004.
- Schor, Naomi. *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. R. G. Cox. London: Routledge, 1979.
- Thompson, Charlotte. "Language and the Shape of Reality in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." *ELH* 50.4 (Winter 1983): p729-62.
- Watt, Ian. "From *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*." *Theory of the Novel: A Historical Approach*. Ed. Michael McKeon. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000.
- Williams, Jeff. "Narrative Games: The Frame of *The Turn of the Screw*." *Journal of Narrative Technique* 28.1 (Winter 1998): p43-55. Web.

## Works Consulted

- Alliston, April. *Virtue's Faults: Correspondences in Eighteenth-Century British and French Women's Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996.
- Canu, Jean. "Flaubert et la phrase finale d'*Une Vie*." *Modern Language Notes* 47.1 (Jan. 1932): p26-28.
- Claridge, Laura. "Tess: A Less Than Pure Woman Ambivalently Presented." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 28.3 (Fall 1986): p324-338.
- Diderot, Denis. *La Religieuse*. 1796. Gallimard, 1972.
- Ellis, Reuben. "Joan Durbeyfield Writes to Margaret Saville: An Intermediary Reader in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." *Colby Library Quarterly* 24.1 (Mar. 1988): p14-26.
- Freud, Sigmund. *On Dreams*. New York: Rebman. *Internet Archive: Open Library*.  
---. *The "Uncanny"*. 1919. Trans. Alix Strachey. <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.
- Gregorio, Laurence A. *Maupassant's Fiction and the Darwinian View of Life*. New York: Peter Lang, 2005.
- Halttunen, Karen. "Through the cracked and fragmented self: William James and The Turn of the Screw." *American Quarterly* 40.4 (Dec. 1988): p472-490.
- Kauffman, Linda. *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- MacArthur, Elizabeth J. *Extravagant Narratives: Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
- Martin, Shirley A. "'He Knew Psychoanalysis': Thomas Hardy and the Paradox of Degeneracy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*." *PsyArt: A Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts* (2005).

- Miller, J. Hillis. *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Place-Verghnes, Floriane. "Tabou or not tabou, dire ou ne pas dire: Maupassant et l'autocensure." *Neophilologus* 88.3 (July 2004): p367-84.
- Schrero, Elliot M. "Exposure in *The Turn of the Screw*." *Modern Philology: A Journal Devoted to Research in Medieval and Modern Literature* 78.3 (Feb. 1981): p261-74.
- Shumaker, Jeanette. "Breaking with the Conventions: Victorian Confession Novels and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*." *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 37.4 (1994): p445-62.
- Spacks, Patricia Meyer. *Privacy: Concealing the Eighteenth-Century Self*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003.
- Versini, Laurent. *Le roman épistolaire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1979.
- Wills, David. "Post/Card/Match/Book/Envois/Derrida." *SubStance: A Review of Theory and Literary Criticism* 13.2 [43] (1984): p19-38.