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Post Scripts — the writer's workshop

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Reading in Bed

«How do you read?» a psychoanalyst once asked me, after a talk I gave on Rilke's correspondence. The question showed methodological concern, but was well meant, conspiratorial, and was intended to make me admit what my reading method owed to psychoanalysis. Without thinking, I short-circuited the theoretical debate my companion wanted by answering that I always read «lying down.» He seemed, like me, rather surprised by the answer but also satisfied, more satisfied probably than if I had launched into a technical explanation. I was dealing with a real psychoanalyst, I thought. In fact through what was, when it comes down to it, a misunderstanding, everything had somehow already been said. First because the conversation was the result of a misunderstanding and psychoanalysis depends fundamentally on the existence of misunderstandings – which are just as important as understandings. And, second, because answering «lying down» to a psychoanalyst whose question was basically theoretical would remind him of his patients who, lying on his couch, are not in the least concerned with methodology. It would suggest that reading a text from an analytical point

of view requires the reader to occupy not only the position of the analyst – from whom he borrows a certain assumed knowledge – but also the position of the patient being analyzed, of the one who is there to express himself in words. Valéry once said that the poem listens to its reader. We could say more generally that reading a text in an analytical way, observing its gaps and repetitions, makes us its «analyst» but also puts us in a position to be analyzed or «spoken» by the text – and for this second possibility to occur, I think, we have to read lying down.

In order to create misunderstanding, you need a kind of reading that is both concentrated and distracted. You must learn to avoid libraries, where you can't lie down; you must give your body the chance to forget itself, which it doesn't have on a chair or at a desk. When you read sitting, the text is opposite, drawing you into a dialogue. But to understand or imagine the unspoken subtext of a text, you need to avoid a face-to-face confrontation. You have to dodge its direct appeals and distance yourself, so as not to answer only what it wants you to answer. You need a capacity not for sympathy and dialogue, but for impassivity and absence. You must always read from the position of a third party, a dead third party perhaps – the position that Lacan assigns to the analyst.⁽¹⁾ It is easiest to do this lying down because, prostrate, you can forget yourself and disappear. (Lying down is the most popular position for disappearing, if not permanently, then at least into sleep, and there are few experiences more deeply satisfying than falling asleep while reading.) That is about all I can say about the analytical dimension of my reading «method,» which is more a constraint than a theoretical choice. I sometimes think that it is simply a result of my inability to read when I am not lying down. Maybe this inability has limited my literary interests, or prevented me from becoming the literary historian I always dreamed of being.

Even more seriously, maybe my taste for the prone position actually inspired me to write this book, which is dedicated to the letters of a number of writers (Kafka, Flaubert, Proust, Rilke, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Artaud, Valéry, and Gide, in order of appearance). If it is conceivable for the specialist of a particular writer to read his or her entire correspondence sitting up – as a primary biographical document, say – it is virtually impossible to read the complete correspondence of several writers without lying down. There is, first of all, the boredom that this

genre can provoke. How can you get through Baudelaire's interminable requests for money, Proust's no less interminable health bulletins, or Rilke's domestic worries, except by preparing yourself for the sleep to come and by offering it the least resistance in order to concentrate all the more when you wake up?

Then there is the fact that these letters constitute, more than most truly literary texts, an analytical space. (Some writers, like Proust, compose their letters in bed, while others, like Kafka, write them at night instead of sleeping or dreaming.) A psychoanalytical treatment and an epistolary exchange have several elements in common – the most significant being between the person to whom one writes, often over a period of years, and the analyst to whom one speaks, also over a period of several years. Both figures have an ambiguous or equivocal status. They are there without being there. The first cannot respond immediately and the second stops herself from doing so. They exist within a «depragmatized» discourse, floating between reality and fiction (or fantasy). Like the analyst, the correspondent exists as a listener. But inasmuch as she maintains a necessary silence, the speech ostensibly addressed to her drifts into the essential irresponsibility that is also necessary for desire to surface. By moving into the shadowy, your correspondent gives free reign to your imagination, to narcissism, to the mirror effect; she teaches you to enjoy the sound of your own voice. By remaining there, though, she also leads you to a point where the imagination exhausts itself, working in a void, it loses solidity, becomes removed from itself, as if watching an image of itself. Behind the requests entrusted to the mailman, in the spaces between the lines, lies something akin to truth, and to desire.

There is nothing more tedious in a writer's work than his correspondence: your arms give way under the weight of its repetitious pages and it must be propped up, against the pillows. But it is precisely in these repetitions, where something refuses to be properly expressed to someone else, where it resists the passage into words, that the act of writing letters constitutes a form of analysis; and this is also why so many writers have been seduced by letters. They are of course not the only ones to write letters, but one can't help noticing that a surprisingly large number of them have devoted themselves wholly to letters, almost as others give themselves over to drugs. The letters I will examine here reveal several writers who are unquestionably fascinated by the silence or secrecy of their

communications, by the methods they discover to distance the other to whom they speak or write. Their letters are secondary to this fascination and, as such, are an entry into wild psychoanalysis.

Usually we see letters as a means of drawing closer to the other, of communicating. But perhaps what we experience is really only a division or estrangement – a distancing that allows us also to stand back from ourselves, to witness our own disappearance. There is something fundamentally ambiguous in the epistolary impulse, and its development leads to the very frontiers of poetry. Although letters seem to facilitate communication and proximity, they produce instead a distance in which writers find the chance to become writers. If the letter writer wanted to communicate, he would not write at all. This ideal possibility not to communicate is, in my opinion, the reason why so many writers undertake voluminous and relentless correspondence, untiringly calling on others only to dismiss them again.

Letters give the writer a chance to avoid dialogue. Such is the hypothesis of this book, where I discuss a number of writers' correspondences as so many workshops where noncommunication is constructed and carefully maintained. In other words, I have not written a history of epistolary writing, or a poetics of letters, or a study of a genre that clearly extends far beyond the literary sphere. If I absolutely had to answer not «How do you read?» but «Why do you read that way?» I

would describe this work as my theoretical, and analytical, contribution to the long debate over the reception of the literary text.

To the ideal or implicit readers assumed by the aesthetics of reception,⁽²⁾ and to the readers with whom, whether in accordance with Bakhtin or not, one maintains a dialogic relationship, I propose to add another kind of reader: not a partner in dialogue, and even less a partner in a trivia game (all too often the only game that specialists in this field know how to play), but a desired reader who is fundamentally absent. One of the primary interests of the correspondence I discuss here is the writer's desire to make the other disappear – to the point of being willing to disappear himself. From the Lacanian perspective, one could say that what characterizes the literary text is the ability to address, above and beyond the imaginary other (who is always similar to oneself), an Other who is

the cause or source of desire. It is the ability to address (according to the formula I will elaborate in relation to Kafka) no one, but no one in particular.

In short, I want to play the epistolary against the dialogic and the hermeneutic. It may not seem a particularly timely debate, but I am not convinced that it isn't – especially in an academic context that places so much importance on fixed cultural identities and seems generally uninterested in the disappearance of the reader or the writer. Evidence, impassivity and irresponsibility are not highly valued these days.

A Return to the Biographical

Perhaps I need to specify that neither the irresponsibility nor the impassivity I substitute for critical reasoning represents in any way a «textual» bias. I am not particularly comfortable with «the work speaks for itself» or «the death of the author,» credos for which Blanchot, Barthes, and Foucault have fought so hard with all the piety and evangelism required in these matters. Instead of bowing to the thanatographic myths that continue to form the ultimate legitimacy of literary discourse, the analysis I plan in this book will be a reactualization of the biographical question – more precisely, I will attempt to show that the thanatographic is simply a variant or flipside of the biographical. Like many of my contemporaries, in the past I learned scrupulously to ignore the lives of the writers I was interested in. The death of the author, that literary spoilsport, had just been decreed: his presence was not only superfluous but even an impediment to readings that aspired to any kind of rigor. There was a cold war between the life and the work; the borders were closed and those willing to cross them were rare.

Imagine my confusion when I found, in Kafka, Flaubert, Artaud, and others, the marked personality of the letter writer. I couldn't help becoming attached to it, but without ever being sure whether I was dealing with a living being or a «writing» being. Did the letter writer's often frenzied activity bite into the time he was given to live or into the time he owed to literature? Was it legitimate to be interested in writers' letters, fragments of life overwritten for some or texts

not textual enough for others? From whichever side of the border one approached him, the letter writer seemed like an infectious renegade and threatened to transform those who took an interest in his situation into double agents. Luckily, *détente* took its course, the cold war is over (at least in the domain of literary studies, this one is over), and the renegades are tolerated now. It is lucky for the letter writer because I am still not sure which side of the border he comes from – and am no worse off not knowing it. In fact, he always seems to be coming from the other side or from the border itself. His milieu of choice is a minefield, a no-man's-land hidden between text and life: an elusive zone leading from what he is to what he writes, where life becomes a work and the work becomes a life. The epistolary allows for the theory that, no matter how far back we look, the writer's life has already been textualized, a life lived in letters, and that the work is never more than a kind of schematization, a shape given to the life. It makes us reassess the literary phenomenon as a systematization of biography, given of course that we acknowledge the necessarily graphic or written dimension of biography.

Such is, in any case, the intuition I will try to prove correct here. Letters are a passage between the lived and the written, independent of their potential aesthetic value. They position and keep the writer's life within the literary sphere. The letter writer is thus the infamous missing link between the person and the work, the yeti of literature. Such a claim may seem peremptory or, at best, naive, and I am certainly not the first to try to describe the link. In every critic there is doubtless a geneticist, an abominable-snowman hunter, struggling to get out. And no one is particularly convinced by the abominable-snowman theory: he may never have existed outside the human imagination. But this is exactly why I place the letter writer in that category. The abominable correspondent whose tracks I plan to follow has little more basis in science than his Tibetan counterpart. He has descended from a lineage whose imaginary quality I accept – I would rather run the risk of seeing him melt into the landscape from time to time than see him transformed into a common primate through all those academic attempts to explain his existence.

«The yeti of literature»: this is also a way of saying that, as the missing link between life and art, the letter writer is entrenched in myth and, more specifically, in the myth of a separate – sacred – »literary space« espoused by

Blanchot.(3) He comes from this myth or, more precisely, comes back from this myth, which also indicates, I hope, that he leaves it behind him. Maurice Blanchot was, to my knowledge, the first to note that *A La recherche du temps perdu* was the result of Proust's epistolary apprenticeship. But it was a theory he did not linger over or try to document; not, of course, because he was unable to but because the myth, or his myth, of writing wanted it that way. To give full credibility to the idea of an «essential solitude,» or a radically separate literary space that has nothing to do with the «unrefined word» Mallarmé talks about,(4) one must both assume an entry into writing and avoid discussing the specifics or the singularity of this entry – it will always be the point at which writing becomes sacred, an invisible and indescribable meeting place between the profanity of «unrefined words» and the sanctity of «essential words.» This is why presenting the figure (or multiple figures) of the letter writer, on a stage that is the frontier of literature, de-sanctifies the literary space, without destroying its specificity. After all, it must be possible to turn that space into something other than the myth by which certain contemporary critics identify writing itself. Myth by definition resists singularity, or subjectivity, and does so even more if it is the myth of a form of writing that is radically withdrawn and unrepresentable. It is hardly compatible with the multiplication of figures and representations that make up the epistolary world, at the junction of life and work.

Having, perhaps, evolved from a sentence of Blanchot's, my book has no ambition other than to leave its origins behind. The «disappearance of the artist» in Mallarmé, Flaubert, or Proust, which is undeniably at work in their correspondence, is no longer quite the same when, instead of simply declaring it, one follows its traces in the writer's life through his letters. The death of a writer becomes something other than a perfectly rhetorical (and evangelical) justification of the literary discourse when it is embodied in his life: the thanatographic must be read and understood, not in philosophical terms but in biographical terms. After all, not everyone can experience the author's death. It must be paid for with your self and even, as the correspondence discussed here shows so clearly, with the other. It requires not only a taste or a gift for self-sacrifice, but also a capacity for becoming inhuman, sometimes even cruel or monstrous, as the real abominable snowman would likely be. And letters are unquestionably the perfect place to watch the «inhumanization» that so often characterizes the writer – who does not necessarily have better intentions than

the nonwriting segment of humanity. The writer is neither a philosophical abstraction nor a saint, and what he does is far from sacred. This should not in any way diminish the interest or admiration we can feel for him or his works; nor should it lead us to judge him. On the contrary, it makes him all the more exciting and, in any case, more real.

Madame de Sévigné's Proustian Side

Although it has become paradoxical in my mind, the reference to Blanchot will probably still seem a sign of attachment to the so-called modernist period of European literary history. «My» authors overlap with Blanchot's and have often been at the center of the most striking propositions and theoretical debates of the last quarter century. You might expect this choice of subject matter to limit the scope of my discussion of the epistolary genre, which would have meaning only within the framework of modernism. Then you would only have to return to romanticism, or better to classicism and the traditional golden age of letters that was the eighteenth century, in order to challenge my theory, to show that nothing was as it became later. I would like to respond to this hypothetical restriction by worsening my own case. Even in the modernist period of literature, there is no shortage of exceptions and counter-examples to indicate other uses and functions of writers' letters, beyond the role of missing link suggested above. I will not even mention the letters I have not read, whether for lack of time or interest or simply because they are inaccessible or unpublished. But think of the letters from Africa of a writer as undeniably modernist as Rimbaud. It is difficult to think of those letters as a literary workshop, since they come after the work. Or take the correspondence between Francis Ponge and Jean Paulhan, which suggests a completely different kind of writing workshop, rooted more in friendship, complicity, and cooperation than in a desire for distance.⁽⁵⁾ Or, in a slightly less modernist register, think of Sartre's letters to Simone de Beauvoir, in which one can see something more like a bashful or secret stage of Sartrian autobiography than an experimentation with absence and desire.⁽⁶⁾

And I will risk worsening my case a second time. Even among the writers I have chosen to discuss here, there are counter-examples, notably Valéry and Rilke,

who also refused to admit that one always writes blindly to a blind man, without an identifiable correspondent, and who became involved in letter writing precisely for this reason. Inversely, and this time in my defense, I will say that I am not convinced that cases like those of Rimbaud or Ponge are so different from the ones I discuss. After all, living in Africa is a distancing experience for Rimbaud, and it is easy to find the traces of transference – hence desire – in Ponge's relationship to Paulhan considering that Ponge was the first to point them out.(7)

This leads me to propose two hypotheses. First, the modernist epoch – at least as I know it – is made up of exceptions, counter-examples, and singularities. In fact, it seems so heterogeneous that I wonder whether modernism could exist as anything other than a period of singularization – and the world of difference that exists between Flaubert and Rilke or Artaud will not convince me otherwise. Second, what characterizes a writer's correspondence (and what makes it literature) is that it is always brought about by his existence as a writer, even after the fact, as in Rimbaud's case. Of course not all writers write writers' letters and, inversely, writers are not the only ones to write writers' letters. Fundamentally, though, a writer's correspondence exists only where it can form a link between life and work. It is up to each reader, beginning with the examples given here, to discover this link: each writer's correspondence is played out in a specific montage with a specific work. Above and beyond the considerations of time, knowledge, and space, my choice of writers reflects only my own preference, which tends toward writers whose work turns on the paradoxical destination of speech when it passes into writing, and toward those who are the most sensitive to the possibilities for a rupture of discourse in writing. What Baudelaire, Flaubert, Mallarmé, Proust, Rilke, and Kafka share is not a cultural or historical context, but a taste for distance and perversion.

I am even less convinced of the existence of modernism – or at least of the modernist character of the epistolary theory developed here – since it is possible to find many of the same traits in writers of other eras. The modern era is certainly not the first to experiment with desire as a poetic force and it has no monopoly on perversion. Proust was the first to see that there was something of Dostoevsky in Madame de Sévigné's letters. Today we see more of a Proustian (mother-and-son) quality in them; the historical context of the emergence of

private writing aside, we are struck most by the possessive character of the mother-daughter relationship. Madame de Grignan pays a high price for her mother's entry into the ranks of writers, and Madame de Sévigné is also aware of her letters' shortcomings: «I am killing you with the length of my letters.»(8) Her letters are overwhelming, deadly, and the daughter survives her by only nine years. Like the letters that pass between Proust and his mother, they force the untiring discussion of a tyrannical passion onto the other. They are born of desire, of a speech Madame de Sévigné qualified as vain three centuries before Blanchot: «This exchange is thus what's known as vain words, which have no other goal than to make you, my darling, see that my feelings for you would be perfectly happy if God didn't allow them to be mixed with the unhappiness of not having you anymore, and to persuade you also that all that comes to me from you or by you goes straight to my heart.»(9) If Madame de Sévigné is a classic, she owes it perhaps less to her rhetorical talents than to her ability to make rhetoric useless, to build it, in Lacan's formula, with a speech full of the lack of desire. Her correspondence is, accordingly, not all that different from that of the modernists.

Nor is there a reason to stop at the Proustian qualities of Madame de Sévigné. Without even raising the difficult question of authenticity, we could also discuss the Kafkaesque (or Flaubert-like, given the latter's desire to become a hermit or saint) side to the letters of Abelard and Heloise; cast Fulbert as a slightly more offensive (given the era) version of Felice Bauer's father, and look at Abelard's castration as a variation on Kafka's tuberculosis. Heloise and Abelard's story is, like Kafka's, an evasion of marriage: distance is maintained, sexuality is impossible (as the castrator Fulbert understands so well), and desire is epistolary. Rousseau, of course, knew this and made their story into an epistolary novel. In Rousseau's writing in general, though, the Kafkaesque quality seems less interesting to me than the resemblance to Artaud's letters – Rousseau is Artaud's ancestor in paranoia. I am thinking specifically of the claim, explicit at the beginning of the *Confessions*, of absolute singularity and authenticity, which is also at the heart of Artaud's famous letters to Jacques Riviere, director of the *Nouvelle revue française*. Also, Artaud enters literature through his correspondence with Riviere, just as the *Confessions* has an epistolary prehistory. (It is generally acknowledged that the *Confessions* is based

on Rousseau's letters to Malesherbes, whose censoring function is not unlike Rivière's relationship to Artaud.)

From Rousseau to Artaud, the conditions for the emergence and destination of writing change far less than is often believed. Some say that Rousseau was the first modernist – which perhaps extends the category too far; I'm not sure that things were so very different for Montaigne, for example, who wrote his *Essays* for the late Raimond Sebond, his old friend and conversant⁽¹⁰⁾ and whose melancholy pose is not unlike that of Flaubert, permanently in mourning for his sister Caroline, or Proust, whose *Recherche du temps perdu* has been called a long postscript – containing all the things he was unable to tell his mother when she was alive. Critics have also noted Pascal's debt to the epistolary mode, particularly his technique of fragmenting the speaking locations, which comes into his work here and there as an experiment with distance.⁽¹¹⁾ Thanks to letters, Blaise Pascal becomes Roland Barthes; he makes himself protean, atypical, even polyphonic. The epistolary genre carries him too into the modernist period. Closer to our own time, there are numerous romantic correspondences that seem to be workshops for fiction. Alfred de Musset in his letters presents himself literally as his own hero, Perdican, who has just broken things off with Camille (more likely, George Sand). And Balzac's letters, full of plot and complicated romantic intrigue, form the antechamber for *La comédie humaine*, a human comedy that predates the literary version.

I am not trying to deny that all the instances mentioned come from different eras, cultures, and historical contexts, requiring as many specific descriptions and much decoding. But too much history or culture can also, as Lacan says of the imaginary, block the truly literary dynamic of a writer's correspondence. Behind the instituted discursive practices, analyzable in historical terms, there are Madame de Sévigné's vain words, in almost infinite number. Behind the rhetorical smokescreen, there are the machinations, plots, and inventions of desire, which knows so well how to feed on the misrepresentations and obstacles that it imposes on itself or are imposed by others. From Abelard through Sade to Artaud, the epistolary genre follows the same routes to literature. And it is preferably read lying down.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, «La direction de La cure», *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), p. 589.

2. I am thinking specifically of the works of the Ecole de Constance, most notably those of H.-R. Jauss and W. Iser.

3. See Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), and *Le livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

4. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions, 1982), p. 75.

5. Jean Paulhan and Francis Ponge, *Correspondance, 1923–1968*; vol. 1, 1923–1946 (Paris: Gallimard, 1986).

6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Lettres au Castor et à quelques autres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983).

7. See Ponge's introduction to *Poèmes in Tome premier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), p. 109.

8. Madame de Sévigné, *Lettres* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1976), p. 68.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

10. See Jean Starobinski, *Montaigne en mouvement* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 52–53.

11. Christian Meurillon, «La lettre au coeur de l'écriture pascalienne,» *Revue des sciences humaines*, 195 (1984).