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Materiality and the Literary Letter

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Materiality and the Literary Letter

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Introduction

In a letter to Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thomas Carlyle writes, "as the Atlantic is so broad and deep…ought we not rather to esteem it a beneficent miracle that messages can arrive at all; that a little slip of paper will skim over these weltering floods?" (Carlyle in Decker 45). This "little slip of paper" that carries the weight of his words and forges the relationship between the two writers suggests the paradox of epistolary correspondence: the skimpy materiality of the letters themselves and the powerful ability for them to span the great distance between two correspondents. The ability for letters to bring correspondents physically separated imaginatively, mentally closer together through a sheet of paper and ink confers on the very medium through which they communicate heightened significance. Carlyle rejoices at the possibility for his letter to reach his friend despite the great physical distance between them since it allows them a sense of intimacy across oceans. His question also exposes the apprehension of relying on letters to secure this intimacy, calling it "a beneficent miracle" that the letter may reach its intended destination. The intimate space created in an epistolary correspondence is threatened by

the possibility of the letter being burned, waylaid, destroyed, gone astray, or in some other manner mishandled once leaving the caring hands of its writer.

Literature often exploits this apprehension of the reliance of intimacy on the materiality of letters. When we read, however, we rarely pay attention to the letters embedded within the narrative frame, instead skimming over them and accepting their materiality in our haste to understand the fiction as a whole. If we stop and pause on the literary letter we may consider how and why we so readily accept its materiality within this fictional world. The literary letter designates a new space within a fictional narrative, signaling a shift within the space the narrative had previously occupied. As we enter into a fiction, we already accept that we are entering a space separate from our own, an invented, imaginary space conditioned by the specific characteristics of a given narrative. As we enter into this space, we encounter and come up against the others created within the world of the narrative (the home, the social and domestic space, etc.). The literary letter, if we as readers can recognize and navigate this heterogeneous spatial construction of literature, ropes off yet another space for us to consider and ponder as part of the overall structure of the fiction.

When we read, we do not recognize the narrative as creating one, homogeneous space but rather as populated with multiple spaces. Narrative space can be as diverse, then, as Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological space of the home or as the ideological, social fragmented domestic space created by slavery that Phillip Fisher observes in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The history of creating layered, multiple spaces within a work is even playfully and self-consciously noted by John Donne's "The Canonization," when its narrator claims,

We can die by it, if not live by love,

And if unfit for tomb or hearse

Our legend be, it will be fit for verse;

And if no piece of chronicle we prove,

We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms (Donne 29-32).

"We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms" puns on the Italian "stanza" meaning "room" to represent the intimate, microcosmic space of lovers, a poetic space confined to a sheet of paper. Thus, literature, we see from the above examples, creates and maintains different spaces, intellectually and conceptually created, all generated from various ideas of the materiality of a conceptual space.

The fictional letter, similarly creating this abstract material space of its own, does so in some sense by adding another character or voice to the narrative; it destabilizes and interrupts the homogeneity of the fiction, that type of sameness that Barthes attempts to designate when he speaks of the solidarity of the "readerly text, that it "sticks" and creates a "homeopathic rhythm" that naturalizes the text (Barthes 23). Although never read as a (metaphorical) flesh-and-blood character, the letter brings complexity and diversity to the narrative as a (metaphorical) physical object capable of surrounding itself with a space of its own. Unlike an inserted picture or ticket stub, similarly inanimate objects disrupting the flow of the narration, or another physical object (such as a chair, table, tree) rendered material in literature, within the intimate space granted in the narrative a letter gains a specific voice of its own that it projects as separate from that of the narrator, thus complicating the spatial construction of the narrative. For example, Rabih Alameddine's protagonist in *I, the Divine* inserts her sister's letters into her first

person narrative, permitting them to be physically separated by font from the rest of the novel. Additionally, Sarah, the protagonist, offers an explanation for their separation when she says, "It is quite possible that I am not the best person to describe my sister [Lamia] or to speak for her. I am biased and cannot write objectively about her. I will let her speak for herself" (Alameddine 149). Here we find fiction generally affording fictional letters their own space and consciousness, the ability for the letter to add, both physically on the page and metaphorically, a separate entity to the narrative.

The significance of the literary letter as creating what Anne Bower imaginatively views as "rectangles [within a narrative] capturing one writer's reactions" lies in our conceptualized notions of epistolary correspondence and the materiality of letters that allow us to recognize the situations in which they are involved (Bower 2). As we read, we often imaginatively render the literary letters "real," suspending our disbelief as we accept them in the imaginary world the narrative builds. The specific material conditions of letters that constitute the focus of this thesis include the conceptualized boundaries of privacy surrounding epistolary correspondence and the metonymic and metaphoric relationship between letters and the bodies that exchange them. Narrowing my focus on these two aspects of the material letter in fiction, I attempt to explore how it is that within fiction we imaginatively construct and accept literary letters as separate, material entities within a narrative.

In answering this question I rely on a diverse range of literature in an attempt to discover a certain harmony in the material rendering of the literary letter across time and genre. I recognize that I must ignore the multiplicity of differences separating these works and many of the factors that differentiate them in my attempt to draw parallels

between them. Shakespeare's plays hold interest in the literary letter because they offer us a glimpse of the early modern English epistolary practices theatrically rendered on stage. Alan Stewart in *Shakespeare's Letters* observes that Shakespeare builds his moments of epistolarity upon "time-honoured letter motifs [in theatrical norms] and turn[s] them into something that is at once much more complex and emotionally compelling" by focusing "on the letter as a material object" (Stewart 21). Letters on stage require an audience's conceptual understanding of their function as they carry an added weight of insinuating social engagements in the abrupt shifting of scenes and the physical object on stage signals to the audience cultural cues that allow them to understand its significance.

Shifting from the early modern period, the thesis turns to Laclos's French eighteenth-century epistolary novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782), chosen from among the many others emerging during this era—Richardson's *Pamela*, Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Heloise*, Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werthe*—because of its almost excessive use of the parodied, copied, reappropriated, hidden, or stolen letter. In *Epistolarity: Approaches to Form* Janet Altman remarks that "no one interested in interpreting *Les Liaisons dangereuses* can fail to examine the central role of the letter in creating meaning" (Altman 7). Indeed, the letters do not merely function as a narrative device, but the heightened treatment of the material conditions in which they operate dominates the novel. Letter correspondence also offers here the intimate, private space necessary for the malicious plots, improper romantic relationships, and seductive manipulation central to the novel, which are dramatically exposed with the circulation of the letters to the greater public. The very presence of letters in improper places in the

novel further signals subversive or improper acts, creating a tension between the medium's ability to form an intimate and private connection between correspondents and to expose their vulnerability to public shame if the letters are revealed.

Henry James's American nineteenth-century novella *The Aspern Papers* (1888) offers a moral commentary on the pursuit of letters of the deceased and the relationship between public and private, with letters being the central objects troubling this distinction. The silent, unexposed letters also hover at the edge of the narrative as tangible documents always just beyond the reach of the narrator's grasping hands and frustrating both the fictional editor and ourselves as we are restricted from breaching the privacy wrapped around the correspondence. A.S. Byatt similarly treats her characters' letters as objects of pursuit in her post-modern romance *Possession* (1990). As hinted in her title, the novel offers an investigation into the concepts of possession and materialism central to the twentieth century and posits letters as objects to be possessed and pursued.

Rabih Alameddine's Arab-American novel *I, the Divine* and Carme Riera's Catalan short story "A Matter of Self-Esteem" (both published in 2001) provide contemporary examples of the intimate relationships established between female correspondents. In Alameddine's fragmented narrative told intentionally as a series of first chapters, letters occupy a space of their own, creating yet another literary technique through which the protagonist attempts to tell her story as Alameddine explores the fragmented nature of a family living in diaspora. "A Matter of Self-Esteem" is a short story composed of a single letter similar to those individual ones fully inscribed in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* or *Possession* but here without the benefit of a third-person narrator or fictional editor to mediate the letter's exposure to its reader(s). The single letter

remains unanswered within the scope of the narration, leaving us without resolution; the open-ended closure of the short story mimics epistolary correspondence's own uncertainty that after each letter another will come.

In the spirit of diversity I also touch briefly on Charles Dickens' nineteenth-century novel *David Copperfield* (1850) for the novel's realist depiction of everyday life and the power of a secretive legal letter. The Greek play *Hippolytus* surfaces momentarily in the second chapter, offering a letter similar to *The Aspern Papers* in its silence and to Shakespeare in its staging as a physical letter. Finally, Kate Chopin's general focus on female sexuality becomes dramatically realized through letters in her nineteenth-century short story "Her Letters" (1895), a beautiful rendering of unrequited love. The diversity of the texts chosen for this thesis allows a glimpse of the ways in which literature exploits the dramatic potential of literary letters as material objects afforded heightened significance through the privacy in which they are surrounded and the desired presence of the other materialized on paper.

In Chapter One I set the theoretical groundwork for the following chapters, tracing the historical definitions of material in its most fundamental and abstract meanings within and without literature in an attempt to discover how it is that we may accept the materiality of the literary letter. In Chapter Two I examine how the conceptual boundaries erected around letters create a private and intimate space often troubled by the instability of the letter as a physical medium through which messages are conveyed toward the purpose of dramatic moments in a narration. In Chapter Three I investigate the relationship between bodies and letters, exploring how the desire for the physical presence of a correspondent causes them in many cases to warp the reality of the letter

itself. These specific categories of the materialized letter in literature contain within them complicated and multifaceted theories of public and private, of writing and the body, and of the letter as a culturally and socially conceived object imaginatively rendered material in literature.

Chapter One

Theorizing on Materiality

> The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas, but real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.
>
> Karl Marx, *German Ideology* (1845).

> The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, *their social being that determines their consciousness.*
>
> Karl Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

How we allow ourselves to image literary letters as "concrete" objects and their vocalized spaces results from the preconceptions we bring to letters and letter writing. James Daybell in *The Material Letter in Early Modern England* defines the letter as "an object that generated—and, in the case of extant letters, continues to generate—meanings through complex, variable and interrelated material signs" (Newman). He posits that "studying the codes and social signs inscribed within things …becomes the metaphorical key to unlocking the essence of the whole" and that "material signs" relate "not only to the significance of physical forms, but also to the social materiality (or 'sociology') of texts" (Daybell 34, Newman). Letters in literature similarly appropriate the generation of meanings through material indicators, although their materiality is complicated by their

fictionality. The situations under which letters in literature are placed often reflect conceptual and social norms concerning epistolary correspondence. Not only do literary descriptions and references to the physical paper and the words inscribed therein in moments of "epistolarity" signal to us an object familiar to our own lives—a papery medium by which we communicate with others—but the social meanings woven around letters also spark our recognition and allow us to conceptualize them as "real" within fiction. Rendering letters material in literature requires a suspension of disbelief as we imagine the materiality of the physical.

This chapter explores the multiple ways terms of physicality and social and cultural conceptions have defined the idea of materiality. I begin with a history of the term "material" as used by German philosophers seeking to relate the physical world to spiritual and artistic inspiration. I then turn to Marx's dialectic materialism for a more abstract notion of material grounded in the real, social human experience before touching briefly on Heidegger for a definition of material in ultimate abstraction—the material as immaterial. These discussions of materialism then lead to literary theorists in the twentieth century discussing the materiality of language itself and the various ways in which a word, phrase, or literary text gestures at the object it references. Their social and conceptual notions of language as a material object mirror the similar exploration in my own study of the literary letter as a social and conceptually rendered object. Finally, the chapter examines Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, King Lear,* and *Othello*, asking how, based on these notions of materiality and literature, we suspend our disbelief to permit the imaginary letter to become material through an awareness of the physical properties and the conceptual notions surrounding letters.

The terms "material" and "materiality" have long been central in critical discussions of philosophy, linguistics, and literary theory. Material is defined both as "things that are material," and as "that which constitutes the substance of a thing (physical or non-physical) [which can be worked up or elaborated]" (Hong). Immanuel Kant believed the material world to be "unknowable" and our understanding of what is material to rely on our "representation of [it], which determines consciousness" (Kant in de Man [1996] 77). Kant viewed material as gaining significance through an object's "surface value" or form; the meanings associated with its appearances rather than its unknowable physical content (Hong). "Form" here refers to the visual characteristics, whereas "content" connotes the physical matter of an object. Hegel, following Kant, grounded the term "material" in an object's physicality in his pursuit of understanding the "mind or spirit…abstract or ideal" (Hong). Whereas Kant viewed the material world as unattainable and only recognizable through its form, Hegel argues that the material (physical) world exists without meaning to our spiritual and artistic inspiration. He separates the spirituality of art and material, arguing that "no content, no form, is any longer immediately identical with the inwardness, the nature, the unconscious substantial essence of the artist; any material may be indifferent to him if only it does not contradict the formal law of being simply beautiful and capable of artistic treatment" (Hegel 605-6). Materiality of an object is "secondary to the truths which they bear and which, on this argument, transcend them" (605-6). Hegel's separation of spirit and material grounds the latter as an earthly, physical entity existing outside of human experience.

Under Marxism, "material" came to describe a more abstract meaning; it embraced "extended meanings charged not just with an element of a physical object but

also with an irreducible component of what shapes the phenomenal world" (Hong). The notion of a constantly moving material world central to Marxist thought relies on a broader conception of the term "material" that attempts to explain the physical forces behind social action. Marx gives an example when he describes the "ideal" concept of beauty of found in ancient Greek sculpture:

> Greek art presupposes Greek mythology, i.e. nature and the social forms already reworked in an unconsciously artistic way by the popular imagination. *This is material*. Not any mythology whatever, i.e. not an arbitrarily chosen unconsciously artistic reworking of nature (Marx [1973] 111).

The production of a Greek sculpture, he argues, relied on human conceptions of the ideal and the socially constructed definitions of beauty rather than on some outside, inspirational "spirit" or idea as Hegel contended. Marx further argues that "the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men… conceiving, thinking, the mental intercourse of men appear at this stage as the direct efflux of their material behavior" (Marx in Fromm 153). Marx thus makes the social consciousness of the culture an essential part of the natural world. He condemns the fact that "the more the inanimate comes alive, the more the living themselves seem subordinate to their own productions" (Marx in Fromm 153). He criticizes previous German philosophers for granting human thought and consciousness a sense of freedom from the material world and for losing sight of the very social beings that produce them. Instead of the consciousness of man as an abstract, free-floating entity, Marx insists that it is bound up in the material world in which "real, active men" live and act and that the material conditions of man influence

the production of thought and ideas rather than the other way around (Marx in Fromm 153).

Although on the one hand the term "material" often connotes a physical aspect of an object, it often also "evokes [the] immaterial," or associations with non-material objects (Ayers 763). Heidegger and the phenomenologists of the early twentieth century conceptualized an even more abstract notion of materiality than Marx; for them it referred broadly to the "immaterial—some contrasting essence or quality excluded from materiality" and as existing "in relation to the ontology of things" (Ayers 763, Hong). This broadened the Marxist conception of material as grounded in social activity to all *things*—any concept or idea relating back to a physical object (Hong). Unlike Marx's conception of material, then, this new definition embraced thoughts, ideas, and abstract notions rather than just the physical objects that drive the social activity of men. The combination of dialectical materialism and Heidegger's abstract conception of material led to a new notion of "materiality" as that which "convey[s] the quality of being material despite its being non-material in actuality" (Hong).

These varied definitions of material were taken up by literary critics of the twentieth century as they attempted to explain the relationship between literature and the physical world. Their emphasis on language as getting in the way of a pure relationship between literature and reality introduces the notion of the materiality of language itself. Judith Butler, for example, in *Bodies that Matter* articulates the question that drives the discussion in twentieth-century literary thought when she asks, "can language simply refer to materiality, or is language itself also the very condition under which materiality may appear?" (Butler in Ayers 770). In *The Materiality of Language: Gender, Politics,*

and the University David Bleich argues that the materiality of language "takes language to be inseparable from the total context of its use" (31). Though most critics conceive of literary language itself as a material object, what remains at issue is how language gains its materiality. To ponder this question, I begin with Blanchot's concept of absence at the heart of literature and his argument that language refers back onto itself rather than a physical object outside of a text. I then look at Riffaterre's commentary on the materiality of language when he argues that prose attempts mimesis whereas poetry intentionally obscures a hidden meaning, even as both become self-aware of their literary construction through linguistic indicators. Bakhtin follows next as he builds off of a more Marxist concept of language as a commodity, a system of exchange of sorts between an author and her reader that relies on the material conditions of both. I briefly explore Iwanicki's investigation of the materiality of language as originating in the bodies that produce them. New historicists then move away from a close reading of language to instead attempt to discover the relationship between texts and their social, textual surroundings. These discussions help us recognize how the language of the text gestures to letters in literature and how, (similar to my exploration of the literary letter), language itself may be conceived of as material through the social and cultural conceptions that surround and define it.

De Saussure, an important figure in positing language as an object of study, observes, "Whether I make the letters in white or black, raised or engraved, with pen or chisel—all of this is of no importance with respect to their signification" (de Saussure in Iwanicki 95). For de Saussure, language's importance exists exclusive of the materiality of the medium through which it is conveyed. In his focus on language as its own realm of

study, words become "essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world" (Harris ix). His argument that the physical form of the letters on a page has no meaning issues from his study of the relationship between words and the objects they reference; both the physical shape of letters and the semantic names of words ("cat," "chat," "katze") function as arbitrary indicators (for they are at the discretion of the culture and have nothing to do with language as a closed system).

Following de Saussure in his focus on language, Blanchot and other deconstructionists isolate the text in a matrix of structure that does not link directly to a material object but posit literary language's self-referentiality. Blanchot writes on the difference between everyday language and literature, arguing that in everyday language the message is more important than the medium through which it travels. Language for him is both representative and destructive: "it causes to vanish, it renders the object absent, it annihilates it," because it refers to a concept or idea of an object rather than the physical object itself (Haase and Large 31). In "Literature and the Right to Death" he explains, "I say 'This woman.' … A word may give me its meaning, but first it suppresses it. For me to be able to say, 'This woman,' I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her" (Blanchot in Haase and Large 30). Though in everyday language this absence of the physical presence of the object is hidden by the concept it refers to, in literature the absence becomes essential. Rather than just a fluid medium through which a message is transferred, writing "resists, interrupts, or suspends the message" (Haase and Large 29). Language itself becomes a material object through its "texture," its "rhythm, colour, and style" and gains materiality in its interaction with other words (28).

Blanchot argues that the world of the text is separated from that of the reader's reality because words in literature, rather than referring to a material object, instead refer back onto other words within the same text. The end of this chain of reference does not end in meaning or an object but instead in this "absence that is at the heart of language," that is, in the self-awareness of the inability for language to embody directly a physical object (Haase and Large 32):

> What is art's complaint about everyday speech? It says it lacks meaning: art feels it is madness to think that in each word some thing is completely present through the absence that determines it, and so art sets off in quest of a language that can recapture this absence itself and represent the endless movement of comprehension (Blanchot in Haase and Large, 34-35).

Here, Blanchot emphasizes that the materiality of language lies in the text, not the physical script or words on the page, but instead in the abstract meaning of materiality of language as a structured matrix of meaning. Blanchot seeks the materiality of literature, specifically, its creative manipulation of language that constructs its own worlds separate from our reality and reveals the absence of physicality in language.

Riffaterre's analysis of modern fiction relies on this concept of the materiality of language through the isolation of the text promoted by Blanchot and the other deconstructionists and argues that the truth of fiction rests in the recognition of this material language. In *Fictional Truth* he attempts to explain how literature relates to reality: he searches for the "truth in fiction," which he believes "is not based on an actual experience of factuality, nor does the interpretation of esthetic evaluation of fictional narrative require that it be verified against reality" (Riffaterre xiii). Instead, truth in

fiction relies on verisimilitude and a "system of representations that seems to reflect a reality external to the text" (xiii). This mimesis rests on the grammatical agreement between literature and reality. Fiction, he argues, "relies on codes, that is, on arbitrary conventions that can be identified independently of the narrative, that are assignable to a viewpoint exterior to it, or that can be perceived as irrelevant to the motivation of narrative events" (xv). The grammatical ordering of a fiction follows a reader's expectations and thus attempts mimesis, or a close representation of reality. Riffaterre then argues that "ungrammaticalities," which refer to disruptions in this grammatical agreement expected by the reader, make readers aware of a text's literariness, or constructed form. The "truth" of a narrative thus relies on the reader's recognition of the grammatical agreement, which mimics her own reality, and on the "ungrammaticalities," which remind her of the fictionality of the narrative.

Riffaterre believes that poetic language gets even more in the way of this mimesis than prose and is concerned with "what language *does* to reality" (Riffaterre in Stuart, emphasis mine). The grammatical structure of a poem for Riffaterre is its importance, and it obscures but hints at a hidden "hypogram" or a "truth" of the poem. This ultimate meaning exists outside of the text that the reader must actively work to discover through the process of multiple readings, "surmount[ing] the mimesis hurdle" and "overcom[ing] a poem's ungrammaticalities (that is, the challenges to mimesis apprehended during heuristic reading)" (Riffaterre in Stuart). Furthermore, only through re-reading can the reader hope to locate this "hypogram," because the very "linguistic structure and (dis)grammatical ordering" of the poem intentionally remains ambiguous on the first reading (Stuart). The materiality of poetry for Riffaterre lies in the "disruption of

mimesis (ungrammaticality) and the intense involvement of the reader required to push through this, toward significance and interpretation" (Stuart). The relationship between literature and reality thus relies on a common understanding of grammar that readers recognize and relate to their own use, and disruptions in this common grammar self-reference a text's literary construction.

Bakhtin's discussion of literature builds off the social conception of language; for him, materiality of language seems to originate through its engagement with the intent and reception of the text. Although he does not explicitly discuss language as a material entity, his approach to literature reveals how he conceptualizes it in its relation to the material world. Bringing the conditions of the author and reader into the discussion more so than Riffaterre, who isolated the text from the intent of the author, Bakhtin argues that "language depends upon the material conditions that produces it and those that regulate its consumption" (Stuart). With Marxist underpinnings, Bakhtin believes the material world produces language; an author creates a text out of an existing pool of possible words and the text is then consumed in a specific way by a reader. He brings in the reader to engage actively with language, which he believes to be socially constructed; he argues that "form and content in discourse are one, once we understand that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon" (Bakhtin 259). The way in which language is constructed, therefore, relates to its meaning because of what its very construction reveals about the material conditions in which it is produced and consumed. Because of the various social constructions of each word, in the process of reading literature there is an internal dialogue (which he refers to as "heterglossia") among the different meanings of each word. This is a dialogue "that does not assume any external compositional forms of

dialogue [but which] cannot be isolated as an independent act, separate from the word's ability to form a concept…of its object" (279). Words don't become caught up in a conversation of their own, therefore, but rather the object they reference takes different meanings depending upon the social conditionings of both the author and reader.

Bakhtin agrees with Blanchot and others concerning the idea that a word cannot exhaust the object it gestures at through reference, but he also believes that a multiplicity inherent in the social formation of a word complicates the process of language and interpretation. He argues:

> no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate. … The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile (276).

His very language, when discussing the multiplicity of voices inherent in language, suggests its materiality; a word in a text "weaves," "merges," "recoils," and "intersects" as it interacts with the "elastic environment" difficult to "penetrate." His focus on the material conditions of language's production further ties a relationship between the speaker, text, and reader.

In literature, and in particular the novel, the embodiment of this complex interweaving of meaning gains significance for Bakhtin through the singularity of the linguistic markers and their forms in combination with the social stratification that accompanies each word (288). The materiality of language is found in the socially constructed languages (professional jargon, oratorical, publicistic, of the lawyer, the doctor, etc.) within a novel when "outsiders," the readers, or those who are not of the particular situation of life in which a given language is generally used observe them (289). Here, argues Bakhtin,

> languages may be treated as objects, as typifications, as local color. For outsiders [who live in their own, separate "verbal-ideological life"], the intentions permeating these languages become *things,* limited in their meaning and expression; they attract to, or excise from, such language a particular word…these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia (289, 292).

A word may be an object, "a living, socio-ideological concrete thing" that, before it is appropriated by a particular speaker for a specific intention, exists "in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions" (293-4). The relationship between literature and reality for Bakhtin relies on the social conditions of the authors and their readers.

In "The Materiality of Language: Implications for Pedagogy, Literary Theory and Literacy" Christine Iwanicki agrees with the other theorists that "language is an omnipresent—not invisible—phenomenon in peoples' lives" but argues that twentieth-century language theory often involves the "disembodiment of language" (Iwanicki 496).

She posits that language, written or spoken, contributes to the way in which we "'mark' our existence in the world" and "enact our material being" (496). Building on Bakhtin's concept of the "social word," she believes that the materiality of language depends heavily on its relation to the body of the speaker or writer and his or her social conditions (497). Unlike the other critics discussed so far, Iwanicki places emphasis on the reality and physicality of the natural body and language's relationship to it.

A new historicist approach dismisses close readings of literature and the intense focus on language itself seen in these earlier theorists in its own pursuit of explaining the relationship between literature and its surrounding culture. New historicism argues that "poetry, drama, and prose fiction play themselves out in the everyday world, since men and women repeatedly find themselves in effect speaking the language of the literary not only in their public performances, but also in their most intimate and passionate moments" (Greenblatt and Gallagher 30). This fluid interaction between textual representation and social activity is based on an understanding of everything as constructed as text, in the language with which we refer to it. In *Practicing New Historicism* Greenblatt and Gallagher posit that

> the collapse [of] everything into something called textuality…calls for a sharp attention to…the text's implicit or explicit reality claims, to the implicit link (or distance) between the word and whatever it is—the real, the material, the realm of practice, pain, bodily pleasure, silence, or death—to which the text gestures as that which lies beyond the written word, outside its textual mode of being (23).

They argue that a literary text remains especially at a certain distance from reality because of its fictionality even as it is influenced and shaped by the historical and literary

factors surrounding it. New historicists contend that concepts, objects, actions, and thoughts in literature may be examined through an investigation of the social and cultural factors influencing a text.

The new historicist's reliance on the idea of "culture as text," of studying literature in its relationship to other textual forms in history, inevitably brings up the comparison to historical letters. In doing so they argue that letters (and other textual forms) offer a more "raw" relationship to reality, quoting anthropologist Clifford Geertz when he argues that his field-note, similar to a letter, makes "a stronger claim to reference—it points more directly to a world that has some solidity and resistance—than [an] invented example" (Greenblatt and Gallagher 23). Though both literature and the field note are textually constructed, the field note allows us, the reader, to "conjure up a 'real' as opposed to an 'imaginary' world," to "seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience" (30). The non-fictional letter for them similarly allows access to a closer, more tangible reality than fiction. The literary letter, then, perhaps adopts this authenticating nature of the non-literary document and gives the illusion of a "touch of the real" within a more removed fictional representation and causes the reader to attribute to letters embedded in literature an added weight of realism.

In their analysis of the history of literature new historicists lean heavily on Geertz's concept of "thick descriptions." In his approach to ethnography Geertz defines a "thin description" as that which merely describes a given behavior and a "thick description" as that which describes "an account of intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions meaning" (Greenblatt and Gallagher 25). For new historicists, Geertz's "thick description" comes into play as they

take an anecdote in history and from a close analysis reveal "the behavior codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society" (Veseer xi). This thesis also employs the concept of "thick descriptions" when I examine the conceptual understandings surrounding letters and how these affect their rendering in literature. Examining the complex, "thick description" surrounding epistolarity both within and without literature, we may begin to consider how we imaginatively conceive of a letter as material within fiction.

Diverging for a moment from the concept of language as the only way through which we may begin to conceive of the materiality of a literary letter we come to the notion of an aesthetic rendering within the graphic layout of a text. Similar in some sense to how concrete or "shaped" poetry plays on the idea of a symbiotic relationship between form and content, letters in fiction are often marked out or presented as a physical break from the rest of the text on the page, granting them a separation from the narration through which a new voice emerges. In "shaped" poetry of the early modern period, for example, the shape of a poem reflected its meaning.[1] These visual marks reflect the content of the object referenced, the letter, and all of the conceptual and social notions that surround it. Unable physically to insert another sheet of paper as a letter into a text (generally) for practical reasons, the graphic demarcations suggest the physical form of the content gestured at through the literary language of the text. In concrete poetry and the various lineages following it in art and poetry, the visual form and materials used are an essential part of the meaning of the object (poem, artwork) itself. These graphic

[1] See, for example, George Herbert's "The Altar," a "variety of emblem poem" that physically (graphically on the page) takes on the shape of an altar, "collapsing picture and poem into one" (Greenblatt 1707).

markers in conjunction with the conceptual boundaries and notions surrounding letters in a social world help us to imagine their material presence in the space of a literary work.

The literary theorists' positions on the materiality of language and literature's relationship to reality motivates my own discussion of the materiality of letters in fiction and how they are caught up in the complex discussions concerning material, language, and literature. The abstract notions of materiality based on dialectic materialism allow us, living in the social world, to conceptualize the situations in which letters are written, exchanged, read, destroyed, circulated, publicized, protected, or fetishized. The complexity in defining material relies on an awareness of letters as social and conceptually created objects. A heightened awareness of social and conceptual understanding of language that drives many of the theorists discussed above to examine language within specific genres—Blanchot's "absence," Bakhtin's social word, and Riffaterre's obscurity—all in some way mimic the specificity with which I examine the literary letter. Three moments of "epistolarity" in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night, King Lear,* and *Othello* offer us examples of how the social conceptions surrounding epistolarity and the materiality of letters become dramatically rendered; in presenting this analysis I often borrow from the explanations of those theorists discussed above.

Shakespeare's Malvolio of *Twelfth Night* who reads Maria's letter aloud in Act 2 offers us, contrary to what de Saussure posits, an example of the graphic significance of letter writing. We see here an intensified focus on the graphic figures themselves as pivotal to an account of meaning when, for example, Malvolio reads aloud the letter he believes Olivia has sent him. Looking at the page in his hand he declares, "By my life, this is my lady's hand. These be her very c's, her u's, and her t's, and thus makes she her

great P's. It is in contempt of question her hand" (*TN* 1.5 82-3). The focus on the very form of the letters on the page contradicts de Saussure's postulation since they reference to Malvolio a particular writer. His attribution of meaning to the graphic script on the unsigned letter is central to the humor of his mistaking it for Olivia's handwriting. The physical form of the letters, in this case, their uniqueness, thus takes on a meaning de Saussure brushes aside in his indifference to linguistic form.

In Malvolio's claim to recognize "Olivia's" handwriting, the very script on the sheet captures the body of its writer in a manner similar to Iwanicki's concept of the relationship between language and bodies. Malvolio unconsciously relates the handwritten letters to the body of the woman he believes to have written it, graphically sexualizing her representation on the paper sheet. Unknown to Malvolio, his pronouncement of c's, u's, t's, vulgarly and subconsciously also alludes to a woman's genitals. P's furthers this sexual fetishization of the letters, referring to urination and thus, once again, to Olivia's anatomy (*TN* 2.5, Warren and Wells 81). The sexual edge here, which repeats throughout the play as an undercurrent to the action, not only adds humor to the scene, but also suggests Malvolio's desire for intimacy and closeness to his mistress through the physicality of the long-drawn letters and a play on the way in which, as Iwanicki argues, language "enact[s] our material being." Placing this emphasis on the reality and physicality of the natural body and language's relationship to it, we recognize how Shakespeare renders the duality of the letter's material, capturing both a description of handwriting as well as physical inscription of how the script of the page becomes the body's surrogate. The relationship between body and letters is one I examine more closely in Chapter Three.

Shakespeare further richly explores the materiality of letters when Malvolio muses aloud on the riddle Maria poses near the end of her letter, granting each individual letter a heightened meaning: "M.O.A.I. doth sway my life" (2.5 104). In his musings, the stern but now at ease steward wonders, "what should that alphabetical position portend? If I could make that resemble something in me" (113-114). He interprets the riddle in the following way: "'M.' Malvolio. 'M'—why, that begins my name… 'M.' But then there is consonancy in the sequel. That suffers under probation: 'A' should follow, but 'O' does… And then 'I' comes behind…'M.O.A.I.' This simulation is not as the former; and yet to crush this a little, it would bow to me, for every one of these letters are in my name" (119, 121-123, 127, 131-133). As he reads and "crush[es] this [the meaning] a little," he advances his own interpretive process in the act of reading Maria's letter, and by metaphor proclaims the text's sense of materiality, that it may be "crushed." Malvolio individualizes each letter, heightening their meaning and making the letters themselves stand out as code. Malvolio proceeds as if a student of Riffaterre's notion of a hidden meaning within the "ungrammaticalities" of a text; the riddle posed by Maria rests on the nonsense of the ordering of the letters on the page, which Malvolio takes to refer to him. For him, there exists a select secrecy within the individual letters and their meaning. The comedic power of the scene relies on Maria's recognition of Malvolio's inflated sense of his own being, that he would naturally require the individual letters to bend to the initials of his name. His smug belief in his own intellect motivates him to decipher the riddle even as Maria has anticipated his solution.

The emphasis on physical markers of language inscribed onto a piece of paper here also suggests the concept of a material letter within a fictional space. As Malvolio

reads the letter aloud, the contents are known to the internal listeners (Maria, Sir Toby, Feste) and to Shakespeare's external audience. We watch Maria, Sir Toby, and Feste secret themselves away and peer in on Malvolio's privacy, his intimate moment (so he thinks) with his lady's letter. Shakespeare reminds his audience of their own role as an audience by the internal voyeuristic moment in which the letter becomes exposed to multiple audiences at once. Perhaps we might take this, in some sense, as marking Riffaterre's concept of the self-referentiality of literary language. To be aware of the intrusion of both internal and external listeners suggests an understanding of some conceptual, private boundary that surrounds a letter, a concept that I explore more fully in Chapter Two.

Sir Toby Belch's instructions to Sir Andrew on how to write a proper letter in Act 3 of *Twelfth Night* opens itself up to a new historicist-like examination of materiality, of the social and cultural conceptions that help to construct the very materials of the letter. Sir Toby directs Sir Andrew to write a properly accusatory letter and in doing offers commentary on the materials of the early modern letter:

> Go, write it [the letter] in a martial hand; be curst and brief.
> It is no matter how witty, so it be eloquent and full of invention.
> Taunt him with the licence of ink. If thou
> 'thou'st' him some thrice, it shall not be amiss, and as
> many lies as will lie in thy sheet of paper, although the
> sheet were big enough for the bed of Ware in England,
> set 'em down: go, about it. Let there be gall enough in
> thy ink, though thou write with a goose-pen, no matter.

About it (*TN* 3.2 39-47).

The detailed description of the letter here describes the intimacy that exists between early modern writing materials and writer. Alan Stewart argues that the materials used for writing in this period "go far beyond ink and paper, [they] possessed vivid associations [for the correspondents] in part no doubt because they often prepared them themselves" (41). That the materiality of the written form is so meditated upon in Shakespeare, however, also indicates an interrelation between the form and content of letters; the complex interaction between the materials used to make the individual parts of the letter, the format and folding of a letter, and the relation to the cultural conceptions and artifacts, all which underscore a Marxist notion of the relationship between production and social thought.

In the above instructions Sir Toby meditates on the expanse and space of the physical letter, advising Sir Andrew to write into the letter "as many lies as will lie in thy sheet of paper, although the sheet were big enough for the bed of Ware in England, set 'em down." This metaphor, alluding to the bed of Ware, built in 1590 as a commercial attraction for the inn in Ware, Hertfordshire plays on the double meanings of "sheet," meaning both stationary and bed sheets. By linking the two, Shakespeare's Sir Toby incites the scandalous associations "sheets" and particularly, the bed of Ware's sheets, had acquired in society. The cultural artifact was commonly mentioned in "plays and bawdy tales" during the seventeenth century, first mentioned by Ben Johnson in 1609 in "Epicoene" in the context in which the two knights, Sir Daw and Sir Amorous La-Foole boast of their success with women ("The Great Bed of Ware," Jonson). Together they reveal their history in a stuttered explanation in which Sir Daw begins, "Why, we have

been—" and Sir Amorous La-Foole finishes "In the great bed at Ware together in our time" (Jonson 5.1). This sufficiently impresses their companion because of the great expanse of the bed and the monstrous sexual activities able to take place there. Shakespeare's allusion to the great expanse of the bed (over three meters wide) links the space of the letter to the physical bed and drives home his instructions to Sir Andrew to include as many lies as he can in the space of his sheet of paper ("The Great Bed of Ware"). The reference further conveys to Sir Andrew that, like the unabashed qualities associated with the bed, he should similarly have no restraint or fear of transgressing respectable bounds in his accusatory letter to 'Cesario.' His reference to the bed signals the new historicists' broad cultural circulation of meaning attached to the bed in both society and texts (perhaps Shakespeare conceived of the idea from another text, Jonson's play) and meditates on the physical paper of the letter, conflating it with the sheet of a bed.

Sir Toby further instructs Sir Andrew to take advantage of the great expanse of the paper to "taunt" the receiver with his insults, which include that of unwarranted familiarity. Sir Toby instructs Sir Andrew: "thou 'thou'st' him some thrice" to convey his disrespect in the intimacy of the use of the familiar tense of "you." The footnotes again give insight into these lines, noting it is "an insult to a stranger: *you* is the polite form, *thou* is used to inferiors" (Warren and Wells 164). By writing "thou" three times over, Sir Andrew might hammer home his aggression toward the serving man Cesario by willfully transgressing the form of socially acceptable address in a letter.

To underscore his desire for the corrosive nature of letter he wishes Sir Andrew to write, Sir Toby alludes to the bitter properties of the gall that makes up the ink. Early

modern ink usually consisted of oak gall, derived from the "excrescence produced by the friction of insects on oak trees," which could either be purchased at a store or made at home with the raw materials (Stewart 48, Daybell 37). Many recipes and guides circulated on how to make a proper ink, a skill also taught in schools, because of the different meanings the quality of ink signaled to the receiver (Daybell 39). The color and thickness of the ink often conveyed on its own various indicators of the writer: "a runnier ink for a writer with a fast hand; black more viscous ink for a formal presentation text" (37). Furthermore, "differences in the quality of ink may be related to the occasion of writing or may indicate someone ill-practiced at making ink, and therefore less familiar with the writing arts" and "ink blots on the page might indicate sloppiness or haste" (37-39). Sir Andrew's thick ink would, therefore, signal to the serving man a more "viscous ink" to complain against the other's behavior.

Stewart observes that "because this gall [from oak] shares its name with the bile secreted by the liver, Shakespeare and his contemporaries could not resist conflating the two" and the word in the early modern period came to mean "to write with virulence and rancour" (Stewart 48, *OED*). The ink on the page would not *physically* feel "bitter" to the reader, but there is instead an association between the bitterness of the gall and the accusatory tone of the letter. Sir Toby may mean for Sir Andrew to include so much gall as to make the actual lines of ink harsh, but he also calls on the bitterness of the very material of the ink to impress upon the young suitor how "rancorous" his letter should be.

In his detailed, humorous analysis of the process of writing, Sir Toby comments on Sir Andrew's use of a goose quill: "though thou write with a goose-pen, no matter." Through this phrasing, Sir Toby subtly insults Sir Andrew, likening him to a fool. The

OED traces the relationship between the goose and foolishness to a sermon in 1547, in which the deliverer rhetorically asked "Shall I stand still, like a goose or a fool, with my finger in my mouth?" (*OED*). The association continued to proliferate during and after Shakespeare's time, and today, even, we have the saying "silly goose," a modern derivative of the analogy. Although writers at this time most often used the goose feather for their quills because "quill pens were [usually] home-made, fashioned by letter-writers, scriveners, secretaries or amanuenses from feathers close at hand," goose feathers were not the only bird whose feathers were plucked for their literary use; writers also commonly used feathers from turkey, crow, and duck (Daybell 42). Sir Toby specifies that Sir Andrew will write with the goose-quill not only because it was commonly used at the time, then, but also because the specific choice of goose over crow, duck, or turkey indicates a deliberate play on the association between the goose and the fool. The very act of writing is thus infused with social signifiers that reveal the identity of the writer, furthering Shakespeare's commentary on the process of writing and reading a letter, one which his audience would understand because of their own (if literate), similar practices. In the resurfacing of the letter throughout literature, we see a meditation on the very form of writing itself, as though to reinforce its pretense of authenticity.

In *King Lear*, the social meanings constructed around the private conceptual space of a letter initiates Gloucester's distrust of his son Edgar. In the second scene of Act 1 Edmund, the bastard son, convinces his father of his half-brother's treachery, and the material letter becomes his means to do so. The moment his father enters the scene, Edmund hastily puts away a letter he pretends to have just finished reading. Gloucester's first question to Edmund is "what news?" and Edmund's physical movements, putting

away a letter, immediately catches his father's attention (1.2 26). Since letters were most often the mode of communication in the early modern period and signaled the bringing of news, Edmund's act of hiding it just as his father asks for news contradicts his verbal answer, "I know no news, my lord" (29). The materiality of the letter here becomes the means to deceive, as the "terrible dispatch of it into your pocket" suggests to Gloucester something duplicitous (32-33). Gloucester and Edmund discuss the very existence of the letter when Gloucester asks "what paper were you reading?" and Edmund responds, "Nothing" (30, 31). Nothing, here, refers to what the letter signifies rather than the physical object itself. Edmund manipulates the common understanding of a letter as a bearer of news, and thus his action of spiriting it away troubles his father. Gloucester conflates the social meaning of the letter with the physical letter itself, saying, "The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles" (33-35).

When Gloucester finally obtains this "nothing" and reads it aloud, Edmund pretends shock at the letter's message, which he in fact forged, and blames the "contents" of the letter for placing him in the position of offending his father by either "detain[ing] or [giving] it" (40). His specific blame of the text, rather than his brother, recalls the discussion of text itself as material as well as his reluctance to appear to eager to blame his brother. Gloucester, however, soon grounds the text back in the reality of the play by linking the graphic characters on the paper back to his son's body. He asks, "My son Edgar, had he a hand to write this, a heart and brain to breed it in? …You know this character to be your brother's?" (54-55, 59). When asking whether Edgar had "a hand to write this?" he does not question his son's physical well being, but instead questions him

as having the motivation and malice carry it out. This is made explicit by the dual use of "character," meaning "handwriting with [an] ironic pun on 'personality'" (Halio 15). The connection between the writer and the content and form of the text becomes explicit here, linking Edgar's body to both the meaning of the language and the graphic form of the individual letters inscribed on the paper. Both *King Lear* and *Twelfth Night* present forged scripts that Gloucester and Malvolio misidentify, respectively. In the case of Malvolio's letter, Maria copies her mistress's hand and in *King Lear* Edmund mimics his brother's. These duplicitous moments dramatically play on the authenticity often attributed to handwriting as proof of a specific person and the ability for deception through letters.

Finally, in *Othello*, to continue this Shakespearean vein of analysis, the materiality of a letter is most abstract in its oral form and becomes relevant at the play's most dramatic moment—Othello's suicide. Before he cuts his own throat, Othello claims the right to dictate the letter he wishes Lodovico to write to the Venetian state. We are made aware of the format of his speech when he says, "I pray you, in your letters, /When you shall these unlucky deeds relate, /Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, /Nor set down aught in malice: then, you must speak /Of one that lov'd not wisely but too well…" and he goes on to define himself for future posterity (*O* 5.2 396-399, 407). He refers to the letter form again halfway through the speech when he reminds his audience of the written nature of his language: "Set you down this" (407). Lodovico himself recognizes and reinforces the literary nature of Othello's speech when, after Othello stabs himself with the hidden dagger, he cries out, "O bloody period!" grammatically referencing how Othello chooses to end his dictated letter.

Tom Cohen comments on the materiality of the language in the epistolary form of Othello's speech, arguing that "rather than addressing the Moor's pathos-ridden end, they [Othello's Venetian audience] draw attention to what could be called the materiality of the speech itself" (Cohen 11). He further proposes Shakespeare's reference to writing in this scene: "the grammatical metaphor acknowledges the facticity of Shakespeare's own writing, while the speaker registers amazement at Othello's self-constructing oratory, just when its aesthetic effect collapses into transgressive blood and ruin" (11). Shakespeare's reference to his own writing here mimics the similar use of the letter read aloud in *Twelfth Night*, when the audience is reminded of their position in relation to the fictional world created through written language. Cohen follows the multiplicity of meaning in the word "period," recalling that not only does it signal an end to Othello's dictated letter but also refers to, among other things, "a woman's menstrual blood, a feminizing image that is in fact persistent beneath the text's martial pretense in the motif of Othello's posture of service to the state" (12). The materiality of language recalls the earlier discussions of language as an object and ties directly to the similar conception of a literary letter as a concrete object. Here, the orally dictated literary letter exists as material through an awareness of the materiality of language itself as Shakespeare references his own process of writing. Furthermore, the materiality of the letter in this scene comes not through the physical sheet of paper or character, but in the suggested form of a letter. The legality of his letter to the "Venetian state" mimics the public letters written by generals and he thus embodies his self-defining role as a servant of the state even in his death. The medium through which this letter becomes publicized is Othello's body, and even as he dictates

the contents of the letter he carries them out, materializing its purpose through his own suicide.

My discussion of the materiality of literary language relies on complex notions of materiality possessing both physical and abstract meanings. The concept "material" has undergone serious reflection and been applied variously across some 200 plus years of philosophical and literary theorizing. We began with Kant's notion of the "unknown" physical world and then traced "material" through Marxist dialectic materialism and other more conceptual notions of materiality before representing twentieth-century literary theorists who positioned language in relation to the physical world and conceived of the socially constructed materiality of language. We borrowed their methodologies to discuss language and social and conceptual meanings and briefly touched on conceptions of how language in literature and the physical world interrelate by exploring the materiality of a few of Shakespeare's dramatic letters in *Twelfth Night, King Lear* and *Othello*. The literary letters in these three plays rely on social and conceptual notions of letters in the early modern period. The imaginative processes of readers recognize these letters by the material references and the conceptual and social values surrounding them. The burden this of chapter was to establish preliminary ways by which conceptually private and intimate boundaries of literary letters and the relationship between the body and writing can be explained in the next two chapters.

Chapter Two

Conceptual Private Boundaries: The Letter Exposed

> "The method of the theft was not less ingenious than bold. The document in question—a letter, to be frank—had been received by the personage robbed while alone in the royal boudoir. During its perusal she was suddenly interrupted by the entrance of the other exalted personage from whom especially it was her wish to conceal it. After a hurried and vain endeavor to thrust it in a drawer, she was forced to place it, open as it was, upon a table. The address, however, was uppermost, and, the contents thus unexposed, the letter escaped notice. At this juncture enters the Minister D—. His lynx eye immediately perceives the paper, recognizes the handwriting of the address, observes the confusion of the personage addressed, and fathoms her secret. After some business transactions, hurried through in his ordinary manner, he produces a letter somewhat similar to the one in question, opens it, pretends to read it, and then places it in close juxtaposition to the other. Again he converses, for some fifteen minutes, upon the public affairs. At length, in taking leave, he takes also from the table the letter to which he had no claim. Its rightful owner saw, but, of course, dared not call attention to the act, in the presence of the third personage who stood at her elbow. The minister decamped; leaving his own letter—one of no importance—upon the table."
>
> Monsieur G—in Edgar Alan Poe's *The Purloined Letter* (7)

The private space of a letter is one we readily accept. The very form of the letter connotes privacy; the folded page with the text on the inside placed in an envelope that is then sealed and sent to a recipient to unseal, unfold, and read all replicate its material seclusion. As Mark Seltzer puts it, "Once it becomes possible to write on sheets of paper that can be folded back on themselves…once it becomes possible for the handwritten and folded sheet of paper to be inserted in an envelope, sealed, and posted, the technical conditions of interiority and privacy are in place" (Mark Seltzer in Rosenberg 259). Erasmus further discourses on the intimacy of the letter when he writes, "for this ought to

be the character of the letter: as if you were whispering in a corner with a dear friend, not shouting in a theater, or otherwise somewhat unrestrainedly. For we commit many things to letters, which would be shameful to express openly in public" (Erasmus in Schneider 133). The idea of whispering into the ear not of a friend but a "dear friend" as analogous to letter writing imagines intimate, physical closeness (to be able to hear the whisper), as well as sentiments best discussed "in a corner," squirreled away from onlookers. Similar language of whispering in corners as some secret, intimate act plays out in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* when the jealous Leontes spies his wife giving her hand to his childhood friend at court, leaning in to speak with him intimately. Despite his servant's reassurances that nothing is amiss, Leontes cries, "Is whispering nothing? /Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses? … Sulking in corners?" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2 282-283, 206). In his paranoid state he conceives of an affair between his wife and friend from the proximity of their bodies and their position tucked away in the corner of a room. Leontes' fears are grounded in the notion similar to Erasmus's that whispering in intimate, secluded spaces is the very conception of privacy. As is often true of letters, this private, hidden nature of intimate space suggests subversive or secretive acts to an onlooker.

Though this conception of intimate space is meant to discourage the intrusion of others onto the scene, throughout history there have been instances of just such intrusion, that is, the personal letter made public. Letters are often intercepted by another unintended reader, copied for a different use, or published to the public against the wishes of the author. Cicero condemns this kind of interference after his own personal letter is circulated and asks, "how many jokes are accustomed to be in letters which, if they

should be published, would appear foolish, how many serious [things] nevertheless ought not be divulged in any way!" (Cicero Phil. 2.7 23-25 in Drunkenmill 41). His light tone suggests the beginnings of a boundary between public and private in ancient Rome that has solidified over the centuries in the Western world.

The growing separation between private and public life that accompanies the rise of Christianity with its focus on the inner self and the privatization of a consumerist world weaves about the letter a secretive and personal purpose (Kuersten 16). Elizabeth Cook observes the spatial changes in society that occur beginning in the late seventeenth century and their relation to epistolary correspondence, noting that

> spaces were…divided into rooms scaled to the family circle of the conjugal couple, their children, domestic servants, and a few intimate friends. The letter form itself, of course, suggests a similarly benign and restricted privacy, a protected space in which individuals can express their inmost thoughts in a language of the heart not heard in the larger world (Cook 90).

Not only do individuals often protect the privacy of their letters, but also the rise of the royal and official postal systems in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the development of the envelope in the eighteenth century helped to solidify the letter's private nature. In the U.S., the current punishment for obstructing in any way a letter in the postal system merits a heavy fine and up to five years of imprisonment ("Mail Security"). The privacy of the letter is thus regulated at the level of the state, indicating a social and legal value placed on privacy.

Out of this complex history in the development of private and public realms arises the letter as an object constantly troubling this distinction and throughout history, and

played out in literature, the publication or exposure of a private letter may signal a dramatic moment. [2] When William Godwin writes his wife Mary Wollstonecraft's biography after her death, for instance, he includes quotations from several of her letters to former lovers. The release of his wife's intimate life to the public eye "had a massive impact on Wollstonecraft's posthumous reputation and literary legacy" because Godwin refused to "downplay his wife's sexual independence" (McDayter). Her own sisters were outraged by the exposure, mirroring society's astonishment at this breach in privacy in a world already separated into realms of public and private. Disregarding or ignorant of the potential backlash from society, Godwin publishes his memoir to defend his wife against critics and to portray her more truthfully to the public (McDayter). The quotation of his wife's epistolary correspondence in his memoir opens here the private space of her letters to the public's eyes without her consent and breaches what her sisters (and society) view as her right to privacy.

The imagined materiality of the conceptual boundaries surrounding epistolary correspondence is reflected in the letters' material treatment and form. The ability for the letter to be exposed to the public hinges upon its physicality as a medium through which people transmit sensitive messages. Often containing the intimate, personal dealings between two correspondents, the letter usually must in some way traverse a public sphere to travel from one to the other. Terry Eagleton examines the paradoxical condition of letters in which on the one hand they are a site of "free subjectivity" for a writer but on the other hand are deeply entrenched in political matrixes of power that surround and

[2] The concept of privacy in the Western world is a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon and here I only touch on it briefly, recognizing my simplified reference.

endanger epistolary practices. He offers an almost exhaustive list of the ways in which a letter on an intended route between two correspondents may be disrupted:

> Letters, the most intimate sign of the subjective, [may be] waylaid, forged, stolen, lost, copied, cited, censored, parodied, misread, rewritten, submitted to mocking commentary, woven into other texts which alter their meaning exploited for ends unforeseen by their authors… If letter-writing is in one sense free subjectivity, it is also the function of an ineluctable power system. Certainly no activity could be more minutely regulated. To 'correspond' is to implicate a set of political questions: Who may write to whom, under what conditions? Which parts may be cited to another, and which must be suppressed? Who has the authority to edit, censor, mediate, commentate? (Eagleton 50).

Leaning on Eagleton's long list, this chapter explores how many of the dangers of exposure he introduces are in fact realized in literature and function dramatically. This exposure functions in literature as a narrative technique that often satisfies readers' desire for the opened letter, reveals a hidden enigma in the narrative, and or serves as a dramatic moment when it renders correspondent(s) vulnerable, manipulated, misquoted, or condemned because of the exposure. Janet Altman argues that "as a tangible document, even when intended for a single addressee, the letter is always subject to circulation among a larger group of readers" (Altman 109). Each case below reveals the extreme measures that are taken to protect the sanctity of the letter and the dramatic ways in which its privacy is disrupted. In this chapter I begin with Dickens' *David Copperfield* and Micawber's use of a letter to expose hidden and manipulative actions in a dramatic and public setting that satisfies the hermeneutic enigma of his actions. Next I examine

how the play *Hippolytus* dramatizes the silence of the letter, obstructing the contents of a letter from the audience even though those on stage know its message. This desire to hear the intimacy of a letter relies upon the privacy with which they are treated and the seemingly universal voyeuristic desire to become privy to a space from which we are generally forbidden. Carme Riera's short story "A Matter of Self-Esteem" follows in its exploration of letters woven into other texts and reappropriated for purposes unintended by their authors that render the correspondents vulnerable both emotionally and publicly. In my analysis of the three texts that follow, I argue that the concepts of the dramatic exposure of the letter to satisfy the hermeneutic code, a voyeuristic desire to hear a letters' contents, and the vulnerability inherent to the instability of epistolary correspondence are complicated notions intertwined with the conceptual and physical privacy of letters in literature. Goneril's letter in *King Lear* demonstrates for us the multiple exposures of a letter that is waylaid, stolen, and finally used to condemn its own author and recipient. Parodied letters, those submitted to mocking, waylaid, copied, exposed to others outside the correspondence and ultimately publicized become dramatically rendered in Laclos's epistolary novel *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*. Finally, A.S. Byatt's *Possession* and Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* explore the disturbance of private letters when fictional scholars attempt to steal, copy, and publish the correspondences of deceased poets.

The use of a letter to satisfy an enigma within the text becomes pertinent to Dickens' *David Copperfield*. Here, Micawber's letter read aloud to the group gathered in Mr. Wickfield's parlor becomes a moment of triumph for all involved (besides, of course, the lecherous Heep) (731-736). He "produce[s] from his pocket a foolscap document,

folded in the form of a large letter. Opening this packet, with his old flourish and glancing at the contents, as if he cherished an artistic admiration of their style of composition, he began to read" (731). Micawber builds the suspense leading to this moment in the preceding chapters, deflecting Trotwood's questions and keeping the contents of the letter secret even from his wife. In choosing to use the epistolary form here, Dickens appropriates the letter's dramatic revelatory power within the novel, as Heep is finally exposed for his treachery. The exposure of the letter to those outside the epistolary correspondence extends to the reader of the literary letter as well, and we share the desire to become privy to its contents. When the letter is read aloud, even knowing its material specification ("foolscap") and the joy Micawber takes in the presentation of its crafted contents serve to satiate both audiences, the fictional characters' and our reader's curiosity about his actions. Both audiences jointly desire Heep's downfall and the dramatic exposure of the letter satisfies the enigma of his previous secretive actions.

In the Euripidean tragedy *Hippolytus*, the contents of Phaedra's letter remain unspoken throughout the entire play and our voyeuristic desire to become privy to its contents is frustrated. When Theseus himself reads the letter that he finds in the clothing of his dead wife, he does so silently, exclaiming aloud to the audience, "This letter loudly tells a hideous tale! Where can I escape my load of woe? For I am ruined and undone, so awful are the words I find here written clear as if she cried them to me; woe is me!" (*Hippolytus*). The paradox between the letter that "loudly" produces its message but which is silent to the audience increases our desire to hear what it is that so troubles Theseus. Patricia Rosenmeyer observes that "here the author plays with and eventually disappoints our expectation that Theseus will read Phaedra's letter out loud on stage so

that we, too, can learn its contents" (Rosenmeyer13). The power of the scene here originates in the withholding of information from the audience; the audience is thus reminded of the staged and written nature of the play as the playwright toys with our desire to become privy to the information on the letter. Euripidies' intent to hide the contents of a letter from the audience powerfully inflames the audience's desire to know and at the same time exploits the cultural norm of the very privacy of letters.

Those engaging in epistolary correspondence are made vulnerable from the inscription of thoughts, intents, or feelings onto a fragile sheet of paper that leaves the hands of its author, taking with it the personal message written therein. The tension between the conceptual and physical intimate space of a letter and the ability for it to be exposed renders its correspondents vulnerable to the results of the contents made public. In Carme Riera's short story "A Matter of Self-Esteem" we see a clear instance of the vulnerability inherent in epistolary exchange. That a letter's message can be copied or reappropriated for an unintended use is a danger inherent in epistolary correspondence central to her modern short story. The letters themselves are not physically harmed; instead, messages inscribed on letters are lifted off of the paper and inserted into other textual forms. The notion of a disturbed privacy becomes pertinent as Riera's two protagonists, Angela and Miguel, each breach the conceptualized private boundary surrounding their letters and betray each other's intimate words outside of the correspondence. The fiction is composed of a single letter and the intimacy between the reader and the text becomes enhanced by the lack of a third-person narrator; we feel as though we are peering over the shoulder of Angela, its author, as she writes, or that of Ingrid, the addressee, as she reads the letter. Its graphic form mimicking the layout of a

letter further suggests materiality through its aesthetic form in the text. Dated and addressed, it begins:

Vallvidrera, October 23, 1986

> DEAREST INGRID: You are right. I accept your furious ultimatum. You never want to hear from me again if I don't answer your letter right away, explaining in detail what has kept me silent for so long. As you can see, I'm responding immediately—your letter came the day before yesterday—and I begin by asking forgiveness… (Riera 1).

The blocked out text grants us, the readers, intimate access to the letter as we enter into its world through Angela's narration to her friend. The exposure of the extremely private letters within the fiction emphasizes the private boundaries surrounding letter exchange and the vulnerable positions in which this exposure places correspondents.

The letter is composed by Angela, Riera's middle-aged protagonist, to her friend Ingrid, and relates Angela's failed relationship with a writer she meets at a conference, Miguel. Angela composes her letter in the form of a story, relating the events building up to the end of her relationship with Miguel and her realization that his seduction of her is solely for the purpose of investigating a character for his new novel. Angela describes in her letter to Ingrid the privacy with which she and Miguel began their relationship, passing messages back and forth secretly during lectures at the writer's conference they both attended. She tells Ingrid that Miguel calls these notes "the charter documents of our love…priceless records for our future biographers that he was determined to keep himself," hoping to hold them for posterity (18). They exchange these scraps of paper secretly, delighting in their intimate exchange to which the other writers at the conference are oblivious. Angela admits to Ingrid, "I felt that Miguel and I shared an intense and

complex secret life that isolated us from the rest. Settled in the last rows of the lecture room we whispered remarks unrelated to what, in theory, we were listening to, or [we] exchanged messages" back and forth (18). These messages, along with the "whispered remarks," weave around their relationship a secrecy rooted in the excitement of passing intimate notes in public. The stimulating experience of risking exposure thus propels their relationship forward as they participate in a kind of mild public disobedience.

The materiality of language itself becomes important to Angela's vulnerability through the fact that her and Miguel's relationship is rooted in words and that these words ultimately become publicized in Miguel's novel. Angela believes their "highly literary relationship," is built on her and Miguel's own positions as writers; their correspondence throughout the relationship is based on words—words in phrases copied from their favorite authors, spoken over the phone, or written to each other on scraps of paper and in formal letters. This causes Angela to wonder, after the relationship is over, if "Miguel had written our relationship…perhaps he and I were nothing but a jumble of words now, all of a sudden, collapsed with pain, sound, and fury, threatening to crush us" (30). For Angela, their correspondence (verbal and written) becomes representative of their love and failure and she disassociates herself from her past words that metaphorically crash down around her. She writes:

> perhaps we weren't even that [a jumble of words], but rather some minor entity: a sticky meringue pie beginning to ferment. That morning, when he shut the front door, Miguel left behind, still wrapped in cellophane and decorated with a big pink ribbon, protected but already contaminated, the words with which I would try hopelessly to make sense of our relationship and, above all, of this unexpected

> end. Perhaps our story—and now I have reason to believe this—was nothing but a writing test, a laboratory experiment (31).

This highly culinary imaginative picture posits their literary relationship as a material object, as something that is either "a sticky meringue pie" or words that may be "wrapped in cellophane." One metaphor crashes around her only to be replaced by another; despite Miguel's appropriation of her words, Angela doesn't accept an imposed silence or reject the words she believes to have betrayed her.

Miguel also reappropriates her letters and copies them into his new novel, publicly exposing her most intimate and guarded feelings. Angela describes the moment she finds herself staring back at her from the pages of Miguel's new book as his fictional character Olga. She portrays this copied version to Ingrid as "the mature Catalan writer, as pretentious and corny as can be, [who] was, if not my portrait, at least my caricature" (45). Not only does Miguel recreate her for his novel but also "reproduced fragments of our letters, transcribed our conversations or included passages stole from the 'charter documents of our love'" (45). Her shock originates in the very public exposure of their private correspondence and the appropriation of her words that, at least in her mind, were intended for a very different purpose. The boundaries between public and private becomes double edged for these two characters; they misbehave cooperatively in public when they are in love, delighting in their intimacy in public spaces, but when Miguel publicizes Angela's letters he does so without her consent and his misbehavior harms Angela only.

In some sense out of revenge for the vulnerable position Miguel places her in, Angela mimics Miguel's appropriation of her words when she reproduces his in her letter

to Ingrid. Though she exposes him in a less public manner and her only intended audience is Ingrid, her reason for doing so is to eventually expose him to public shame. This becomes evident at the end of the letter when Angela asks Ingrid to feed Miguel false information that he will then write and publish and thus be made a fool of. She hopes to convince Ingrid to help her in her revenge against Miguel and uses his letters as evidence of his seduction. She includes the brief letter he leaves her after their first night together: "An unsigned card dated that same morning read 'I love you now and always'" (23). The lack of signature suggests intimacy—Miguel feels no need to formalize the letter. The following cards, sent from the various cities Miguel traveled to, were "written on elegant paper embossed with his initials," suggesting intimacy still through the initials, though the sophisticated material hints at a sense of distance or formality, perhaps a foreshadow of the betrayal to come. With each fragment copied, Angela includes the date as if to give them more validity and to prove to Ingrid the extent of Miguel's seduction. Angela copies Miguel's letters into her own to convince her friend of the depth of his betrayal and to persuade Ingrid to help her enact revenge against her ex lover. The intimate privacy with which the two lovers correspond builds a conceptualized abstract material boundary around their relationship that comes crashing down around them when their letters are exposed and their words reappropriated for other uses, rendering each vulnerable both to public attention and emotional injury. The power of the exposed letter here rests in its dramatization of the emotional betrayal Angela feels and her revenge to render Miguel equally vulnerable through his letters.

The physical letter exposed in literature thus often reveals an enigma built up through the course of a narrative, as seen in *David Copperfield*, satisfies the audience or

readers' voyeuristic desire to become privy to the contents of a letter, which was frustrated in *Hippolytus*, or explores the vulnerable position the exposure of letters often places its correspondents, as we saw in "A Matter of Self Esteem." These uses of the exposed literary letter rely heavily on the material concepts of privacy and intimacy woven around epistolary correspondence and are often interrelated in exploiting the dramatic power of epistolarity in a narrative. In the following sections we recognize how exposed letters function within texts to build dramatic moments in the narrative. I organize these works by the ultimate effect of the privacy of the letter on a text's readers. First, a letter in Shakespeare's *King Lear* carries the social conceptions and notions of intimacy that relies on small moments and passing mention in its theatrical attempt to tackle larger issues such as madness and nothingness; in the second, I examine the intimacy between the outside readers and the letters in *Les Liaisons dangereuses* as the structure lengthens time and we are drawn into the terror of the seductive Valmont in his pursuit of Cécile and Tourvel; finally, in the third section I examine James's manipulation of the reader to epitomize his belief in the immorality of breaching privacy in his nineteenth-century novella *The Aspern Papers* and the intimacy granted outside readers to letters unread by the fictional readers within the narrative in A.S. Byatt's twentieth-century romance *Possession*. The conceptual boundaries of intimacy and privacy surrounding the letters are thus extended in some sense to the readers of the fiction themselves in varying levels of the breach in privacy we make when exposed to a letter. In each case the letter reveals an enigma within the narrative, satisfies or frustrates our own desire to become privy to the letter's contents, and explores the vulnerability inherent in the tension between the public and private conditions of epistolarity.

The Circulated Letter: *King Lear*

The dramatic power of the exposed letter becomes clear in *King Lear* when we trace Goneril's letter to Edmund through the play as it undergoes a series of exposures before finally coming back to its writer and intended recipient. The significance of the letter as the medium through which Goneril chooses to communicate with Edmund becomes clear when Oswald, Goneril's personal messenger, reveals its existence to her sister Regan when he stops at Reagan's court on his way to deliver the letter to Edmund. The jealous sister asks, "Why should she write to Edmund? Might not you transport her purposes by word?" suggesting that the letter form itself lends a sense of privacy and intimacy. The decision to write instead of transmitting the message "by word" through Oswald indicates that it is a message requiring commitment to paper that may be sealed and hidden away even from its bearer. Oswald protects his mistress's privacy with valor, responding to Regan's attempts to see it; Reagan's efforts to bribe Oswald with the promise of advancement and sexual favors to secure his loyalty and reliability evoke no favorable response from the steward (*KL* 4.5 22).

The importance of the bearer of letters in this era before an established postal system lies in their level of reliability and trustworthiness. As Schneider notes, servants often opened their masters' letters or allowed them to fall into the wrong hands: "Servants may [profit] from important letters by social superiors and perhaps use the information for their own advancement or to betray their masters… such was the general anxiety about the 'necessary evil' of secretaries and bearers in the system of epistolary communication" (Schneider 81). Seals were employed to discourage bearers from

opening the letters, giving the recipients evidence of a tampered-with letter (Daybell 168). Letters with ripped seals or bearing indications that they had been clearly tampered with "were [highly] suspect" and "where seals were damaged or letters were already opened on arrival readers worried that the security of their correspondence had been compromised" (Schneider 107, Daybell 168). Goneril thus sends Oswald, someone who is "of her bosom," as Regan observes, because employing a personal servant generally reassured the sender that the letter would end up in the hands of the correct addressee (*KL* 4.5 27, Schneider 140).

The general instability of the post in the early modern period heightens the importance of Goneril's letter as a means of communication for Regan. Senders were often unsure of the fate of their letters and "throughout the period correspondence remained a deeply insecure medium" (Daybell 10). For Goneril to take this risk of the letter going astray suggests that the contents are particularly sensitive and meant for the intended recipient's eyes only, thus necessitating her securing Oswald as a reliable bearer though she clearly doesn't trust him with the personal contents of the letter. As Regan's questions reveal, sending a message by word was a technique commonly used at the time and so Goneril's use of a letter immediately suggests to her sister a subversive or private message written within. Regan's desire to hear the contents of the letter mirrors the audiences', though for her the contents carry the possibility of personal ramifications, whereas for the audience its exposure merely satisfies a voyeuristic desire to hear what is so privately kept secret.

Although envelopes were not invented until the eighteenth century, the shape of the sent letter in the early modern period anticipated its form; the paper was creased with

the text folding in on itself and a blank outer side inscribed only with the address or name of the intended recipient. Properly folding a letter in Shakespeare's time involved

> First creasing the bi-folium letter twice horizontally, then folding it twice vertically, before tucking the left portion inside the right one. Folding a bifolium in this manner, where the writing did not continue to the second folio, had the distinct advantage of ensuring secrecy: effectively it provided an extra layer of blank paper as a cover, in much the same way as an envelope functions today (Daybell 49).

The significance of the folding becomes evident in another of Shakespeare's plays, *Cymbeline*. In this play, two letters become important to the narrative; in one Posthumus instructs his servant Pisanio to kill his wife, Imogen. The second is Posthumus's deceptive letter to Imogen herself telling her he wishes her to journey with Pisanio to meet him in Italy, where he now resides, when in fact he plans to have Pisanio dispatch her on the journey. Here we sense the importance to our discussion of Goneril's letter; when Pisanio first reads his master's letter he declares, "O damned paper, /Black as the ink that's on thee! Senseless bauble, /Art thou a fedary for this act, and look'st /So virginlike without?" (3.24 20-23). "So virginlike without" indicates the white blankness of the outside of the letter whereas the blackness of the ink remains within, tucked away so Imogen has no warning of the harmful words inside. The paper itself appropriates the meaning of the letter, becoming "damned" and "black" in a reference to the ink of the treacherous words and the outside of the letter remains deceptively clean. Similarly, in *King Lear* everything about Goneril's letter speaks of its personal and private nature – from its very folding and sealing to Oswald's refusal to hand it over to Regan to the

purpose of a letter instead of a spoken message (as Reagan queries Oswald as to why he could not simply speak the message). These conditions heighten its fierce exposure at the end of the play when it is in fact used against Goneril.

When Edgar, posing as a madman in the wilderness after his banishment, kills Oswald in a duel in Act 4 he further reiterates the privacy of epistolary correspondence in the early modern period to the audience. He takes up the letters he finds on the dead man and discusses aloud for the benefit of the audience the breach in privacy his act constitutes. He begs forgiveness for his trespass, asking, "Leave, gentle wax, and, manners, blame us not" (4.2 53). Daybell notes that with the rising value placed on privacy in the sixteenth century "the opening of another person's missive…became socially taboo, thought worthy of apology" (20). In the absence of someone to apologize to, Edgar speaks to the letter itself and begs "manners" to forgive him. He rationalizes his action somewhat, saying, "to know our enemies' minds, we rip their hearts; /Their papers is more lawful," thus ranking reading another's letter as a slightly more moral choice than killing one's enemy (4.6 254-255).

The dramatic suspense of the contents of the private letter as it circulates through the play is here satisfied for the audience when Edgar reads aloud its contents. Goneril has written:

> Let our reciprocal vows be remembered. You have many opportunities to cut him off. If your will want not, time and place will be fruitfully offered. There is nothing done, if he return the conqueror; then am I the prisoner, and his bed my jail from the loathed warmth thereof, deliver me, and supply the place for your

labor. Your wife (so I would say), your affectionate servant, and for you her own for venture, Goneril (256-264).

She recalls a previous conversation unknown to the audience in referencing their "reciprocal vows" in which she promises Edmund a space in her bed and sexual pleasure ("your labor") in exchange for her husband Albany's death ("cut him off"). Edgar, once he reads the letter, cries,

> O indistinguished space of woman's will!
> A plot upon her virtuous husband's life,
> And the exchange my brother!—Here in the sands
> Thee I'll rake up, the post unsanctified
> Of murderous lechers, and in the mature time
> With this ungracious paper [I'll] strike the sight
> Of the death-practiced duke [Albany]" (4.6 269-270).

The paper itself becomes "ungracious," or wicked, as the "unsanctified" nature of its contents extends to all players in the plot, animate and inanimate. Edgar's commentary on the very materials of the letter recalls the "blackness" of Posthumus's letter in *Cymbeline* and the correlation drawn in both between the very materials of the letter and its message. Unlike *Hippolytus,* the audience here is granted our voyeuristic desire to become privy to the contents of the private, carefully guarded letter after the build up of suspense in the first three acts of the play. Though exposed to the audience, the hermeneutic tension in the narrative is not satisfied until Edgar passes the letter to Albany in the last act and we see the ramifications of its exposure to Goneril's husband.

The exposure of the letter to Albany in the last act also renders Goneril and Edmund, its intended addressee, vulnerable to punishment by the court and satisfies our curiosity of what happens to the letter. Meant as a private epistle, as discussed above, the instability of letter correspondence becomes dramatized as Goneril and Edmund's treacherous plot that is inscribed on the letter is intercepted by Edgar and Albany and causes their downfall. In the last act Albany holds the letter up as physical evidence against Goneril and threatens to choke her with her own letter, the message of the letter thus becoming entangled with its materials. When Goneril cries out for Edmund's safety as he and Edgar duel Albany responds tersely, "stop your mouth, dame, or with this paper shall I stopple it" (5.3 155-156). Goneril's first words inscribed onto the material letter have come full circle and the threat to force the letter down her throat to silence her is the physical manifestation of making her literally eat her own words. The exposure of the letter to Albany thus satisfies the enigma of what becomes of the letter as well as renders Goneril vulnerable not only to the condemnation of the court but to physical harm. Goneril attempts to wrest the letter away from Albany to destroy this piece of evidence, as though by ripping the letter she can prevent the exposure of her complicity in the plot against her husband. She hopes by doing so to destroy the evidence against her, even though the contents have already been exposed to Edgar and Albany. The presence of the letter renders Goneril and Edmund vulnerable to condemnation and lays open their secret affair to the public. Ironically, the letter finally does reach its intended recipient: Albany turns to Edmund with the letter and instructs him to "read thine own evil" as though the letter itself, although written by Goneril, embodies the results of his treasonous nature (157). We thus trace Goneril's letter as it is exposed to the audience, Edgar, and

ultimately the rest of Lear's court. The emphasis on the letter itself, which Albany so menacingly threatens to choke his wife with ("Shut your mouth, Dame, /Or with this paper shall I stopple it"), remains the focus of its passage from character to character and although pertinent to the plot, the message remains inscribed within the letter except at one instance when it becomes vocalized in the fourth act.

The conceptual boundaries surrounding Goneril's letter as evidenced by the seriousness with which Oswald guards it and Edgar's trepidation when he opens it works in a number of ways to increase the play's power. Not only does it play off the anxiety surrounding the vulnerability of the physical mode of communicating intimate messages, but it also builds up the suspense of how the exposure of the letter will affect Goneril and Edmund as well as satisfying, through Edgar's oral reading, the audience's wishful desire to know the contents of the letter. Our physical separation from the drama unfolding on the stage distances us somewhat from the intimacy of the exposed letter, but Edgar's vocalization of the contents bring us into the action.

Manipulated Letters: *Les Liaisons dangereuses*

The conceptual boundaries of privacy surrounding epistolary correspondence and the vulnerability of correspondents to the exposure of letters become perhaps most dramatically rendered in Laclos's *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. In this eighteenth-century epistolary novel letters are copied, forwarded to unintended recipients and made public to a general audience; as Altman notes, "very few letters in [Laclos's novel] are read by their intended recipients only" (Altman 95). Here, the vulnerability, hermeneutic revelation, and readers' satisfied voyeuristic desire are tied up together with the novel's

attempted mimesis. The exposures of individual letters not only render their writers and receivers vulnerable to internal voyeurs, but the very existence of the novel is meant to suggest that the authors of all of the letters have been publicly exposed within the reality of the outside readers, directly engaging them in the narrative. Each letter is printed separately in the text with a heading describing the author and (intended) addressee with the date on the right hand side of the page, a formal technique paralleling Riera's set up of her own letter in "A Matter of Self-Esteem." The broad enigma of the novel is how the letters "came" into our possession. Before exploring the individual characters' attempts to protect their letters and the dramatic ways in which they are intercepted, copied, and manipulated I will touch briefly on Laclos's desire to convince his readers of the reality of the letters and how this satisfies our voyeuristic desire to encroach upon other's private, intimate lives and sets up the hermeneutic unknown at the very start of the narrative.

Epistolary novels of the eighteenth century are composed of series of fictional letters, often from multiple authors, whose "publication" rely on the guiding hand of a fictional editor. The genre itself grows out of the increasing awareness and preoccupation with the developing distinction between public and private life in the Western world and a growing delight in exposure to others' intimate lives. Wulf Koepke argues in "Epistolary Fiction and Its Impact on Readers: Reality and Illusion" that "the development of a larger leisure class and the widening gap between the public and private spheres brought an increasing preoccupation with the self and more and more curiosity about the intimate aspects of people's lives" (263). Furthermore, "the intimate character of this literature lies mainly in that it reveals secret wishes and fears" of others and

reflects the isolated and intimate acts of the readers themselves in their everyday lives (272). Often the authors of epistolary novels in the eighteenth century attempted to cater to their readers' desire for the exposure of others' lives by blurring the line between fiction and reality. The role of the fictional editor particularly stimulates this "illicit border traffic between reality and fiction" and occasionally the authors succeed in disguising the difference between reality and fiction. Koepke argues further that "the trick of editorship reinforces the illusion of documentary evidence and creates a text designed to look like a sequence of authentic letters. The self-elimination of a 'narrator'…the reduction from narratorship to editorship preserves the status of purported documentary authenticity while allowing for a structuring of the material according to aesthetic principles" (269).

The authentic nature of the letters in the novel further mimics reality in the internal reference to their materiality. In "Publicity, Privacy, and the Power of Fiction in the Gunning Letters," Thomas Beebee argues that with the printed publication of private letters, "traditional means of verification, such as seals, watermarks, and handwriting could no longer be used to verify authenticity" (68). Laclos seems to recognize this obstacle to his attempted verisimilitude and addresses it through the internal reference to the physical state of the letters. The authors of letters often remark on the tearstains, blotted out words, ripped paper and other evidence of the physicality of the letters the editor purports to have in his possession, rendering the letters material in the printed text.

The authors of eighteenth-century epistolary novels thus often attempt to stimulate reality and convince their readers of the authenticity of the letters compiled in a

novel. We have to look no further than the editor's note in *Les Liaisons* to understand this to be true to Laclos's novel. In the note preceding the letters, Laclos writes,

> This work, or rather, collection of letters, which may perhaps still be thought too weighty, contains nevertheless only a very small portion of the correspondence which made up their total number. Charged with putting them in order by the people with whom they were deposited, and who, I knew, intended them to be made public, I asked nothing for my pains except permission to cut anything which in my opinion might not be to the purpose (4).

The eighteenth-century epistolary novel thus attempts even in its preface to convince us of its authenticity so that it may appeal to universal intrigue into others' lives (and indeed trade magazines such as *People* or *US Weekly* following the lives of celebrities reveal that this curiosity is still prevalent today). Significantly, his publication of these "authentic' letters is at the behest of an unknown person in possession of the letters. By the end of the novel we are left wondering how they end up in his possession, although we understand they are all given to Valmont's aunt, Madame de Rosemonde, as each of the letter-writers suffer death or social banishment with the exposure of their letters. The enigma of how the (fictional) letters come into our possession, if we go along with Laclos's attempted verisimilitude, is thus only partially satisfied; we guess, relying on the general recognition of the instability of epistolary correspondence, that the letters have somehow been purchased, stolen, sold, or given to an editor for publication from their "safe" place in the possession of Madame de Rosemonde.

Laclos's novel is evidently obsessed with the exposure of the intimate details of the correspondents' lives, as its very narrative structure is one mimicking the private lives

of the characters made public. Within the narrative frame, moreover, characters copy letters, forward them to unintended recipients, publish them to the public, or collect them as evidence of affairs. The tension between the public and private that Eagleton suggests in his long list of the dangers inherent to epistolary correspondence becomes clear through the subversive acts and secrecy with which letters are exchanged in *Les Liaisons* as the correspondents attempt to protect their vulnerable positions. The need for privacy and the risk of exposure is especially prevalent for Cécile and the Présidente de Tourvel, both women who fear (or, in the case of Cécile, have mothers who fear) harm to their virtuous reputations. Stewart argues that in many occasions the very presence of a letter may signal an intimate relationship and Altman also posits that in *Les Liaisons*, in some cases, it is "less the content of the letter than its physical aspect (the letter as object rather than the letter as message)" that renders the females vulnerable to exposure (Stewart 241, Altman 18). Cécile's difficulty corresponding with Danceny exposes the intense protection her mother wraps around her daughter's virtuous image in society. Cécile bemoans to Danceny the difficulties she faces in continuing correspondence with him. She writes,

> Even receiving your letters is difficult, and, if Monsieur de Valmont were not as agreeable and clever as he is, I should not know what to do. Writing to you is even more difficult. In the mornings I do not dare because Mamma's room is right next to mine and she comes into my room the whole time. Sometimes I can in the afternoons, on the pretext of singing or playing the harp. But I still have to break off at each line so that I can be heard practicing. Luckily my chambermaid sometimes falls asleep in the evenings and…then I have to hide behind the curtain

so that my light cannot be seen, and listen for the tiniest sound so that I can hide everything under the bedclothes if anybody comes (Laclos 189).

Madame de Volange's protective watch over her daughter's actions attempts to prevent the exchange of letters that may render her daughter's reputation vulnerable to harm. Thus Cécile is forced to write to Danceny in a concealed manner, secluding herself away in an intimate, enclosed space that mimics the conceptual space of the private letter. Earlier in the correspondence, the two young lovers find means of communicating to each other beneath the watchful eye of Cécile's mother, folding pieces of paper into the young woman's harp. Cécile describes to Sophie Carnay how in the initial stages of their relationship, when she reaches for her harp to practice, "among the strings I found a letter, just folded, not sealed—and it was from him!" (Laclos 39). She relates how she responds to Danceny in the same manner, "slip[ing] my piece of paper between the strings of my harp, where his letter had been" (43). The secret and intimate nature with which these two must communicate recalls in a sense Angela and Miguel's private exchange of written messages in the public forum of the lecture rooms.

Valmont himself takes advantage of this tension between a desire for privacy and the possibility for exposure in his seduction of the Présidente. Despite her attempts to resist engaging in epistolary correspondence, Valmont finds ways to force her hand and compel her accept his letters. In a number of scenes, he presents her with letters in public, an action that causes her to quickly take them to hide from being exposed to the others present. Valmont boasts to Merteuil of one such instance in which he manipulated the Présidente into receiving his letter:

> I seized the chance when Madame de Rosemonde withdrew a little to pass my letter to her [Tourvel]. She refused to accept it, but I left it on the bed, and very properly made to pull up an armchair for my elderly aunt who wished to be near *her dear child*: she had to quickly conceal the letter to avoid any scandal (57).

Valmont understands the risk he places the Présidente in by presenting to her a letter whose very presence may render her vulnerable to social scorn (she is, after all, a married woman prided for her own virtue and religiosity).

Another instance in which he attempts to similarly force her to accept his letter or be shamed occurs when he sends her a letter by post: she, along with Madame de Rosemonde and Valmont himself, looks for letters from her absent husband and finds instead an unexpected one from Valmont, unexpected because at the time he is staying at the same house as she. When she sees the letter and recognizes his handwriting she pales and declares, "the letter and its author both fill me with disgust" (74). She rips up the letter to signal to Valmont her rejection of him and to her female companion her lack of participation in any improper exchange of letters. Valmont comments in a letter to Merteuil that the Présidente rips the letter to "save face" and at first he is dismayed. After he observes her slip the torn pieces of the letter into her pocket, however, he rejoices at his success in his seduction. Cécile and Danceny hide their letters between the harp to continue their correspondence despite the risk of exposure and Valmont manipulates the Présidente through her fear of this very exposure. The possibility for the presence of physical letters as evidence of impropriety thus renders these women vulnerable to social shame and they go through great lengths to conceal the letters and their engagement (willing or not) in epistolary correspondence outside of what is socially acceptable.

Valmont and Merteuil, the novel's two most devious characters, construct their entire conspiracy against those who have offended them by manipulating the correspondence between the young lovers Cécile Volanges and Chevalier Danceny. Valmont and Merteuil pose themselves as advisors to the younger couple, instructing them how to act around the other and even how to construct their letters to each other. In a letter to Merteuil Valmont writes, "You will see, my love, as you read the two letters enclosed, that I have carried out your plan thoroughly. Although both are dated today they were written yesterday at my house and in front of me. The letter to the girl says everything we wished" (Laclos 141). They gain access to and intercept the letters passing between the two young lovers, forwarding them to each other to read and act upon. As seen in the quotation above, Valmont dictates the contents of Danceny's letter and passes it along to Merteuil before it arrives in the hands of the intended recipient. Similarly to how Goneril's letter undergoes a series of exposures, the letters of Danceny and Cécile are constantly exposed to Valmont and Merteuil's prying eyes.

Valmont often also forwards the letters he receives from the Présidente de Tourvel to Merteuil to demonstrate to his friend the progress of his seduction. In one letter to Merteuil, he writes, "I am sending it [a letter from the Présidente] to you with the rough copy of my own. Read it and judge [its contents] for yourself…" exposing the Présidente's coveted privacy to the Marquise de Merteuil (58). Valmont continues, "by the way, send me back the monster's letter. It is possible in time she might want to put a price on these wretched things, and I must ensure that all is in order" (58). His postscript suggests the Présidente's potential desire to keep her correspondence safe from exposure to the public that would render her vulnerable to public scorn and reputable harm.

Though throughout the novel the readers are privy to all of the letters in the novel, we remain ignorant of how they become public. The hermeneutic power in Laclos's novel originates in the enigma surrounding how the letters fall into our hands (if we are to play along with the author's pretense of reality and engage in the world of the novel). With each letter we desire to become privy to the next, although we are never *not* shown an important letter. This positions Laclos's dramatic epistolary tension similarly to *King Lear* and Riera's short story, although here what we anticipate is the explanation of how the letters came to be exposed in the first place. The secrecy with which Valmont and Merteuil conduct their activities is exposed only to each other and ourselves, the readers, who are privy to the intimate letters. Their relationship and actions are not made public to the rest of the characters until the very end of the novel when Danceny publishes the Marquise's letters and forwards Valmont's letters to his aunt. We understand the impact the contents of the letters must have on those now privy to the information within. After receiving the bundled correspondence between Valmont and Merteuil after the Monsieur's death, Danceny writes of his intent to make public two of Merteuil's letters in his correspondence with Valmont's aunt, Madame de Rosemonde. By doing so, he writes her, he hopes to do "a service to society" by "unmask[ing] a woman as truly dangerous as Madame de Merteuil" and exposes the marquise to public condemnation (393). Just as a character in a Charles Gildon novel remarks that to publish the private letter is to "[pull] off the Mask in a Corner of the Room, to shew one another their Faces," Danceny seeks to reveal the true face of the woman who caused himself and others so much harm (McKeon 568). Interestingly, when the contents of the letter are made public, they seem to cause Merteuil's true character to come forth; after her letters are made public,

Madame de Merteuil contracts smallpox and becomes "horribly disfigured" (405). One bystander remarks that "her illness had turned her inside out and that presently her soul was in her face" (405). Just as the letter Imogen opens that is "virginlike without" and on the inside is "black as the ink," Merteuil's innocent reputation is ruined by her intimate dealings with Valmont and with the public knowledge of her most private doings her very figure becomes disfigured, turned inside out, mimicking the opening of her letter and its exposure to society.

Danceny remarks further on the ability for the letter to expose those involved and thus the need for their protection. He writes to Madame de Rosemonde,

> I do not believe I can put in any safer hands papers which I consider should not be destroyed, but which I should be ashamed to make any wrongful use of. I believe, Madame, that in entrusting these papers to you I am doing as great a service to the people concerned as if I were giving the letters directly to them. And I am sparing them the embarrassment of receiving such correspondence from me, and of knowing that I am aware of affairs which they would surely wish not to be made public (394).

In this passage Danceny meditates on publishing the intimate details of others' lives and reveals himself to be honorable in his handling of them. That we ultimately read them, however, suggests that the letters at some point they fall short of maintaining confidences and end up available for the perusal of the general public. Of course, in the process the fiction of the novel proclaims itself.

Privacy Violated for "Public Good:" *The Aspern Papers* and *Possession*

The exposure of intimate letters once again becomes a point of dramatic attention in Henry James's *The Aspern Papers* and A.S. Byatt's *Possession*. In both cases, present-day scholars (contemporary to the novels' publication dates) pursue love letters written by deceased poets and rationalize their behavior by their scholarly pursuit. Clare Brant, a real-life scholar who studies the letters of Mary Queen of Scots, admits to her own rationalization in reading the private letters of those who have passed. She recognizes that as she peers into Mary's private correspondence,

> the single figure of the critic gate-crashes a relationship between two people, in willful intrusion on intimacy. This snooping is sanctioned by scholarship, and the critic can expiate at least a little for trespass by self-consciousness. After all, critics, like lovers, understand solitude and its relation to writing (Brant in Gilroy 74).

Just as Brant worries over her intrusion and rationalizes it by benefit of the letters' publication or information gleaned from them, so the fictional scholars in these two novels recognize their "gate-crashing" role and fret, to a greater or lesser degree, over disturbing the private space created by the correspondence. Both *The Aspern Papers* and *Possession* contain love letters of the most intimate and private nature (both reveal secret love affairs) and the narratives explore the moral issues surrounding their exposure to others and potential publication, bringing in the outside readers in the moral implications of their exposure.

In James's novel an unnamed narrator attempts to place his hands on the letters of Jeffrey Aspern, a slightly well known American poet and the object of the narrator's

scholarly career. The letters, which the narrator is not certain exist until the end of the novel, remain in Venice in the possession of Aspern's past lover Juliana Bordereau. Unlike the situations discussed previously, readers of *The Aspern Papers* are never granted that "over-the-shoulder" glimpse at the intimate and private space the letter creates when read aloud to an audience or quoted or marked off in a text. The letters are never seen by the first-person narrator and thus remain hidden from our view as well. Similarly to *Hippolytus*, the contents of Aspern's letters are hinted at (we understand them to be love letters) but never exposed. One critic of James observes, "not unexpectedly, the American editor's frustration at the loss of the Aspern letters spilled over to some of James's first readers" and a contemporary review even complained when Juliana's niece Tita burns them "[I]t is disappointing to lose […] all knowledge of what the papers contained" (Monterio 35). The hermeneutic or secretive code is thus in some sense frustrated, both for the narrator and reader, by the destruction of the letters at the narrative's end.

Because of Juliana's intensely private and secluded nature, the narrator decides he must try to possess the letters by applying under a false name as Juliana's tenant. He understands that his attempt to see the letters is a "horribly intrusive" act and he occasionally, although perhaps not often enough, worries over the morality of his actions (James 17). Intriguingly, James himself felt the importance of keeping his own personal letters private from the prying eyes of those hoping to publish them. In a letter to an editor discussing the potential publication of his correspondence with Sarah Orne Jewett he declares,

> I find our admiral friend's occasional communications have submitted to the law that I have myself made tolerably absolute these last years…the law of not leaving personal and private documents at the mercy of any accidents, or even of my executors! I kept almost all letters for years—till my receptacle would no longer hold them; then I made a gigantic bonfire and have been easier in mind [sic] since—save as to a certain residuum which had to survive (James in Rosenberg 257).

The Aspern Papers appears to reflect James's belief in the privacy of one's personal writings and correspondence. The parallel between his life and those of his fictional characters underscores the tension between the universal desire for privacy in correspondence and the letters' potential for exposure.

In *A Superficial Reading of Henry James* Thomas Otten describes James's disgust at the issues of his day that trouble the realms of public and private. Otten observes that James believes that "the problems of privacy and publicity [is]… crucial to his project [*The Aspern Papers*]" (88). The nineteenth-century author himself writes in a journal of "the impudence and shamelessness, of the newspaper and the interviewer, the devouring publicity of life, the extinction of all sense between public and private" (James quoted in Otten 88-89). Otten further argues that "what James saw as the collapse in America of privacy as a value is registered…as a crisis in the relationship between bodies and writing; when persons 'go into print' to the extent that they seem to be physically constituted of writing, privacy ceases to function" (106). He cites the Supreme Court case Boyd v. United States (1886) and the debate about whether the fourth amendment, which guarantees "the right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and

effects against unreasonable searches and seizures," prevents the court from "compelling a person to produce his papers [or if it] should be considered just as much an intrusion as rifling through his drawers" (89-90).

James clearly would agree with the second conclusion, that taking personal letters was the same as intruding onto a person's most intimate and private moments, reflected in the ferociousness with which his fictional Juliana Bordereau guards her papers. The letters' final hiding place suggests her intense desire to keep them from the narrator, or indeed from anyone but herself; we learn, along with the narrator, that she hides them between the mattresses of her bed—"sheets held between the sheets, a very intimate envelope" as Joseph Rosenberg puts it (Rosenberg 261). The narrator admits to understanding her desire for privacy despite his efforts to intrude upon it. To Mrs. Prest's suggestion that he simply offer to buy the letters, he declares, "The old woman won't have the documents spoken of; they are personal, delicate, intimate, and she hasn't modern notions, God bless her! If I should sound that note first I should certainly spoil the game. I can arrive at the papers only by putting her off her guard" (James 9). The narrator scoffs at Mrs. Prest's idea of simply offering a sum for the letters because he understands, even before meeting her, that Juliana will guard the letters especially carefully because of their intimate and personal nature. The privacy surrounding the letters extends even beyond Juliana's death; Tita tells the narrator that Juliana's possessions are to be inherited under "very strict conditions," a statement the narrator infers to mean that "the bequest would be accompanied with a command that the articles bequeathed should remain concealed from every inquisitive eye" (79). Indeed, Juliana

keeps her correspondence with Aspern so well hidden that even her niece, living in the same house for so many years, has only glimpsed them from afar.

Throughout the novel we see this consciousness in the narrator of the immorality breaking into another's correspondence. When he applies to Miss Tita for her help in recovering the hidden documents he admits his actions "would have been in the worst possible taste if anything less vital (from my point of view) had been at stake" (76). He later describes feeling even "like the reporter of a newspaper who forces his way into a house of mourning" (77). He expresses outrage (whether believable or not remains uncertain) when Miss Tita informs him of Juliana's fear that he may even resort to digging them up were they to be buried with her. He exclaims, "violating a tomb? Mercy on us, what must she have thought of me!" (125). When he sneaks into Juliana's room in search of the papers he admits, "I think it was the worst thing I did" (107). And indeed everything about this scene dramatizes the wrongful act: the dark room, the sleeping Bordereaus, his hesitant actions. The enclosed, dark space on the second floor of the house already bespeaks an intimate, private space for the letters and then, upon gaining entry to the room, the narrator is "confronted with the evident fact that Miss Bordereau did not leave her secretary, her cupboard and the drawers of her tables gaping" and "I had no keys, no tools and no ambition to smash her furniture" (109). The enclosed space of the cabinet within a private room signifies the different levels of privacy the narrator encroaches upon in his search: not only does he break into her dressing room, he also hopes to go even further into the closed writing cabinet. The violation of this act and the realization of his desire to publish her love's letters causes Juliana to fall back "as if death had descended on her" when she catches him. The narrator admits, "I [shall never] forget

the tone in which as I turned, looking at her, she hissed out passionately, furiously: 'Ah, you publishing scoundrel!'" (110).

The narrator rationalizes his actions with the belief that the publication of all of Aspern's work, no matter how private or unrelated to his poetry, will benefit the poet's readers. He tells Miss Tita that his interest in the papers derives from the fact that "they would be of such immense interest to the public, such immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (76). To publish and expose Aspern's life and work is indeed at the very heart of the narrator's career and he argues that he and his partner John Cumnor "held, justly, as I think, that we had done more for his [Aspern's] memory than any one else, and we had done it by opening lights into his life. He had nothing to fear from us because he had nothing to fear from the truth" (4-5). "Opening lights into his life" portrays a very different view of the attempted break-in that so horrifies Juliana. The narrator's belief in the public's interest in these private papers recalls the similar fascination of exposure of privacy that birthed the eighteenth-century epistolary novel as well as the idea that James's readers were at first themselves frustrated at not being privy to the Aspern letters. Letters thus allow us to satisfy our desire to expose and read the intimate details of others' lives and perhaps may be seen both in the narrator's actions and in our own frustrations at not seeing the letters themselves.

Though the desire for the disclosure of the contents of the letter is natural, it is not necessary to the novel's hermeneutic dramatic tension. Rather than a desire to see the contents of the letters and for them to reveal to us some intimate moment in the life of Jeffrey Aspern, it is the fate of the letters that drives the suspense of the narrative (we are

not, after all, scholars of Aspern's poetry like the narrator). I would argue instead that the novel's dramatic power rests upon our desire to find out who "wins" in the end; will the elusive Miss Bordereau maintain her coveted privacy of the letters? Or will the persistent, nagging narrator claim his prize and grasp them in his hands? James keeps the narrator's desire to see the contents of the letters from becoming ours by creating a distant narrator whose judgment we distrust and whose morals often stand on shaky ground. We have to look no farther than the serious consideration he gives Tita's marriage proposal in exchange for the letters. Although he views her as "a plain, dingy, elderly person" who speaks with a "mild literalness" he still, at the very end in a moment of desperation, considers accepting her proposal (134, 14,133). Unsympathetic to the narrator and without his scholarly interest in Aspern's life and works, the content of the letters become less important than the showdown between the American editor and elderly woman who clearly treasures privacy, both her own and Aspern's. James centers his novel on silent letters as though to remind his readers of the immorality of attempting to break through the conceptual boundaries established around epistolary correspondence in society.

The idea of the general public's benefit at the expense of another's privacy is one explored extensively in A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, where the letters are in fact revealed to the scholars within the narrative and to Byatt's outside readers. The hermeneutic tension originates in our (and the internal scholars') desire for the final letter detailing how Ash and LaMotte's relationship ended, the letter serving as the final piece to a puzzle complexly created through the course of the novel. The intimacy of the correspondence between Rudolph Ash and Christabel LaMotte is exposed to scholars Maud Bailey and Roland Mitchell (along with, eventually, James Blackadder, Mortimer Cropper, Beatrice

Nest, and Leonora Stern). Ash and LaMotte value their privacy and the intimate space their correspondence provides them and they go to great lengths to protect it. LaMotte's roommate, Blanche, jealously watches Christabel receive letters in the post and comments, "you need not hurry them away to lie in your sewing-basket or run upstairs to fold them under your handkerchiefs" (52). LaMotte hides her letters, secreting them into the house through her sewing basket or tucking them beneath her handkerchiefs and away from her roommate who would not approve of her relationship with Ash, given the two women's chosen life of seclusion away from society. This protection of her privacy and the intimacy with which LaMotte treats Ash's letters extends to her preservation of the packaged letters after he returns her letters. When Maud, Roland, and Sir George find the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte in Christabel's old room, they find the letters in a "package, wrapped in fine white linen, tied with tape, about and about and about, like a mummy" (93). This mummy-like wrapping keeps them closely bound and that they are wrapped so tightly and securely—"about and about"—suggests LaMotte's desire to keep them private and safe. The packaging itself, made of "fine white linen," forms another layer around the material and functions almost as another envelope to the letters.

In their pursuit of the letters Maud and Roland often worry, more seriously than James's narrator, over the breach in privacy they must make. When Maud cuts the tape it falls away and "the linen, many-layered, was turned back" to reveal the letters (94). Maud hesitates before she opens the packet; she haltingly and half-heartedly protests, "We shouldn't —cut—" as she picks at the knots in the ribbon. She doesn't want to disturb the packaged letters any more than she has to, but her sense of invasion and intrusion at undoing the packaging stands at odds with her desire for the letters. In the

same scene Roland admits to feeling as though he is " prying" when he looks through LaMotte's desk (though there is no one alive to call him a "publishing scoundrel") and when he finds Ash's first letters in the *Vico* text he remarks, "they aren't Cropper's or Blackadder's or Lord Ash's either. They seemed private" (56). Furthermore, when first granted permission to read the correspondence by the formidable Sir George, Roland frets over his action: "The truth was, Roland thought uneasily, these letters, these busy, passionate letters, had never been written for him to read—as Ragnarok had, as Mummy Possest had, as the Lazarus poem had. They had been written for Christabel LaMotte" (146). Unlike the poems, which Ash intentionally publishes and sells to a public audience, Roland understands the letters to LaMotte create a private, intimate space, one that he now uncomfortably intrudes upon. Although unwilling for his career's sake to not read the letters, he seems to agree somewhat with Sir George that they should leave the letters, and their authors, alone.

Just as Henry James burned his correspondence to prevent others from seeing them, the fictional Ash hopes to save his own writing from future scholars. On his deathbed he instructs his wife Ellen, "burn what they should not see" (482). Ellen observes that her husband guarded his private documents closely: "He hated the new vulgarity of contemporary biography, the ransacking of Dickens's desk for his most trivial memoranda, Forster's unspeakable intrusions into the private pains and concealments of the Carlyles" (480). She also desires to keep his private life from the public; in her journal she writes,

> Who can endure to think of greedy hands furrowing through Dickens' desk for his private papers, for these records of personal sentiment that were his and his only–

–not meant for public consumption—though now those who will not reread his marvellous books with true care will sup up his so-called Life in his Letters (145).

She regards future readers of these personal documents as consuming the intimate details of Dickens' life, and indeed views the future scholars pursuing correspondence as "vultures" feeding off of the dead (481). The privacy of the desk in this passage also reminds us of Juliana's locked cabinet and the snooping editor in *The Aspern Papers*. The enclosed space of the desk, the "greedy hands," the desire to publish the intimate moments of a deceased poet indicate the widespread private value placed on the writing desk and personal correspondence and the vulnerability the exposure of these letters may signify.

Ellen further writes, "I remember being much struck with Harriet Martineau, in her autobiography, saying that to print private letters was a form of treachery—as though one should tell the intimate talk of two friends with their feet on the fender, on winter nights" (48). The intimacy of this scene, of friends speaking quietly and intimately together, associated with epistolary correspondence recalls Erasmus's instruction that a letter should "whisper" and suggests that to make the correspondence public is analogous to telling the secrets of your friend. She finishes the journal entry vowing, "He [Ash] shall not be picked by vultures" (481). Ellen's disgust of the public's desire to become privy to this intimate, secret space becomes understandable in light of her own trepidation in reading her husband's private writings. After he dies she goes through his desk, which for her over the years has assumed an almost reverent and secretive air. Even though married "she had never read his letters" and when she finally looks through his desk the act "fill[s] her with a superstitious bodily fear" (494). She not only believes that the

letters of poets should be kept private from the general public but she also respects the privacy of her husband to the extent that she hesitates going through his correspondence.

Ellen Ash exposes to her future fictional readers (Maud and Roland) the existence of a final letter from LaMotte to Ash, one that Christabel asked her to give to her husband on his deathbed. Ellen chooses not to give it to him, however, and instead buries it with him unopened. She writes of her actions: "And if the ghouls dig them up again? Then justice will perhaps be done to her [LaMotte] when I am not here to see it" (501). Her belief in the possibility that someone in the future may attempt to retrieve her husband's belongings from his very grave grants her the option to passively harm LaMotte's reputation after they are both dead. The letter never makes it to its intended recipient and instead waits for years before it is finally opened on a table surrounded by anxious scholars bending over reading it and hoping to make public its contents. The opening of this letter corresponds with the ending of the novel; the hermeneutic unknown is revealed and our curiosity sated along with the protagonists as we find out the truth of LaMotte's disappearance and of Maud's descent from the illegitimate offspring of the two poets.

The notions of privacy woven around epistolary correspondence offer potential in literature for dramatic moments in their exposure or disturbance of this privacy. The growing value attributed to privacy in the Western world interacts with the physical construction of letters and the intimacy with which they are treated. The intensity of these conceptual boundaries surrounding letters becomes evident through the personal protective treatment of letters and the intimacy granted to the space on the page. In this chapter I examined the way in which exposed letters conceptually and imaginatively conceived of as material objects function dramatically. The physical letter becomes

important in some cases (*King Lear, Les Liaisons*) when its very presence signals to others a subversive act or impropriety. In others the messages inscribed on the letters become reappropriated, transformed verbally or transcribed into other writing as the physical letters are intercepted. These exposures render their correspondents vulnerable to public judgment, reveal a hidden enigma in the narrative, or feed the audience or reader's voyeuristic desire to the intimate lives of others provided by the space of the letter. The distance between the fiction and the reader through a narrative's self-referentiality, attempted verisimilitude, or combination of the two in these varied texts complicates our relationship to the private and intimate space of the letter exposed. The conceptual boundaries of privacy erected around letters and the references to their form and content allow us to render them imaginative material because of our own "grammatical agreement" (if we borrow Riffaterre's term) between our conceptions of the privacy of letters and how we see them dramatized in literature.

Chapter Three

The Embodied Letter

Wryght to me often for in thy absents I make love to thy letters.

Sir Thomas Baskerville to wife (Schneider 111).

The relationship between writing and the body has perhaps diminished in the age of computers and technology, but there still exists an undeniable bond between the writer and his or her pen and paper. The translation of language between thought and written form requires a creative, conscious process that marks the text with traces of the writer through the choice of grammar, syntax, word choice, and, obviously, subject. This Bakhtinian-esque notion recalls the theorist's claim of the multiplicity of voices inherent in a text and that "language depends upon the material conditions that produces it and those that regulate its consumption" (Bakhtin 259). Iwanicki builds on this concept, arguing that with language we "mark" our place in the world, "enacting our material being" (Iwanicki 496). The relationship between language and body that these two critics explore begins to develop the sense of embodiment in written language. Thomas Otten further argues that "acts of reading and writing tend to happen close to the body; perhaps that is why it seems possible to imagine…that bodies and papers can lend each other their qualities or attributes" (Otten 87). By the physical proximity of the paper to the author's body and the material language linking back to the social and physical writers thus weave

together the body and the written word. In *Epistolary Bodies* Elizabeth Cook argues that "handwritten letters [bear] traces of the body that produced them in inkblots, teardrops, erasures [and] revisions" (Cook 2). These physical reminders of the writer visibly recall the living body, and Janet Altman even argues that "whereas in theater, film, and opera the life force conventionally expresses itself metonymically through the breath that gives voice to speech or song…in epistolary literature ink is regularly metaphorized—explicitly or implicitly—as life's blood" (Altman 149). The very material ink of a letter, then, holds the power to signal to a reader the life of its writer. As Greenblatt and Gallagher postulated under different circumstances but pertinent to epistolary correspondence, "any text depends upon the absence of the bodies and voices that it represents" (Greenblatt and Gallagher 31). This relationship between body and text intensifies in moments of epistolarity where the materiality of letters inexorably bind to the absent bodies of their correspondents.

The intimacy of the private space created in letters stimulates a desire for the correspondent through the allusion of the other's presence within their writing. Schneider argues that "intimacy, as a component of privacy, demand[s] physical closeness" and if physical proximity is not possible, intimacy then demands "an object capable of representing that body, of rendering it present even in its absence" (Schneider 133, Roger Chartier in Schneider 133). Letters may fill this role by the existence of an "imaginative, almost magical correspondence between the letter and its writer" (133). Correspondents, in fact, often reach for a spiritual form of "communion of transcendence and a consummation of desire" through their letters (140). Altman calls this "make-believe," a less glamorous notion of the imaginative powers stimulated to create this bond between

correspondents, but she still agrees that an exchange of letters is "preoccupied with immediacy, with *presence*, because it is the product of absence" (Altman 135 emphasis added). Just as Greenblatt and Gallagher noted that with any text there is generally an absence of the body, Altman calls our attention to a letter's role of mediating distance between correspondents and of filling the void created by the absence of a physical body.

Letters often fill this void by rendering the writer present through the link between the body of a writer and his or her writing. Letters may embody a writer's voice through the phrasing and "tone" of the writing. When Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir writes of her adopted mother's letters, for example, she says that through the letters one can "certainly hear her voice in them, its most fleeting along with its most constant tones: her true, living voice" (Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir in Dawson 3-4). Mary Wordsworth similarly links her husband's body to his letter; she writes that his love letter is equal to the "breathing of thy inmost heart upon paper" (Dawson 3). For Wordsworth, the space of the letter grants her husband a container for his deepest feelings that are then transported to her through the paper itself. Her reference to "breathing" further suggests a connection between her words and body and likens the letter to a sustaining physical act. Hawthorne exemplifies the ultimate illusion of physical intimacy when he writes in a letter to his lover, "belovedest…I have folded it [your letter] to my heart, and ever and anon it sends a thrill through me; for thou has seeped in with thy love—it seems as if thy head were leaning against my breast" (Hawthorne in Decker 39). For Hawthorne, the letter becomes metonymically linked back to his lover. For these historical writers letters are a medium that embodies the writer and, especially clear in Hawthorne's passage, renders the writer's body in an imagined sense present to the recipient.

In *Epistolarity: Approaches to Form* Altman applies Roman Jackobson's conception of metaphor and metonymy to the letter as "mediator of desire." The first concept, metaphoric, allows the letter to generate an image of the other and to conjure up "interiorized images and comparisons" (Altman 19). The association between the letter and the physical writer or receiver "is reached by imaginative contemplation" and does not follow a logical chain of signifiers. Instead, it requires a "transpositive leap" between the letter and the person imagined to be present ("Metaphor/metonymy"). The second aspect of the letter in mediating desire is its ability to function metonymically. This occurs when "the letter itself, by virtue of physical contact, stands for the lover" or other correspondent (Altman 19). In metonymy "'a word or phrase denoting an object, action, institution, etc.,' is functionally replaced with a 'word or phrase denoting one of its properties or something associated with it'" ("Metaphor/metonymy"). A letter may link metonymically back to the hand of the writer, tying together the piece of paper to the body of its writer. Through both the poetic phrasing of the writer's language and the physical traces and evidence of the writer embedded within the paper, the letter gains the potential to generate an image of a correspondent in two ways: metaphorically by making an imaginative leap between the letter and correspondents to generate an image between the writer or reader; metonymically by retracing the associations that logically follow its very presence back to the writer who placed pen to paper or forward to the future reader who will hold it in his or her hands.

The letter's ability to serve as a proxy for a correspondent often causes correspondents in love letters to warp the reality of the papered medium. In Hawthorne's letter, for example, a correspondent attributes to a letter qualities of the body of its author.

The letter, heightened in the imagination and psyche of the correspondent, appropriates the very sense of the writer. The link between body and letter in many cases results in the letter becoming a fetish by the writer's sexual desire for the correspondent that transfers to the paper because of the paper's physical and emotional proximity to its writer or reader. According to Freud, fetishism occurs when there is an "overvaluation of the sexual object, which inevitably extends to everything that is associated with it" (Freud 20). He defines the fetish as occurring when "the normal sexual object is replaced by another which bears some relation to it, but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim" (19). This object "bears an assignable relation to the person whom it replaces and preferably to that person's sexuality" (19). Part of this definition of fetish relies on its status as a material object (non-spiritual) that is "established in an intense relation to and with power over the desires, actions, health, and self-identity of individuals" (Pietz 10). Within psychoanalytic terms, the fetish connotes an "effective symbolization of the sexual human body 'fixated' in relation to certain material things" (10). The sexualized letter thus can carry traces of the body of the writer for the fetishizer. Thomas Dant argues that Freud's definition of the "abnormal" fetish relies on "underlying normal sexual aim [as] a different form of hunger, the biological, sexual 'need' that is manifest as desire which may be redirected towards objects in sexual fetishism" (Dant 16). This desire originates from a natural, bodily want or need for the other that is transferred onto the object. This object-turned-fetish may not hold value for others and "yet [may] hold immense psychic, spiritual, and/or social value" for the one who sexualizes it (Oliver 40). The proximity of letters to the bodies of their writers positions the paper as a potential object that may offer, similarly to clothing or jewelry, "the amorous flow or sense of

being touched" to another correspondent (Pietz 12). Correspondents, such as Hawthorne, may thus attribute a sexualized meaning to the letter because of its metonymic link to the body of its author. Because of the intimate, personal space it provides for correspondents to imagine a connection with the other, the letter, especially as a fetishtic object, plays off the strong bond existing between writers and their texts.

In some epistolary moments the sexual desire placed on a letter through its association with the life and body of the writer becomes dramatically rendered. The tension between the absence of a physical correspondent and the other's desire for personal contact may stimulate an overvaluation of the letter. This chapter explores the various situations in which letters embody their correspondents and create for the writer or reader(s) erotic stimulations of the correspondent and argues that here the materiality of the letter entangles itself with erotic and emotional desires. I examine the letter as a fetishized object in romantic correspondence in *Possession*, "A Matter of Self-Esteem," Kate Chopin's "Her Letters," *Two Gentlemen of Verona,* and *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* and note how in each the intimacy afforded by letters to the correspondents causes them to warp the reality of the paper into an almost supernatural state. I then move on to discuss in *Possession* and *The Aspern Papers* how the letter functions as a fetish for fictional scholars studying letters of past poets, and similarly erotically arouses their desire for sensual contact. I then briefly examine a few instances in which the physical and conceptual material properties of epistolary correspondents curiously impact the very ontology of correspondents in *Possession*. Finally, I examine the way in which a mediation of the presence and absence of correspondents in letters allows both a concomitant sense of intimacy and physical connection and maintains a certain desired

distance in *Possession*, *I, the Divine*, and "A Matter of Self-Esteem." The relationship between the materiality of the letters and the bodies of their writers and readers suggests that the intimacy between correspondents offered in letter writing is transferred to the paper itself.

Fetish I: Love Letters Between Correspondents

In Byatt's *Possession*, the erotic feelings that the poets Ash and LaMotte develop for each other over the course of their relationship transfers to the paper itself and suggests that the process of writing may create a sense of presence for its correspondents. In one of his letters to LaMotte, for example, Ash writes, "I am reluctant to take my pen from the paper and fold up this letter—for as long as I write to you, I have the illusion that we are in touch" (Byatt 215). Ash evokes the concept of physical proximity, that the very process of writing on a piece of paper that will soon be in LaMotte's hands may bridge the physical distance between them. Schneider argues, "images of the writer's body and the materiality of the letter operated in order to textualize positive emotions such as love and affection. Affect was often imaginatively mapped onto the spatial confines of the paper itself" (123). Ash imaginatively "maps" out his desire for LaMotte in the space of his letter. His profession as a writer enhances the intimacy between him and his writing and for him the very process of writing becomes erotic as he imagines LaMotte reading his words. At one point he writes to her, "Only write to me, I love to see the hop and skip and sudden starts of your ink" (147). The material evidence of her active mind relates back to Christabel's living body and stimulates Ash's desire for her. In its role as a physical object imbued with emotionally charged significances, the letter gains a

"spiritual" meaning as the two poets yearn to connect physically through their words and the paper.

A similar situation arises in Riera's "A Matter of Self-Esteem" when Angela describes reading Miguel's letters after their break-up. In this short story, however, the language of her lover metaphorically generates images of Miguel rather than metonymically linking her erotically to his body. She tells Ingrid, "sometimes…I summoned his presence by reading his letters, which I memorized" (Riera 29). She continues to extol his writing style, saying, "his skillful handling of a wide linguistic range seduced me," thus indicating that, similarly to Ash and LaMotte's correspondence, it is through his language that she generates this image of her ex-lover (30). As I shall discuss later, Angela also seems to generate images of Ingrid as she writes the letter to her friend, speaking to her as though she were in the same room. That the letter can create images of the writer through language implies the materiality of language itself and its ability to embody the writer's voice and character.

The letter's ability to *increase* the desire, rather than simply mediate it, arises in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, a novel in which letters often dramatically become the objects of erotic fantasy in their metonymic transfers between writers. After her first letter from Chevalier Danceny, for example, Cécile Volanges writes to her correspondent Sophie Carnay:

> As soon as I closed my eyes I could see him standing there saying all those things I had just read. As soon as I woke…I took out his letter again and read it through again slowly. I took it into bed with me and kissed it as if…Perhaps it is wicked to kiss a letter in that way, but I could not stop myself (Laclos 39).

She acknowledges her almost sacrilegious behavior, calling herself "wicked" because of the idolatrous nature of her actions. Her desire for Danceny is so strong that in her erotic state she brings the letter into bed with her and fantasizes it becoming her lover in like fashion to how Hawthorne places his lover's letter to his heart and imagines it as her head on his chest. Although they barely know each other, Danceny's letter increases Cécile's innocent desire for physical contact. The passage above also iterates the way in which the writer's language can metaphorically generate his or her image for the writer. Cécile describes to her friend how she sees Danceny speaking aloud the words he wrote down, metaphorically relating the letter back to its writer and rendering an image of him present in her bedroom.

This stimulated desire transferred to paper appears most erotically in Kate Chopin's "Her Letters," a short story about a woman who leaves her correspondence with a lover in a packet for her husband to find after her death. Before she dies, the woman attempts to burn her letters to destroy the evidence of her affair but finds herself unable to complete the task; her emotional attachment to the letters prevents her from casting them all into the fire. After she burns a few she reacts violently to her own actions:

> She stopped and began to pant—for she was far from strong, and she stayed staring into the fire with pained and savage eyes. Oh, what had she done! What had she not done! With feverish apprehension she began to search among the letters before her. Which of them had she so ruthlessly, so cruelly put out of existence? (Chopin).

"Put out of existence" hints of killing or in some way ending a life, particularly when coupled with "ruthlessly" and "cruelly," terms associated with bodily harm. Thus to burn

the letters is to kill the writer himself, and Chopin's protagonist frantically regrets her actions with fervor equal to the idea that she herself had physically harmed her lover. When finally she finds that letter most precious to her, in relief for its safety, she erotically "crushed it between her palms…[and] kissed it again and again. With her sharp white teeth she tore the far corner from the letter, where the name was written; she bit the torn scrap and tasted it between her lips and upon her tongue like some god-given morsel" (Chopin). The unnamed protagonist erotically savors satisfaction, tasting and consuming the paper itself, the letter itself imaginatively now the lover's body. Erotic desire for her lover causes her to warp the reality of the paper's function and, metonymically, to link the paper to its writer and ingest it in her desire for him.

The very materiality of the letter as proxy for a romantic connection becomes heightened in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, when Julia, in defense of her virtue and vulnerability in front of her servant Lucetta, rips Proteus's letter into scraps. In her desire to impress upon Lucetta the sincerity of her rejection of the suitor, she destroys it, signaling to her servant a clear message of her feelings. Altman argues that when a letter takes on a physical representation of its writer its "rejection…'signals' for rejection" of the sender (Altman 19). Julia physically rejects the letter dramatically in her anger at Lucetta's supposed desire to "conspire of my youth," and in doing so rejects Proteus himself. Her imaginative association between Proteus and his letter becomes clear when, once Lucetta exits, Julia swoops down to pick up the scraps and places the one bearing Proteus's name close to her heart, telling it, "Poor wounded name, my bosom as a bed /Shall lodge thee till thy wound be throughly healed" (*Two Gentlemen of Verona* 1.2 115-116). Similarly to how Chopin's protagonist regretted burning her lover's letters

for the harm she believes it brings to the writer himself, Shakespeare's protagonist calls herself "unkind Julia" for "throw[ing] thy name against the bruising stones, /Trampling contemptuously on thy distain" (110-113). Speaking as though Proteus himself were rendered present by his very words on the page, Julia apologizes for physically harming this extension of his being.

She meditates on the letter itself; her language reflects how Proteus's love becomes embedded within the materials, and her speech again reiterates Stewart's observation of the intimacy between writers and their writing materials in the early modern period. She cries, "O hateful hands, to tear such loving words; /Injurious wasps, to feed on such sweet honey/ And kill the bees that yield it with your stings. /I'll kiss each several paper for amends" (6-9). Again, in her desire for Proteus she links her actions to the paper back to the writer himself, promising to "kiss" the "bruised" words. She also disassociates herself from her hands, condemning them for tearing his words as though she could divorce herself from her earlier actions. Her evocation of the materials of the letters underscores the medium upon which she builds this imaginative conceit that links Proteus's body to his letter. She likens these "hateful," disassociated hands to wasps that enjoy the process of "feed[ing] on such sweet honey," referencing the use of beeswax for seals and the character of Proteus's language. As Stewart argues, Shakespeare's play on the physical aspects of letters reflects the awareness of the era of the physical components of the letter and the careful and laborious process of writing a letter in the early modern period.[3] When Julia rips the letter, she clearly sends a message to her servant of her rejection of Proteus, only immediately to regret her actions and

[3] See, for example, Alan Stewart's analysis of the correct format, length, folding, ink, etc., that letter-writers had to prepare themselves (Stewart 40-52).

apologize to the letter as though through its connection to Proteus she might apologize to him as well.

However much the fictional correspondents in these narratives envisage an almost spiritual and highly imaginary intimate connection with their lovers, they rely on the physical letter that bears the traces of the writers' bodies. The physical markers on the page often take on significance for the receiver as evidence of some quality of the writer. When Valmont breaks into the Présidente's writing desk, for example, and observes his letter soaked with tears he writes to Merteuil, "you can imagine how delighted I was to detect upon it the quite distinct traces of tears of my adorable devotee" (Laclos 97). The tears for him signal the success of his seduction, reiterating the physical markers of the letter as communicating (unintended) meaning to their observer. He further relates finding in her desk a copy of a different letter she had returned to him earlier that is "faithfully copied out in her hand, in writing that was shaky and distorted, proof enough of the sweet agitation of her heart during this activity" (97). The script reflecting the Présidente's "shaky" hand evidences her state of mind and signals to her seducer her desire for him. The reality of the paper's simple materiality becomes heightened in these moments of erotic desire for the other that warps the reality of the paper and places a greater significance on letters themselves.

Fetish II: The "Publishing Scoundrels"

The erotic or physical desire for the letters and their function metonymically to represent the writer is not always confined to the correspondents. In Byatt's *Possession* and James's *The Aspern Papers* the fictional scholars of the deceased poets (Jeffery

Aspern in James's novel, Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte in Byatt's) pursue the letters of the poets with fervor almost equal to Chopin's protagonist's frantic search for her lover's favorite letter. Both novels, one published in the nineteenth century and the other almost a century later, contemplate the negative associations placed on those who overvalue objects from the past because of their physical proximity or trace of the deceased. As discussed in Chapter Two, the fictional scholars rigorously defend their search for the letters as contributions to the poets' fame and renown. In both, however, the letters themselves become important for the scholars because of their link to the bodies of their writers. According to William Pietz, "'Fetish' has always been a word of sinister pedigree…it has always been a word with a past, forever becoming 'an embarrassment'" for those who use it (Pietz 5). For all of the fictional scholars, their hunt for letters of the deceased becomes precisely that which they consciously claim to avoid: a fetishized desire to possess and grasp hold of some tangible trace of the bodies of those living in the past.

In *The Aspern Papers*, for example, the narrator so desires to be in touch in some way with the author that when he goes by Ash's mistress's house, he admits, "Jeffery Aspern had never been in it that I knew of; but some note of his voice seemed to abide there by a roundabout implication, a faint reverberation" (James 3). The mere outside of a house in which Aspern's mistress, Juliana Bordereau, and potentially his letters reside exudes to the narrator a "faint reverberation" of Aspern's voice. Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir's description of her stepmother's letters reminds us of the possibility for letters to contain the very voice of their author and in his heightened sensitivity to anything

relating to Aspern's possessions James's narrator seems to extend this voice to the very house in which the letters are kept.

The ability for a letter to "echo" the voice of the author and to embody its author through his or her writing often places the letter above other memorabilia in the scale of the "relic." In a chapter titled "Bodies, Papers, and Persons" in *A Superficial Reading of Henry James* Otten argues that letters "seem to offer some sort of bodily trace… [to] offer a glimpse of the author's own hand" (93). Whether through the actual touch of the deceased's hand metonymically linking the paper back to the pencil and hand of the writer or through the words and symbols on the page itself and what the act of writing signals to the reader, the letter in its completeness symbolizes its author for those desirous of some form of connection. Otten argues that the fictional editor hopes to read Aspern's "body back into writing," as though by obtaining the papers he can resurrect in a sense the deceased poet (94). Just as he attributes a kind of aura to Juliana and her house, the editor's "overvaluation" of the poet extends his desire to everything Aspern has touched. The editor rationalizes his pursuit of the papers with the contributions they will make to his research, as explored in Chapter Two, but his intense desire for the papers exposes his lust for the possession of traces of the deceased.

James himself comments on his intrigue of the idea of some way touching the past:

> I delight in a palpable imaginable *visitable* past—in the nearer distances and the clearer mysteries, the marks and signs of a world we may reach over to as by making a long arm we grasp an object at the other end of our own table. The table is the one, the common expanse, and where we lean, so stretching, we find it firm

> and continuous. That, to my imagination, is the past most fragrant of all, or of almost all, the poetry of the thing outlived and lost and gone, and yet in which the precious element of closeness, telling so of connexions but tasting so of differences, remains appreciable (*The Aspern Papers* introduction by Bottkol x).

This "delight" in the touchable, graspable past for James materializes in Aspern's letters and his emphasis on the "thing" that has lived and died mirrors in an odd way the desire between epistolary correspondents for the other, whom they cannot physically touch but whose letters grant them a "precious element of closeness." "Tasting" further recalls Chopin's protagonist who consumes the letters to feel a touch or presence of her lover. The letters in *The Aspern Papers* are the objects that the narrator stretches his long arm towards in an effort to grasp onto the "palpable" past of his favorite author. Eric Savoy argues that for the narrator, "the object of his desire is less hermeneutic than erotic, manifested as the craving for presence, for somatic contact" (Savoy 64). The narrator does not desire merely to see if the letters are there or to gain access to their contents for literary purposes, but to *possess* them. In "The Lure of the Object in Henry James's Fictions of Thwarted Desire: Reflections on the Libidinal and Social Practices of Literary Forms" Gonzalez further postulates that in James's novels there is often "the entanglement of consciousness and desire with libidinal, social and materialist scripts of attainment or possession" (Gonzalez 28). This interaction of desire and possession in a "libidinal" or somewhat sexualized sense materializes in *The Aspern Papers* when the narrator's desire for the papers causes him to even contemplate marrying Miss Tita; he considers consummating his sexualized desire for the papers by obtaining them through relinquishing his own body in a sexual act.

The narrator's idealization of Aspern crystallizes for James's readers when, in response to Mrs. Prest's skepticism, he declares, "One doesn't defend one's god: one's god is in himself a defence" (James 3). This imagery of his idol is enhanced later when he describes his and his partner's position in the scholarship of Aspern: "The multitude, to-day, flocked to his temple, but of that temple he and I regarded ourselves as the ministers" (4). The resurrection of an imagined temple for the deceased poet places his relationship to the author in a religious context and the papers then serve as a connection to a "god" in the similar way to the fetish, this time non-sexual in its meaning, created in many religions as forms of contact with their deities. In their previous research on Aspern, the narrator observes that "we had to deal with phantoms and dust, the mere echoes of echoes" (6). He hopes that by meeting Miss Bordereau he will come into contact with "a single pair of eyes into which his [Aspern's] had looked or to feel a transmitted contact in any aged hand that his had touched" (6). When he finally meets her, "her presence seemed somehow to contain his, and I felt nearer to him at that first moment of seeing her than I ever had been before or ever have been since" (20). The narrator's desire to touch, to hear, to sense Miss Bordereau and any other "relics" of Aspern drives his pursuit of the papers. "The poet cannot be properly 'known' or 'possessed,' but the narrator nonetheless travels to Venice, seeking a mediated, or 'transmitted contact' with the dead poet" (Gonzolas 48). His quest is to possess Aspern's papers, which Gonzolas argues are "symbolic literary 'remains'—or containers—of the poet's buried and mysterious identity" (32). The emphasis on "remains" again ties the letters to the poet's body and being, a trace of his person that is buried in the web of secrecy that Juliana weaves around herself and her possessions.

Rather than see the contents of the letters, then, the narrator desires more the contact the letters will allow him to the deceased poet. Perhaps it is fitting that he (and we ourselves) never see the letters, for their contents are not as important to the narrative as his journey to possess them. Gonzalez further posits that in conversation with the "individual and social values of signifying 'things,'" James attempts "aesthetically to mirror those desires, and morally to elicit a response from his readers" (29). "Morally," then, refers to the negative connotations with this desire for material possessions; we are meant to judge the unreliable narrator in his pursuit of the fetishized objects of the past.[4]

This moral judgment on the desire for a touch of the past, for the letters as objects with heightened properties because of their past proximity to deceased figures, is also central to Byatt's twentieth-century novel. Both Maud and Roland express their distaste for those, such as Mortimer Cropper, who hunger after the physical remains of authors; they claim that their desire to see the letters rests solely on their benefit to the poets' scholarship. Cropper, on the other hand, is the "villain" who admits to his lust for the physical objects of the deceased. In his "autobiography" he describes his visceral reaction to his first encounter with Ash's letters: "when I had touched the letter, I felt, in Tennyson's words, that the dead man had touched me from the past" (Byatt 115). He further describes what may be seen as his intense fetishization of the letters and other memorabilia when he says, "the paper's electric rustle and the ink's energetic black looping" makes him feel as though he has "no separate existence" of his own (118). He appears to internalize Ash's letters into his very being, creating an unreciprocated intimate relationship with the dead author that germinates within his own imagination but

[4] As well as the breach in privacy the narrator attempts as discussed in the previous chapter.

that drives in a very real way his career and actions. Cropper goes even further than James's narrator (claims) he would; he violates Ash's tomb to possess the letters as though digging up the body of the writer himself. Dr. Nest, a fellow scholar, tells Maud that Cropper sets out to "disturb—to *dig up*—the Ashes" (476). Here we find a link between body and letters; "Ashes" here refers not only to Randolph Henry and his wife Ellen, but also to the papery remains of his life, his letters. Though the letter Cropper pursues is one that has escaped being cast into the fire, the relation between the remains of burnt paper and the poet's name links the body of the writer with his papery correspondences.

Though Cropper is Byatt's only fictional scholar to admit to his fetishization of these objects, by the end of the novel the rest have in some way come to attribute to the letters an "aura" and sense of touching the "palpable" past. When Roland discovers Ash's first letter he struggles morally over whether or not to keep the original and this internal debate suggests his own desire for a physical connection with the deceased poet:

> He now had a fair copy and could slip the letters back unremarked into the London Library Vico. But he did not want to. He felt they were his. He had always slightly despised those enchanted by things touched by the great: Balzac's ornate walking-stick, Robert Louis Stevenson's flageolet, a black lace mantilla once worn by George Eliot. Mortimer Cropper was in the habit of drawing Randolph Henry Ash's large gold watch from an inner fob pocket, and arranging his time by Ash's timepiece. Roland's Xeroxes were cleaner and clearer than the faded coppery-grey script of the originals; indeed the copy-ink had a black and

> gleaming freshness, the machines rollers must have been newly inked. But he wanted the originals (Byatt 27).

Roland's desire to possess Ash's original letter suggests an intimate desire for the poet that mirrors Ash's own delight in the "hop and skip" of LaMotte's ink.

That these traces "cling" to the "tangible" object, the document, reiterates German philosopher Walter Benjamin's postulation on the "unique existence" of an original object through its "presence in time and space" that disappears when copied. Benjamin follows Marx's desire to criticize capitalism and the commodification of objects and he argues that the reproduction of artwork for the masses comes at a loss of "aura," of the "mystified and remote 'original'" (Ayers 763). He argues that even the most perfect form of reproduction does not hold an object's "presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 220). The focus on "aura" stems from the history of the physical materials and social meanings placed on an object that disappears with reproduction.

This sensual or sexualized lust for the letters surfaces again when Maud, Sir George, and Roland discover LaMotte's packet of letters in her old room. As Maud begins to unwrap the packet, Roland stands impatiently on the side, "itching" to discover what lies beneath (94). He can barely contain himself, taking "a step forward. He knew, he knew, what was wrapped away there" (94). When she successfully penetrates through the outside layer, they find "two parcels, wrapped in oiled silk, and tied with black ribbon" (94). When Maud pulls at the ribbon it offers a little resistance—"the old silk squeaked and slipped"—before falling open and revealing the desired objects, the letters (94). Roland's excitement speaks to the intensity of their seemingly sexualized desire for

the correspondence. The letters' ability to generate such intense feelings within the two scholars exposes their desire to possess objects once belonging to the poets. Similarly to how James's narrator desires Aspern's letters for the historical and scholarly information they contain and the sense of intimacy he hopes to gain when he penetrates the private space of the poet's letters, Roland, Maud, and Cropper also place value on the contributions the letters will make to their respective fields while at the same time seeming to lust for the "palpable" past and an intimate relationship to the poets themselves.

Gregory Zacharias explores the idea of intimacy and touching the past through letters of the deceased. He argues for the value of Henry James's original documents over published copies and exalts the ability to see the "mind in action" through the "shape of a single character...the thickness of strike-through or underline...the degree of clarity or scrawl in the letter form…" (Zacharias 224). He argues that the "aura" of an original historical document, such as a letter by James, "has nothing to do with touching or being near a document James touched." Instead, the "'aura' has to do with the range and richness of meaning that resides in material elements of the letter" (225). He focuses on the Geertz-esque explanations surrounding specific physical elements that give the individual dashes, drawings, stricken out words, or misspellings meaning and insight into James's life. To expand on this notion, Zacharias quotes Nathaniel Hawthorne's musing on the value of an original document over a copy:

> Strange, that the mere identity of paper and ink should be so powerful...Human nature craves a certain materialism, and clings pertinaciously to what is tangible, as if that were of more importance than the spirit accidentally involved in it. An

> erasure, even a blot, a casual irregularity of hand, and all such little imperfections of mechanical execution, bring us close to the writer, and perhaps convey some of those subtle imitations for which language has no shape (Hawthorne in Zacharias 223).

Hawthorne speaks to the human desire for physical contact, for a touch of the material evidence of the living that in written form comes through the hesitations, stricken through lines, mistaken scratches on paper.

This quotation seems to trouble somewhat Zacharias's declaration that he does not attribute to the letters an "aura" because of their proximity to the letters, since the "spirit" inevitably leads back to the body of the writer who made the "dashes" and thick lines. Certainly, Roland and Maud's desire for the original copies of Ash and LaMotte's letters suggests a similar conception of the "aura" surrounding the original text as they value the original letters over any copied form and themselves appear to connect to the two deceased poets through their letters.

Byatt's two protagonists thus pursue the letters not only for the scholarly contributions the information garnered from the epistolary exchange will result in, but also for their own personal emulations of the poets and a desire to possess them. A concept central to Byatt's novel (hence the title), the desire for possession of some aspect of the poets' lives drives the two fictional scholars despite their disdain for the kind of "enchantment" that objects of the deceased hold for historians such as Cropper. The letters themselves appear to embody their writers, and this embodiment stimulates for Maud and Roland a sense of resurrecting the dead. The letters become traces of the deceased that carry some form of life still able to be grasped. When Roland first stumbles

on the drafts of Ash's letter to LaMotte in the *Vico* text, for example, the loose papers tucked within it "continued a kind of rustling and shifting, enlivened by their release" because "Ash had put them there" (5). When he leaves, he is "seized by a strange and uncharacteristic impulse of his own. It was suddenly quite impossible to put these *living* words back into page 300 of *Vico* and return them to Safe 5" (Byatt 10 emphasis added). He attributes to the letters some kind of spiritual or external connection to the author, seeing the words as "living." That he is unwilling to commit them to a kind of "death" by putting them back into the obscure text reinforces their tie to the poet's very body.

This idea of the letters taking on a personified nature because of their intimate connection to Ash surfaces again when Roland explains why he stole the letters to Maud. He says he took them "because they were alive. They seemed *urgent*—I felt I had to do something" (56). Maud remains skeptical until she herself sees them, and then, after reading them, says, "I see. They're alive" (63). For them, at least conceptually, the letter allows them insight into the minds of the poets and so they believe they are not just fetishizing any object their favorite authors have touched.

What begins as a mere literary investigation to advance their careers, however, turns into a pursuit for the deceased themselves, and Maud and Roland end up themselves embodying and reliving the very relationship between Ash and LaMotte in their own romantic relationship. Oddly opposite to the effect of the fetishization of letters explored in the first section of this chapter, with Maud and Roland the materiality of the letters seems to warp the fictional scholars' ontology as they pursue these artifacts from the past because of the intense connection between the writers and their writing. James intentionally reflects his disgust for this kind of fetishization in his novella, revealing to

his readers, perhaps, his concerns for the posthumous fate of his own letters. Byatt, too, appears to consciously comment on the implications of studying the letters of past writers in her twentieth-century romance that explores the dangers of the growing materialism of her time, though perhaps for less personal reasons (Pearce).

Embodying Components of Epistolary Correspondence

This idea of the letters directing and affecting the fictional scholars becomes more explicit with a tie to the very material of the letter. The contents of the letter in some cases may affect the body, suggesting a phenomenon that Otten hints at when he says that "bodies and papers can lend each other their qualities or attributes" (Otten 87). When Merteuil contracts a disfiguring disease that reveals her true character simultaneous to the publication of her letters in *Les Liaisons*, for example, it suggests a different take on the kind of relationship between the body and writer explored above. It appears that in the case of Merteuil, the relationship between the letter and body does not materialize simply through traces of the body embedded within her letters, but that situations her letters undergo may alternately affect her. Though unusual, this concept suggests the inexorable connection between the writer or reader and the letter and the intimacy with which the materiality of letters are treated. This occurs particularly in Byatt's *Possession*, when her poets and their editors appear to themselves appropriate and embody physical and conceptual properties of epistolary correspondence.

Ash and LaMotte's relationship relies on epistolary correspondence and the possibility for their correspondence to go up in flames becomes a central component of their relationship's ontological status. After one of Ash's letters fails to reach her,

LaMotte worries that "I cannot be sure that any further communication of yours will reach me—intact—or at all" (208). Recalling Eagleton's long list of possible dangers for letters, one of the many possibilities for their relationship's material base to fail them is for the paper to go up in flames (as indeed we see some of them doing at the hands of Ash's wife after his death). The fragility of the paper and the flammability of their (and any) epistolary-based relationship because of its reliance on this medium occupy and worry their exchange and this fear seeps into their language. In one letter LaMotte describes her anger at the loss of one of Ash's previous epistles and poem, declaring, "I am *so very angry*—I see strange fiery flashes before my drowned eyes…" (207). Her awareness of the vulnerable nature of the letters appears to conjure for her an image of flames. Later, as she sits in front of a fire and writes to Ash, the imagery of burning once again seeps into her letter:

> things flicker and shift, they are indeed all spangle and sparks and flashes. I have sat by my fireside all this long evening—on my *safe stool*—turning my burning cheeks towards the Aspirations of the flame and the *caving-in*, the ruddy mutter, the *crumbling* of the consumed coals to—where am I leading myself—to *lifeless dust* (213).

She links herself to the coals consumed in front of her and draws the parallel out so that, just like the coals, their relationship will render her to a "lifeless dust." Her "burning cheeks" references, along with the physical effect of the heat on her face, her embarrassment at the awkwardness of their first outing together in person.

She poetically reflects on their recent meeting in person and brings fire into the scene: "no Lightening struck those Trees, nor trickled along their Wooden Limbs to

earth—yet *flame licked*, flame enfolded, flame looped veins—burned up and utterly consumed" the trees. The world will perish, she writes, not by Abraham's flood this time, but "with—the tongues of Surtur's flames that lapped the shores...and spat it molten gold on the red of heaven—And after that—a rain—of Ash—" (213). Here she consciously plays on Ash's name linked to burnt remainders in describing the end of their world, hinting that their relationship will follow this path of destruction. Perhaps also meant to describe her erotic and "burning" desire for him, her anxiety in entering this relationship and the fear of its failure, based as it is on the fragility of paper, influences her rendition of the scene as well. The letter follows with more imagery of fire and ashes and she says, "I cannot let you burn me up. I cannot" (213). For, she claims, she would not go up as the fire in her fireplace does, but instead burn like "Straw on a Dry Day" in chaos and disorder (213). The rest of her letter is filled with images of fire and burning, sparked by her meditation on the physical fire in front of her, but also significant in the nature of their epistolary correspondence and her fear in its reliability as a medium through which they build their relationship.

In his response, Ash also takes up this imagery of a fiery relationship in his own reflections on their meeting. He writes that he will always wait for her, "a woman like a steady upright flame and [her dog] a grey hound [that] poured along the ground like smoke" (215). In his attempt to revive her spirits, Ash remarks that "my Phoenix [LaMotte] is temporarily a woebegone and even bedraggled bird...I will renounce all...to see you brighten and flare as you were wont" (217). Referencing the bird born out of ashes, the poet consciously plays on his own name and thus ties LaMotte to himself as though he may continually renew her and cause her to "brighten and flare." The image of

fire takes root here in their correspondence and their continual reference to this imagery evidences their subconscious awareness of the vulnerable nature of the letters upon which they build their relationship. The final reference to fire and burning that surfaces in their epistolary exchange is in LaMotte's last letter to Ash. She reflects on their relationship towards the end of both of their lives, saying, "[I] came upon the dragon I always thought you were" and quoting Milton's *Samson Agonistes*: "His fiery virtue roused/From under ashes into sudden flame" (245). She then asks, "*Did we not—did you* not flame, and I catch fire? Shall we survive and rise from our ashes?" (545-546). Again, the reference to Ash's name and his ability to spark life within her ties to their destruction ("shall we survive and rise from our ashes?") and originates in their papery existence. LaMotte refers to their failed relationship, her pregnancy, and the disaster she predicts at the beginning of their correspondence. Although most of their letters remain intact, the potential for their relationship to go up in flames begins with the very paradox between the instability of epistolary correspondence and the intimate, private space it creates.

Maud and Roland also seem to appropriate qualities of the epistolary correspondence they pursue. Perhaps because they are so caught up in their pursuit of letters or perhaps the *reason* for their pursuit of the private correspondence, the two scholars enjoy the private intimacy of closed white spaces that wrap around them and preserve their own intimacy. The two fictional scholars embody the spirit of privacy and enclosure granted by the enveloped letter. When Maud returns home to find "two letters, caught in the lips of the letterbox," for instance, she goes inside her apartment "closing curtains" and shutting up her house before permitting herself to read them (151). The apartment itself resembles that of the inside of an envelope: "it was bright white, paint,

lamps and dining-table; the carpet was a Berber off-white" (58). When she and Roland take off for the seaside together in pursuit of any lingering traces of the two nineteenth-century poets before them, Roland approves of the "clean narrow white beds" in the underwater hotel beneath the "sea of milk" surrounding them (361). When Maud climbs to the top bunk "white and fine, in white cotton," Roland is pleased to think of her "shelved there" above him (362). Wrapped almost as LaMotte's letters were in their "fine white linen," Roland's description of Maud suggests his obsession with the white surroundings and enclosed spaces that recall the envelope in which emotional letters are placed.[5] Staying in the hotel together they sleep side by side, him "a dark comma against her pale elegant phrase" as the "sea-mist closed them in a sudden milk-white cocoon… [and] they lay lazily together all day behind heavy white lace curtains on the white bed" (459). Their private natures thus parallel the letters of the two deceased poets—within this white world they cocoon themselves within we see their most intimate moments and revelations to each other. Similarly to the way in which Ash and LaMotte embody the fragility of the paper into their language about their relationship, Maud and Roland also appropriate the intimate, white space of an envelope in their own relations. The link between material conditions of the letters and the conceptual boundaries of privacy and intimacy surrounding them and the body thus extends to those who hope to possess them as well as the writers themselves.

Exploiting the Space of the Letter: The Choice of the Surrogate Body

[5] It also contributes to the novel's obsession with possession –Roland desires to *possess* Maud and this description also renders her as an object he may shelve and own.

The relationship between the body and the letter extends to situations in which, rather than lusting after or taking on the materiality of the letter and its link to the body of the writer, correspondents use letters to maintain a certain physical distance from one another. The letter may serve as a surrogate body, "speaking" or expressing what the author him or herself chooses not to say in person, suggesting a rendering of the other's body for a more premeditated reason than that stimulated by sexual desire. Schneider argues that "letters frequently textualized what could not be spoken due to polite modesty, physical constraints, or emotional delicacy" (133). He suggests that there often exists a desire to "save face" or to use the letter as an extended, distancing mechanism that allows one to correspond to a friend or lover what cannot be said in person. The intimate space of the letter purposefully takes the place of the body of the correspondent paradoxically to allow a necessary distance.

Decker hits on this seemingly contradictory use of the letter when he observes that "the materiality of the letter exchange reifies the correspondents' absence to one another and the distance between them, even as it embodies the letter writer to the far-off reader" (Decker 46). Instances in which the letter is used to bring the other closer while still maintaining a physical distance often suggest instances of seduction. In the case of the seducer in eighteenth-century epistolary novels, for example, the male writer attempts to penetrate the woman's protected space at the same time that the woman engages in correspondence to maintain the distance; "in novels that develop the seduction plot," Altman argues, "whereas the seducer regards the letter as his arm for overcoming the barrier between him and his lady, the lady paradoxically regards the letter as an extension of this barrier, as her weapon of protection" (Altman 16). This introduces the concept of a

letter as a possible barrier between two correspondents that allows a certain sense of intimacy while also maintaining a necessary distance.

This paradox in the intimate space of the letter allows the two nineteenth-century poets in *Possession* the opportunity to explore and develop their romantic affair slowly. As discussed in Chapter Two, the rigor with which LaMotte and Ash guard their correspondence and personal lives reiterates the privacy surrounding epistolary correspondence. Ash's wife, we will remember, reveals in her diary the disgust Ash has for the "vultures" that rifle through the desks of the famous. LaMotte's own desire for privacy is clear in the intimate and enclosed space she creates with Blanche in their chosen life of seclusion. Within the boundaries of the private letter Ash and LaMotte find the ideal space to develop their relationship. LaMotte even suggests that they restrict their relationship to this space. She asks Ash, "would you rather not have the *freedom* of the white page?" believing they would be "mere acquaintances, if not on paper" (Byatt 215). Her own insecurities about her physical relationship with Ash are clearly influential in this request and her question to him emphasizes the space of the letter as a safe space for her to express herself without physical contact. Ash too remarks on their relatively free and uninhibited relationship over paper; he writes LaMotte after their first rendezvous,

> And did you find—as I did—how curious, as well as very natural, it was that we should be so shy with each other, when in a papery way we knew each other so much better? I feel I have always known you, and yet I search for polite phrases and conventional enquiries—you are more *mysterious* in your presence…than you seem to be in ink and scribbled symbols (209).

Their ease on paper stimulates their desire for one another and they develop through their correspondence a relationship based on the distance and space their epistolary correspondence allows.

Altman observes that "the letter both maintains and bridges a physical gap across which the two [correspondents] can gradually reveal to each other their inner selves and their daily existences before the shock of physical contact would render such spiritual communication impossible" (Altman 27). Analyzing Colette's novel *Mitsou*, she argues that sometimes when "the substitute image or illusion of a lover created during absence is confronted with his presence… epistolary romantics frequently try to become each other's illusions or lament the difference between the image created by the letters and the real lover" (19). In *Mitsou,* a man and a woman who fall in love through their epistolary exchange find, upon meeting in person, that they both lack something they had imagined in the other through the letters. Ash and LaMotte similarly find discomfort on meeting in person, and although they overcome their initial "shock" or discomfort in the translation of their written relationship to person, letters remain an essential element to their relationship, providing them the means to converse and maintain their connection. The fact that they are both poets influences this connection; just as Angela and Miguel in Reira's "A Matter of Self-Esteem" build their relationship on words, LaMotte and Ash flourish in their poetic rhetoric with one another. Indeed, they are both "creatures of [their] pen" and "words too, words mostly—words have been all [their] life" (Byatt 97). LaMotte is especially awkward and socially inhibited in person and prefers using written correspondence to express herself. She thus relies upon and even at times prefers the

written medium as an extension of her body paradoxically to connect with Ash and to develop her confidence and feelings for him.

Alameddine's *I, the Divine* further explores this complex desire for the presence of a correspondent and the use of the letter as potentially maintaining a distance in Lamia's letters to her mother. The paradoxical need for intimacy and distance not only exists between lovers, then, but also potentially children and their parents. In her stuttered attempt to write her own narrative, Sarah (Alameddine's protagonist) writes a series of first chapters from different perspectives to give her readers a holistic sense of her character and, she hopes, to find herself in the process. One of these chapters, titled "A Serial Killer in our Midst," is comprised of her sister Lamia's unsent letters to their mother, who abandons them and their father in Lebanon when they are young and moves back to her home in the United States. Lamia, we discover, is committed to a mental hospital after she is discovered killing her patients at the local hospital. Her mental instability becomes clear in her letters, full of rambling, misspelled rants against her family (Sarah in particular) and society. Lamia addresses these letters to her absent mother. After her abandonment, Lamia "wove an impenetrable cocoon [around herself] from which she never emerged," secluding herself from the rest of the world (Alameddine 146). Her intimate and private nature drives her to turn to letters as a means of escaping the harsh realities of her everyday life and of forging a bond with a mother she has yearned for her entire life.

Lamia's *Herzog*-like letters to her mother expose the extent of her insanity and her desire both for her mother's presence and her fear for a realization of this desire.[6] She often writes to her mother as though speaking in conversation with her, perhaps a symptom of her insanity but also a common technique in epistolary correspondence. Altman observes that because the letter often emphasizes the absence of the correspondent (unless you are Dickens's Micawber, who, in his passion for epistolarity, will often write an addressee sitting across the table…) a writer will attempt to render them present and assume a conversational tone: "as written dialogue, epistolary discourse is obsessed with its oral model. No sooner is the writer aware of the gap that separates him from his reader than he tries to bridge that gap" (Altman 135). Sarah observes that in her letters, Lamia "chronicled her life and feelings in a mundane, running conversation" with their mother, and indeed Lamia's letters reveal this desire to converse with her absent mother as though she were physically present (Alameddine 147). In one letter, Lamia places her mother in the room with her as though anticipating an immediate response. She writes,

> Can I ask you a question which is do you still have the woolend dress I always like and I know there is about thirty years but it was a nice dress and I thought you maybe still had it maybe I doubt you still wear it but maybe you saved it because a penny saved is a penny saved. If you did, can you save it for me? Don't leave it to any of the other girls because I don't think they loved it as much as I

[6] Saul Bellow's protagonist in *Herzog* writes fragmented and unsent letters to people from his past who have died, presidents, scholars, famous celebrities and others in a form of therapy and as a way to deal with his own depression. Lamia's letters mimic this therapeutic use of letters and the halted attempt to form a bond through epistolary correspondence.

did and they don't appreciate beautiful things, dont like pretty things, don't know nice things, they don't do they? (156).

In her misspelled, fragmented and disjointed rambling Lamia renders her mother present despite the great distance between Lebanon and America. This attempt to bridge the gap separating them is rendered futile by the fact that the letters are never sent. She forms and maintains an image of her mother based on her memories of her as a young child and speaks to her as though she were still in that moment, preserving in the space of her letters and the chaos of her mind this connection to a figure of the past.

Her desire to maintain a distance is made even clearer when she burns the postcards her mother sends her. Sarah remembers these moments when the postcards from their mother arrive: "whenever Lamia received her['s], she burned the card after reading it. She placed the card in a crystal ashtray, poured rubbing alcohol over it, and lit it with a match, never a lighter" (Alameddine 146). The fact that she burns her mother's postcards so specifically—the very act of striking the match that ignites the letter—demonstrates her unresolved hurt feelings after her mother's abandonment. This action, a deliberate destruction of writing, modestly resembles Julia's tearing Proteus's letter in front of her servant in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and the Présidente's ripping Valmont's letter in front of him. Although in these earlier cases the women destroy the letters for a public audience to protect their virtue, a similarity may be drawn to Lamia's actions. Burning the postcards signals to her family her denial of her mother's feeble attempts to maintain communication. She has already lost the mother of her childhood, whom she trusted and loved; hence, she destroys any attempt by her mother to reform or continue a minimal relationship. In the last letter, Lamia confesses her supposed longing of a

reunion with her mother: “One day will you sit me and we will talk and I wil say why all this happens and you will understand and I know you love me but I want you to see everything and not sit in new york and worry about wrong and right you see” (166). But Lamia never sends the letter, and this unfulfilled effort collapses into fantasy since she denies her mother the chance *not* to understand her and instead relies on this imagined version as an outlet through which she may complain about her present life and protect herself from the emotional vulnerability she would suffer were they to reconcile.

She burns the postcards, therefore, not only as a rejection of her mother and a demonstration of her hurt feelings but also to break the bond created by the postcard between her mother and her, thereby distancing herself from her mother, an act that allows her to create her own image of the absent addressee in her letters. The imaginative bridge formed between correspondents through their desire for the other in epistolary communication is thus fragmented, just as is her language and indeed Alameddine’s novel, and she partially forms another bridge, metaphorically speaking, through her own letters only to destroy it before any contact may be made. Lamia’s long, unsent letters seem to overcompensate for her mother’s short postcards and her writing exposes her desire for an intimate relationship with her mother. Burning them, however, indicates her maintenance of an image of her untainted mother free of involvement. The space created by the letter here becomes extreme and one-sided; unlike LaMotte and Ash’s increased closeness, Lamia’s heightened imagination provides her with a sense of intimacy with a correspondent who in fact never receives the letters.

In Riera’s “A Matter of Self-Esteem” Angela provides an example of a seductive manipulation of the presence and absence of bodies in epistolary correspondence. Rather

than confront Ingrid in person or over the phone, Angela rejects her friend's bodily presence and instead relies on her physical absence to create for herself an uninterrupted space to frame her story and her request to Ingrid to aid her in her revenge against Miguel. She admits to Ingrid that she has struggled over how to relate her story in a way pleasing to her friend:

> Yes, Ingrid, I seek the perfect way to convey to you everything that has happened to me. I'm sure you already guessed by now that one of the causes of my reticence has been precisely the fear of appearing before you fragile, helpless, full of prejudice and, above all, ridiculous (Riera 3).

Her fear of her friend's judgment thus causes her to put off the confrontation she anticipates in Ingrid's response. In her depiction of Ingrid in her letter we begin to paint a picture of Ingrid as strong-willed, straightforward, and fairly judgmental. Unlike herself, who was seduced by a man and allowed herself to fall in love, our protagonists assures her friend that Miguel "won't deceive you" because Ingrid "adopt[s] a much more open stance, consider[s] sex just another appetite, a necessity that must be satisfied in order to maintain physical contact with other bodies" (8). Indeed, Angela even reproduces an excerpt from a letter Ingrid sent her that advised her that "your novels…would greatly improve if you could resolve your sex life for yourself, instead of through the orgasms of your characters" (8). In copying parts of Ingrid's letter Angela not only exposes Ingrid's private, intimate space to us, the readers, but also helps Angela explain her reasons for writing a letter rather than crossing "the thousands of miles between us" by plane, although she writes that she contemplates buying a ticket (9). She fears her friend's judgment and relies on the space of the letter to communicate her painful experience to

her friend without physical confrontation. She even writes at one point, "later you may scold me all you want. Shout at me, as you usually do" (22). Her intimidation of her friend causes her to physically maintain the distance between them while at the same time relating her intimate, personal history and reflecting on their close friendship.

Throughout the fictional letter Angela assures Ingrid of her desire for personal contact even as she consciously chooses to avoid physical confrontation through the use of a letter. She bemoans the failings of epistolary correspondence, apologizing for "this more conventional mode of communication which, even with the help of the pen you gave me, I still mistrust, being as it is much less personal than the voice, for it steals away all the intricacies I would like to convey with words" (2). Her distrust perhaps stems from Miguel's appropriation of her letters and she remains wary of words materially inscribed on paper, but this passage also suggests her desire to push away her friend's "voice" and body. She brings up the possibility of visiting Ingrid but never explains her reasons for refraining from a personal visit. Instead, she leaves her reader(s) to infer that she needs the space of the letter and the distance it maintains between her and her friend to express herself and beg her favor. She even refrains from calling, arguing that "if [the phone] rings at a bad time it may be counterproductive, forcing me to be brief, to compress hurriedly in a few minutes what, surely, will take hours to explain" (2). Altman argues that "written exchange not only introduces the time lag between message transmission and message reception; it also widens the interval between message reception and response. The writer has more time to meditate, to measure and correct his [or her] words, to polish his [or her] style" (Altman 135). Contradicting her earlier statement that she desires Ingrid's "voice" and the "intricacies" speaking aloud would allow her, her

critique of a conversation on the phone again exposes her desire to keep her friend at a certain distance.

Angela claims to use a letter to "speak" with her friend because of Ingrid's judgment and contempt, but it becomes clear over the course of the letter that she exploits the space provided on the page to beg for Ingrid's help to publicly shame Miguel. The spatial confines of the letter allow her to intimately and privately set down her story on paper, postponing confrontation or interruption and granting her the space to embellish her story to elicit her friend's sympathy. Angela attempts to bring herself closer to her friend but takes advantage of the space and function of the letter to render herself present in the *future* and thus to avoid confrontation in present-time. She writes Ingrid, "I'm ready to accept whatever punishment you may prescribe, particularly if you do me the favor I'm trying to ask in this letter" (Riera 22). She hopes to convince her friend to help her before dealing with the judgment and "punishment" she sees inevitable after her weakness for allowing herself to fall in love. In "A Writing of One's Own" Brad Epps argues that Angela's letter is a form of seduction, and that with the space of the letter she "appeals to Ingrid, eschewing direct discourse, reflecting on the time and place of the letter's composition, its specific tools and general mechanics, its relation to the body and the voice" (Epps 122). The emphasis here on the letter's "relation to the body and voice" suggests again the intimate relationship between writers and their letters, as discussed in the previous sections. Furthermore, the idea that Angela's letter contains a part of her body (metonymically through touch or metaphorically through her voice) again exposes her complicated manipulation of the letter as a tool for bringing correspondents together

while at the same time maintaining a physical distance that requires their imaginative renderings of the writers.

In her letter, Angela takes on a conversational tone similar to Lamia's in *I, the Divine*. She writes with "a confidential, complicit, caressing tone" that Riera herself, in an interview on "A Matter of Self-Esteem," believes is seductive and found often in letters (Riera in Epps 122). Altman postulates that "when [a] partner's words are imagined, the letter writer is addressing a manipulated pseudopresence" and Angela's quotation of her friend's letters and paraphrases of her feminist ideologies attempt to "manipulate" her friend. Again, Riera herself comments on Angela's desire for the space of the letter: "if the story had been written as a dialogue, her friend would have asked her questions, Angela would have lost narrative control, and it would have been more evident that her version of events is just that, one version" (Riera in Epps 112). Angela's desire for control over the situation, her fear of Ingrid's judgment, and her hope for her help in her revenge against Miguel lead her to the letter as the "perfect way" to convey her story.

Although Epps's argument of Angela's seductive purpose perhaps over-dramatizes her attempt to convince a friend into helping her because of the connotations of violence often associated with epistolary seduction, Angela's manipulation of Ingrid through the letter's mediation between physical presence and absence does suggest a conscious choice of the letter as a tool toward a selfish end. [7] The use of epistolary correspondence allows Angela the space in which she may meditate on how to explain her long silence. The letter allows her time to contemplate her friend's reactions and to

[7] Most of the instances in which letters are used for manipulative purposes are ones in which men attempt sexually to seduce a secluded and protected woman, violently raping her (such as Valmont's seduction of Cécile and Tourvel in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*).

frame the story of her relationship with Miguel in a way she believes will be acceptable to Ingrid's high standards.

The relationship between the body, language, and letters thus plays out in a diverse manner as discovered in the texts above. The fetishized letter suggests an intimacy between correspondents that relies on the very materiality of the letter, that is, on its physical proximity to the writer and his or her pen and ink. The ability for language to embody its writer reiterates Iwanicki's concept of "living out loud" and Bakhtin's notion of the social word, each relating language specifically to the material conditions of the bodies that produce and consume it. The conceptual boundaries erected around epistolary correspondence creates an intimacy that allows correspondents to imaginatively bridge the distance between their physical bodies in the protected space of the letter and to warp its reality in their desire for one another. The traces of the body that remain even after the death of the letter writers stimulate a similar eroticized or idolized desire for the correspondents' bodies for those deeply involved in pursuing their literary legacies that even appears at times to transform their own intent as they become affected by the bodily residue surviving in the letters. This close intimacy with the letters themselves paradoxically may affect the very ontology of the correspondents or editors themselves, as seen in Byatt's *Possession*. Finally, the very function of a letter as a mediator between the presence and absence of physical bodies allows correspondents to transform the letters into a surrogate body through which they may affect intimacy as they remain physically separate. The space of a letter carved out in literature not only populates the text with voices, but also offers a discussion of the very bodily traces of the fictional writers whose voices we hear.

Concluding Thoughts

> Four sides of incoherent and interjectional beginnings of sentences, that had no end, except blots, were inadequate to afford her any relief. But the blots were more expressive to me than the best composition; for they showed me that Peggoty had been crying all over the paper, and what could I have desired more?
>
> Trotwood in *David Copperfield* (Dickens 241).

> The thought of printing out her own words still raised the ghost of pages past, and horrified her. But typing something and then watching it disappear under a cheerful heading "Message Sent Successfully" was, as it happened, bearable [. . .] it was in her familiar medium, print, so it emerged through the loved language of her fingertips. But it didn't require a physical body of print on paper.
>
> Pi in *The Metaphysical Touch* (Brownrigg 154-55).

The literary letter carves out a space of its own in a narrative through its voicing and occasional graphic differentiation on the page as a textual object imaginatively rendered material in its literary setting. It is furthermore an ordinary and rather unremarkable physical object on its own—a piece of paper, envelope, ink and pen—but one that within and without of literature often gains heightened significance for epistolary correspondents in its role bringing together two physically separated people in an intimate conceptual space, tempered by the boundaries of the paper. As evidenced by the first quotation above, the physical letter itself often becomes essential in the intimacy of a relationship: Dickens' protagonist in *David Copperfield* conceives of greater meaning from the inkblots and traces of tears on his nurse's letter than the incoherent words she writes, an obvious contradiction to de Saussure's belief that the material form and content of alphabetical letters "is of no importance with respect to their signification." Here, the protagonist grants the materiality of the letter itself the power to convey to Trotwood

some evidence of his nurse's presence by the traces of her emotions that metonymically link letter to body and causes him to picture her "crying all over the paper." Their intimacy maintained through epistolary correspondence is clear, and though Peggoty fails to express her love for Trotwood through her words, the letter itself conveys anxiety at their separation and her desire for his presence.

The letter often attempts to mediate the distance between correspondents, to create intimacy where there exists an absence. This intimacy may be the romantic intimacy of lovers such as Byatt's Ash and LaMotte or Laclos's Cécile and Danceny, who desire physical, sexual, and emotional closeness and use letters as a media through which they may express their feelings for one another. Other less romantic forms of intimacy are also found in letters, however. Valmont and Merteuil in *Les Liaisons* share a common delight in an intellectual immorality recognized through their long, carefully crafted and often lethal letters. Here, the intimacy between them originates from a shared language of malicious misbehavior. Even in their insults they reveal a familiarity with the other that cause the traded barbs to hit home. When Merteuil writes Valmont, for example, that she believes him to be in love with the Présidente de Tourvel, she writes: "you are still in love with your Présidente. Not, indeed, that it is a very pure or tender love, but it is the kind that you are capable of" (Laclos 345). Their almost entirely epistolary-based correspondence during the length of the novel has increased their familiarity with one other to the extent that Merteuil may intimately insult her former partner in crime just as before they understood each other's malice so well.

Riera's Angela also craves a different kind of intimacy from her distant friend than that seen in a love letter as she strives to fill in the gap created by time and distance

through her long letter to Ingrid. In her epistle, Angela hastens to remind Ingrid of their closeness and intimacy, dictating back to her friend her personal feminist views and anticipating her reactions to her narrative as though to prove their familiarity. When describing the messages Miguel writes her, Angela writes in her letter, "Ingrid, you recognize these as trivial phrases" (Riera 19). Her implicit language and conversational tone attempt to bring her render her more "present" to her friend in her letter as she sets up her request at the letter's end. The intimacy provided in the protected and private space of the letter thus functions to mediate the distance between correspondents and takes on different forms both in the ontology of the writers and the language they use as correspondents attempt to use the letter to mediate the distance between them.

This attempt to create a sense of presence through the space of a letter also conceptualizes the notion of absence that is central to epistolary correspondence. The letter's very presence marks a physical absence that correspondents attempt to overcome through language and physical traces of the body of the other. Not only is the physical body of the author or receiver missing, but within the letter itself there are also often intentional absences that require the intimacy of the correspondents to fill in or to recognize. In the same letter to Valmont, Merteuil recognizes an absence in her friend's previous correspondence about the Présidente. She writes him: "Even in your last letter if you did not speak exclusively about this woman it is because you wish to conceal *your important affairs* from me. They seem to you so important that you think this silence is a punishment for me" (Laclos 345 emphasis in original). The intimacy between these two and the history of their correspondence have familiarized her with his methods and character so that she knows to read his "silence" concerning the Présidente.

The identification of such absence originates in the intimate nature of epistolary correspondence; to recognize that which is missing requires an expectation of presence. This intimacy relies on the conceptualized boundaries of privacy surrounding epistolary correspondence that creates a "safe" space as well as the embodiment of the writer or reader that renders them "present." The physical medium through which this relationship is created itself gains a special significance because correspondents and society imbue it with heightened significance. The possibility for a sheet of paper to evidence a correspondent's love for the other, to express deep feelings, to carry secretive plots, or to implicate improper relationships through the written language inscribed within its intimate folding or its very presence in an improper place marks it as an object carrying explosive potential often exploited in literature. The heightened attention to the letter is closely bound to our own epistolary practices and conceptualized notions of privacy, language, and embodiment as we recognize from habit the multiplicity of situations in which literary letters are placed.

The richness of the social and cultural potential of this form of written communication that has for so many centuries been reworked and repurposed in literature is perhaps in danger of disappearing or at least of evolving in the new age of emails, texting, and other forms of digital communication. With this "epistolary dematerialization," or the loss of handwritten correspondence, the dramatic power of the material letter, so pertinent to the literature discussed in this thesis, must inevitably undergo evolution and transformation (Decker 39). In *Epistolary Practices: Letter Writing in America before Telecommunications* William Decker argues that although it is unlikely that the older forms of epistolary correspondence will ever completely disappear,

"it is undeniable that electronic correspondence has taken the place of much old-fashioned letter writing at the same time that it has innovated the conception and possibility of epistolary communication" (236). We have already seen in Riera's "A Matter of Self-Esteem" and Alameddine's *I, the Divine* that handwritten letters have persisted in contemporary literature just as Decker argues it continues in reality. Similarly to how Riera and Alameddine find new ways to employ the literary letter, the letter itself is currently undergoing a transformation with the rise of newer forms of communication.

The evolution of the letter and decline of the traditional epistolary form seen in literature begins perhaps with Derrida's *Carte Postale* (1980). Derrida contends in this epistolary novel of postcards that as a newer form of a letter, the postcard functions as an "intercepted letter" that "can never be enclosed" (Derrida 62, 185). He remarks here on the un-enveloped and open physical format of a two dimensional card with a picture on one side, writing on the other (119). He maintains, however, that postcards nevertheless retain a sense of privacy, being both "half-public half-private" and "neither public nor private" (62, 70). Although exposed physically to any third party reader, postcards remain "unintelligible" to anyone outside of the correspondence through a certain coding that only the correspondents may decipher (79). This suggests not only the potential recognition of handwriting or other indicators of the body on the written card but also the intimacy in the implied language that relies on a certain gained familiarity between correspondents that Derrida implies becomes even more convoluted in postcard-speech as a way to keep the privacy afforded a letter by an envelope.

Following Derrida's investigation of an evolved form of epistolary novel, contemporary literature has begun to explore narratives told in emails or texts that rely on

the lineage of the epistolary novel but which reflect the evolving concepts of intimacy and privacy in digital correspondence in society. With narratives such as *The Metaphysical Touch* by Sylvia Brownrigg (1998) detailing an online relationship stimulated by mutual material loss, Rosie Rushton's *P.S. He's Mine!* (2000) which follows the development of a close friendship initiated over email, Lynn Coady's *The Antagonist* (2011) in which a male protagonist rages through email against a friend's betrayal, Daniel Glattauer's *Love Virtually* (2006) about an accidental virtual meeting that develops into a romantic relationship, and Lucy Kellaway's *Who Moved My Blackberry* (2005), a narrative told in a series of emails of a man who communicates more intimately online than he does in person, we see a move toward new forms of epistolarity originating in the current shift from written letters to electronic conversation.

Each of these fictions appropriates the traditional epistolary novel's form and development of intimacy across distance through language, a sense of presence, and the notion of the privacy afforded between correspondents, but here we see the removal of the traditional physical medium through which that communication occurs. In *Audio Book: Essays on Sound Technologies in Narrative Fiction* Mikko Keskinen argues this very point:

> As a digital medium, e-mail lacks the graphic letter's materiality, which is so significant as the sender's metonymy in traditional epistolarity. However, such conventions of the letter novel as the basic structure of exchange or confidentiality and confessionality in its character types may remain relatively stable in spite of the medium (Keskinen 122).

The transformation of the medium of communication between correspondents thus alters dramatically the nature of the intimate relationship at the same time that it retains some of the conceptualized and social values surrounding epistolary correspondence. The impersonal nature of the computer or cell phone reduces that sense of embodiment and intimate privacy in handwritten letters that causes LaMotte to preserve her correspondence with Ash in "fine white linen" and store it away in her room to survive her. The text message bearing a loved one's words does not have the same tangible material base as the paper bearing a lover's words that Chopin's narrator so erotically places on her tongue or that Shakespeare's Julia so ferociously tears up. The medium through which a message is conveyed electronically reduces the significance of the physical object as the material becomes more impersonal and immaterial.

The phrasing and language of an email or text may still suggest some embodiment of the writer through the conversational tone, phrasing, and choice of words that may generate an image of the writer. Language, in the Bakhtinian sense, situates the writer in his or her material conditions through the existing pool of words available to him or her. In the online correspondence, however, many of the new symbols and phrases that have arisen and are similarly exploited by a writer have become more and more universalized with the advent of an increasingly globalized world, connecting online through digital communication. The emoticon, for example, is a device attempting to translate a sense of bodily presence across email and text that may be seemingly personalized through the choice of image or sign. Decker argues that unlike the handwritten letter or image, however, "the emoticon draws attention to the uniform, impersonal, and minimally personalizable scene of e-mail inscription: the computer screen, endlessly customizable

but ever impervious to the impress of the body, private but ever subject to interception by the gaze of concealed third parties" (Decker 237). The impersonal nature of the emoticon perhaps gestures towards the earlier bodily presence in handwriting or other physical indicators in letters as an attempt to represent human emotion and feeling, but the programmed pool of possible symbols to choose from and the more distant relationship between screen and writer reduces the sense of embodiment found in a handwritten letter.

This transformation to a more immaterial medium does not simply do away with the significance and complexity of epistolary correspondence, however. Laws and penalties protecting the privacy of e-mail correspondence are in place to deter hackers similarly to the royal and governmental protection of the official post, suggesting that the concepts of privacy surrounding epistolary correspondence remains in place (Link). The vulnerability of the message to go astray or be interrupted also survives, though it has evolved into a different kind of fear than that of the possibility of a letter being torn, ripped, intercepted, or going astray. This fear of the physical paper undergoing one of the many dangers that Eagleton exhaustively lists yields itself instead to the more elusive and immaterial world of technological messages and web inscriptions that impersonalize the message's instability. Though a hard drive may still crash or a screen crack, the material intimacy of a handwritten text disappears when the more distant electronic communication becomes normative. As Jon Stratton contends,

> the material letter reinforces the absence of bodily contact, the virtual email, arriving instantaneously, emphasizes a non-bodily intimacy…the instantaneity of email, that it arrives so quickly after it was sent, something which provides a sense of closeness, of an immediacy that suggests presence is heightened by the

> lack of apparatus that goes with letter writing...the most intimate letters are handwritten because they involve the body directly…Email can only use the computer keyboard, this decreases the bodily involvement, and the bodily intimacy (Stratton in Milne 194).

The email or text does not metonymically relate back to the body in the same way as the handwritten letter does, although it perhaps suggests an even closer sense of presence through the immediacy of the communication that seems to hover somewhere in between a traditional epistolary correspondence and a phone conversation. The concept of the intimate space between correspondents similarly has evolved along with the privacy and potential vulnerability of the correspondence with the newer forms of communication.

The email thus perhaps signals a loss in the personal embodiment of the materials that pass from hand to hand in postal correspondence that Pi hints at when she watches her message "disappear" into the ephemeral world of the Internet at the same time that it suggests a different sense of presence than found in the slower traditional epistolary correspondence. With the change in the material of the medium through which we communicate and attempt to create intimacy in the face of a certain absence, however, we may possibly conceive of a notion that with the transition to the more "immaterial" online presence, human interpersonal connection and emotion become less tangible and personal.

Keskinen writes of the effect of the change of medium on the epistolary novel, arguing that "the ontology of e-mail may be…a categorical anomaly, but its representation in the novel relates to both voice and paper and to both mind and matter rather than to an imaginary locus outside of those categories. The intangible e-mail

messages become tangible when printed in the novel, just as the dialogue supposedly uttered into the air materializes as graphic writing" (392). His argument that the email becomes tangible graphically within the printed novel, however, ignores the imagination required in literature to first render the object as material. Blanchot would remind us that to be able to reference an object, in his example a woman, "I must somehow take her flesh-and-blood reality away from her, cause her to be absent, annihilate her" (Blanchot in Haase and Large 30). Thus, though the language in the elusive email may materialize when printed in a text, the immaterial material email message itself still remains only gestured at through the fictional narrative's literary language. What remains to be seen is whether as the medium of correspondence becomes more immaterial there is a correlated loss in the richness of epistolarity that has been present in traditional letter writing in fiction. Perhaps the disappearance of books and reluctance to read lengthy novels and articles signals a trend in current society, such that literature must give up a certain complexity of representation to appease the popular desire for a faster paced way of living.

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