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Małgorzata Nitka

The Letter of Seduction

In George Farquhar's epistolary collection, the writer thus exults over the arrival of a letter:

I have had your Letter, Madam, and all that I understand by it, is that your Hand is as great a Riddle as your Face, and 'tis as difficult to find out your Sense in your Characters, as to know your Beauty in your Mask; but I have at last conquer'd the Maidenhead of your writing, as I hope one day I shall that of your Person; and I'm sure you han't lost your Virginity, if the lines in your Complexion be half so crooked as those in your Letter.¹

The eventually induced reply to mail pursuit comes to signify the onset of seduction, arrives to anticipate the carnal act; the pen traversing the hitherto impervious blankness records the signs of consummation, breaks silence of resistance as it tears the maidenhead of writing, as it cleaves the hymen of script. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in his complicated reading of the term, hymen is a sign of betweenness, a word whose semantic membrane stretches between marital fusion and difference as it communicates the rhetoric of the border: "the hymen . . . produces the effect of a medium (a medium as an element enveloping both terms at once; a medium located between the two terms). It is an operation that both sows confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites 'at once'."² Being a tissue of protection, a tenuous barrier that separates the inside from the outside of a woman, or in other words desire from fulfilment the hymen inheres in diacritical histology.

"There exist treatises on membranes", which is what a hymen is, "or *hymenologies*; descriptions of membranes or *hymenographies*", remarks Derrida. And the word hymenography celebrates a fusion between hymen and writing, a marriage already proposed or rather announced in Farquhar's turn of phrase. As one enters a network of a lexical maze in order to pursue the history of hymen, one

¹ *The Works of George Farquhar*, ed. Shirley Strum Kenny (Oxford, 1988), pp. 335–356.

² All ensuing comments on hymen quote Jacques Derrida's anatomy of the subject performed in *Dissemination*, tr. B. Johnson (Chicago, 1981), pp. 208–226.

cannot do so without soon availing oneself of a textile web, an etymological thread whose knots are: “*uphaino* (to weave, spin – the spider web – machinate), . . . *huphos* (textile, spider web, net, the text of a work – Longinus), and . . . *humnos* (a weave, later the weave of a song, by extension a wedding song or song of mourning)”. And dictionaries report that in times “when writing was unknown, most of the words used to designate a poetic composition were borrowed from the art of the weaver, the builder, etc”. The hymen is then affiliated with a text insofar as both implicate a textile syntax; furthermore, while inquiring into the vicinity of the word one has to inevitably arrive at membrane which once seems to have been a surface of/for writing as it originally denoted parchment.

At issue there must be virginity which writing necessarily incorporates and which may be a condition that every act of inscription has to consider and tackle, if to write is to cover but also divide, undo, the white paper with black marks, pierce its blank integrity with signs. Delight one takes in writing seems to include physical pleasure as the writer’s body “knows the joy of drawing on and rhythmically incising a virgin surface”.³ In Farquhar’s phrase, the hymen is a scriptural metaphor whereas letter-writing in turn is decoyed into a syntax of seduction whose medium or even substance, its very principle, it becomes.

As Jean Baudrillard insists, “the eighteenth century still spoke of seduction” which was “a central preoccupation of the aristocratic spheres”⁴, perhaps as central as epistolary discourse. If seduction is the cardinal concern of the period, its literary vehicle is the epistolary novel which made up about 20 percent of the total of eighteenth-century fiction.⁵ Many epistolary novels are, in words of Ruth Perry, “tales of love and sex” in which an exchange of letters always gravitates towards a sexual climax.⁶ If letters and love, of whose scenario seduction might be an episode, converge on the epistolary novel, this is because they belong to the same order of experience. What correspondence shares with love is the economic experience of exchange, a principle of reciprocity and, what follows, reversibility of positions according to whose rhythm both they unfold. Loving is like corresponding, that is to say it inheres in alternating, taking turns without lingering on too much: in an epistolary affair positions must rotate between reading and writing, as one cannot assume one and the same role for too long without killing discourse. The critical point of correspondence, the point around which writing turns is the point of arrival of the letter as the one at which a reversal of positions must occur in order to make writing go on. It is a junction, a place or moment of becoming, decisive, momentous indeed, for the whole system of exchange together with all its repercussions; “in no other type of verbal exchange does the mere fact of

³ Roland Barthes, Preface to *The Civilisation of Writing*, quoted in Georges Jean, *Writing. The Story of Alphabets and Scripts*, tr. J. Oates (London, 1992), p. 196.

⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction*, tr. B. Singer (London, 1990), p. 1.

⁵ Natascha Wurzbach, *The Novel in Letters* (London, 1969), p. ix.

⁶ See Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters, and the Novel* (New York, 1980), pp. 158–159. Perry mentions in this context Aphra Behn’s *Love-Letters Between A Nobleman and His Sister* and Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess*.

receiving or not receiving a response carry such meaning",⁷ states Janet Altman. The event of arrival of a reply must always be a meaningful moment in the same way in which the letter's failure to arrive is fraught with implications too, as the lover's discourse translates these facts into either compliance or resistance.

Letters which narrate a seduction progress chronicle first and foremost their own story: they are a record of writing, its acceptance or rejection which is acceptance or rejection of the writer and in this respect seduction always unfolds on paper: "Be my Letters the Test of your Passion, if they are acceptable I must be so."⁸ Once sent away, the letter never disappears without a trace and thus one never fully loses sight of one's writing and reads from a distance of its life on the far side. For this reason letters act as envoys whose mission is to reconnoitre the relationship, get the lie of its land.

The epistolary novel demands that writing make advances towards seduction, whereby it makes it approach inevitability. Letters themselves seem to be invested with inevitability or destiny: persistence of script, or its call, puts one under an obligation to respond and thus enter, become part of the relay of writing. As Altman remarks,

To write a letter is not only to define oneself in relationship to a particular you; it is also an attempt to draw that you into becoming the I of a new statement.⁹

For a woman to reply to a letter means to enter an exhausting network of writing and subscribe to paper intimacy that renders her forgetful or perhaps too weak to seek an exit; and as Baudrillard would have it, to render weak is to seduce.¹⁰ If an answered letter functions as a catalyst for seduction, its course must be a fatal one, the woman's writing poised on a precipitous edge can take her to a downfall. Registering a receipt of a letter, Farquhar translates its arrival into an event of triumph while the letter itself is fetishised into a trophy, evidence of conquest in which a woman's affections or sexual favours are pledged.

The conquest, starts with writing, a pen being "the most effective way to woo a lady".¹¹ In Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, seduction casts a shadow of writing, too: an early description of Lovelace, which is to be a word of warning against him, emphasises his being either "notoriously . . . a man of pleasure"¹² or in "vacant nightly hours" (75) a man of writing with "a pen in his fingers" (74), a man whose seductive energy is accumulated in his pen to which "his thoughts flow

⁷ Janet Altman, *Epistolary. Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, 1981), p. 120.

⁸ Mary Delariviere Manley, *Court Intrigues* (London, 1711), p. 138.

⁹ J. Altman, *Epistolary*. . . , p. 122.

¹⁰ See Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 83. That seduction feeds on weakness the victim confuses with strength is recognized by Clarissa herself: ". . . it is plain to me now. . . that he had as great confidence in my weakness, as I had in my strength. And so in point entirely relative to my honour, he has triumphed. . . for he has not been mistaken in me, while I have in myself!" (381–382).

¹¹ Ruth Perry, *Women*. . . , p. 161.

¹² Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* (Harmondsworth, 1985), p. 74. Page numbers in text refer to this edition.

rapidly" (74). It is precisely this addiction to the pen that renders him dangerous as writing turns an alternative to seduction, or maybe its very principle: seduction is writing. And yet, the pen placed in Lovelace's fingers seems to scratch a certain flaw on the portrait of the seducer who avails himself of what Richardson deemed an essentially feminine device when he remarked: "The pen is almost as pretty an implement in a woman's fingers, as a needle."¹³ A whisper of doubt which precariously verges a charge of effeminacy reverberates in the passage which in the last instance states that "that [women]. . . should love to write is no wonder" but "that. . . a. . . gay, lively young fellow. . . who rides, hunts, travels" should do this is "the strange thing", thus identifying the pen with the feminine category of the "domestic and sedentary" (75). It is at this point that one may turn to *A Lover's Discourse* in order to gloss one of its fragments which delineates Woman as a figure of waiting, an expression of immobility, whereas Man represents the fickle vagrant order. "Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys. . ."¹⁴, but feminine sedentariness is not only waiting, it is writing too, and so modifying Barthes's observation one may say: Man hunts, Woman writes. If excessive writing incurs a risk of appearing strange when man does it and thus it is what undoes man, analogically "this man who waits. . . is miraculously feminized".¹⁵

What invests prodigious writing skill is a rule of reversibility, a readiness to be turned to either strength or weakness, a readiness to participate in the challenge or seduction. If one is to venture any chronological order, then it is challenge that launches seduction, that inevitably brings it in its wake. The challenge, itself a seductive enterprise, engulfs the other with its spellbinding energy which exacts a return (after all, challenge is a call to respond). In Farquhar's *Letters of Love and Business* or in *Clarissa*, it is a return of a letter. The inevitability of the challenge is its irresistibility: "one cannot but respond to it".¹⁶ The letter itself is a challenge: sending a letter Lovelace sends a challenge and it is to a challenge that Clarissa responds by responding to a letter. "In a challenge one draws the other into one's area of strength, which. . . is also his or her area of strength,"¹⁷ writes Baudrillard. This area of strength is language or rather a "knack at letter writing" (161), the sense of which fabricates a misguided conviction (that might be a proof that seduction has already started, that it is well on its deviating way) that one has acquired mastery of language. And to have the upper hand in writing is to assume that one can make it stop at one's command, that with the last stroke of pen one can deliver a decisive blow in a writing duel. It is for that reason that a response is ventured: "I thought I could proceed or stop as I pleased," (381) reflects Clarissa at one point, already seduced by compelling approach of script that cannot but inevitably foster her clandestine correspondence with Lovelace in which "every

¹³ Samuel Richardson, *Selected Letters*, ed. J. Carroll (Oxford, 1964), p. 184.

¹⁴ Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, tr. R. Howard (Harmondsworth, 1990), pp. 13–14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶ J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

letter for many letters, intended to be the last” (393). On one’s replying to a letter, correspondence is broached and scriptural intercourse commences, and along with it a complicity of exchange. Once embarked upon, correspondence demands it be continued; itself discontinuous, it refuses termination by enticing the writer into a network of obligations, it catches writing on point of no return: the letter absorbs, enwraps the writer into an interminable traffic as one letter spins off another, every gesture, every word or its absence multiply lines in a fold-adding design. It is a fragmentable organisation of correspondence which setting every letter “within a larger configuration” does nevertheless permit it to aspire to a status of “a self-contained entity”¹⁸, yet this ostensible discreteness of correspondence does not translate it into a partible and therefore masterable performance.

Every area of strength is liable to a process of inversion in which it may be turned inside out and made over into an area of weakness; once such a turnaround has occurred and the gift of writing has been read as a symptom of fragility, as a faculty that renders one vulnerable, then challenge changes into seduction. The border between strength and weakness is one between challenge and seduction: “To seduce is to appear weak.”¹⁹

Although the plot of *Clarissa* permits to define it as the seduction novel it is not exactly the letter that is a persistent vehicle of seduction (as Altman justly argues, “the conquest of Clarissa by Lovelace does not take place via correspondence”²⁰ which is by far too scanty) yet it can be then perceived as its departure point, for it is by means of writing that Lovelace penetrates Harlowe Place. Tracing back the origin of her later ordeal, Clarissa always arrives at “a prohibited correspondence” (409), of which her traumatic situation is a “remote, yet sure consequence” (381). To begin with, Lovelace’s presence in the house is metonymic as it is his letters rather than his person that come into the presence of the Harlowes as he insidiously writes his way into the family to whom, at their request, he addresses public, hence open, letters on “the courts and countries he had visited” which are to provide “agreeable amusements in winter evenings” (47) for them. The letters have a general character since they are to be read in full assembly but at the same time Clarissa is singled out of the community of readers when Lovelace’s pen appoints her postmistress of these letters, one who is to handle his themes, make commentaries and pose questions according to whose rhythm his texts are to be composed, thus she dictates and amends them at the same time, her writing is beforehand as it forestalls his letters but it also a gloss and postscript to them. This mode of writing, owing to its public status seems to escape the name of exchange, being merely “a kind of correspondence” (47), that is to say it is an exchange that assumes, counterfeits correspondence, or maybe is its preliminary. Correspondence proper begins with a moment of crisis which is also a moment of excess and difference. The distraction occurs when economy of ex-

¹⁸ J. Altman, *Epistolarity*. . . , p. 167.

¹⁹ J. Baudrillard, *Seduction*, p. 83.

²⁰ J. Altman, *Epistolarity*. . . , p. 22.

change is upset and writing runs a surplus: there arrives one letter too many, a private one, enclosed within a public missive, through which not only is the symmetry of correspondence decomposed and division or hierarchy of readers set up, but the whole epistolary circuit becomes confused too. What is enclosed parenthesisises writing and relationship by constructing within their respective territories an enclave of privacy which may be ignored and this is how parentheses are often approached: reading passes them by, leaps over their fence, but isolation is an act of privileging too, since “The pleasure of writing. . . is. . . the pleasure of sharing, but it is also that of leading with [the other] a clandestine existence on the fringe of a social group.”²¹ The enclosed letter ushers in disorientation, a twist in direction, by placing writing at the cross-roads, making its paths divaricate. And one cannot speak of seduction without rhetoric of confusion or mis-direction: seduction inevitably spells displacement and error (se-ducere: to take aside, to divert from one’s path). When Lovelace’s script pursues an individual course, when the general subject is interleaved with the particular one (“declaring. . . passionate regards” (47)), it closes as its space contracts itself and becomes more oppressive and particular, yet it opens too by drawing new routes along which writing may unfold. Primarily, the particular letters fail to be acknowledged or taken notice of, they remain unanswered “as if. . . never. . . seen” (48), but when at length they induce the recipient to read them and reply; seduction has already got under way. As the letter is read, recognised, defined as the letter only when one is written into a solitary requital in which the audience, the former reading public, become estranged; the letter leads its privileged reader astray from company of others. The exchange, hitherto watched over and regulated, now slips off the public, prescribed, path and thus begets intimacy. A loss of balance occurs. The family are distanced (71) and withheld from reading: not only does clandestine correspondence disobey law and duty, but it has “a giddy appearance” as well. It comes to signify a frivolous “mere lover-like” writing, but the giddiness defines also a moment of stagger and approach of a fall: the letters gone astray court seduction with which they share the precarious principle of deflection. The off-course writing provokes suit. Woman is to be conquered through yielding to correspondence, a reply to a man’s letter ushers in her ruin, jeopardises female integrity as the hymen of her writing becomes riven, is inflicted a tear. On responding, she returns to him, hands herself over. Clarissa’s “prohibited correspondence” turns ruinous as it literally opens up her body and identity to a series of violations through which they are made an inscribable and legible territory.

An operation of broaching marks an act of introduction or initiation yet never performed, it seems, without a certain pointed gesture (to broach is first and foremost to stab, pierce, perforate, etc.) invariably at stake of every application of pen to paper, every point of inscription. Blankness of paper, which could be also its lack, its very absence like for instance non-arrival of a desired letter, still

²¹ Elisabeth J. MacArthur, *Extravagant Narratives. Closure and Dynamics in the Epistolary Form* (Princeton, 1990), p. 159.

undivided by the point of a pen or defiled with ink connotes a condition of virginity, a state prefatory to the assault of signs and thus a state of resistance to script. To seduce is then to break down resistance of writing. As hesitation of signs becomes mastered and writing takes place, a paper tissue is lacerated in fictive perforation. Breaking the hymen, however, marks at the same time the becoming of the text stitched together by a deft, one might say e-quil-ibrant, manipulation of a pen. Textual space acts as a site for rehearsal of the bodily conquest, the progress of which script both expects and assists. Or perhaps it is writing which is the end of the conquest, its objective but also consummation: paper consumption and thus surrogate and preparatory to the bodily, actual, one.

Małgorzata Nitka

Pismo, list, uwodzenie

Streszczenie

Artykuł ukazuje związki między pisaniem, wymianą listów a uwodzeniem na tle osiemnastowiecznych tekstów epistolarnych, w głównej mierze zaś powieści Samuela Richardsona *Clarissa*. Zależności te są analizowane na podstawie derridiańskiej metafory *hymen* oraz studium uwodzenia dokonanego przez Jeana Baudrillarda. Początkiem, a jednocześnie punktem krytycznym, uwodzenia jest moment odpowiedzi na list, moment, w którym zostaje przełamany opór pisma, i który stanowi tym samym nieuchronną zapowiedź aktu defloracji.

Małgorzata Nitka

Écriture, lettre, séduction

Résumé

L'article montre les liaisons entre l'écriture, l'échange de lettres et la séduction à propos de textes épistolaires du XVIII^e siècle et surtout dans le roman *Clarissa* de Samuel Richardson. Ces relations sont étudiées à la base de la métaphore derridienne de l'*hymen* et de l'étude sur la séduction effectuée par Jean Baudrillard. Le début et en même temps le point critique de la séduction est la réponse à la lettre; c'est le moment où l'on rompt la résistance à l'écriture ce qui constitue par là même l'inévitable annonce de l'acte de défloration.