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Epistolary Novel

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torical transcendence of that society, but in its explicit emphasis on the susceptibility of the social world to processes of change that derive ultimately from the changing nature of economic production. In Brecht's view, it is a fundamental purpose of Epic Theater to represent the world as changeable. It was on this basis that he developed ideas about techniques of *Verfremdung* (i.e., representing aspects of the familiar world on stage in ways that made them appear strange or remarkable). He wanted Epic Theater to assist the audiences of a "scientific age" in comprehending the complexities of the world in which they lived and to train them in the habits of observation appropriate to that world. It is also clear from Brecht's actual practice in theater, as well as from his later theoretical writings (particularly the 1948 "Short Organum for the Theatre"), however, that the effects of discovery that he wished to offer theater audiences depended as much on judicious combinations of conventional theatrical techniques (including naturalistic ones) as they did on the innovative style of acting that he describes in his early writings. Brecht's conception of Epic Theater became influential in the 1950s and 1960s—when the reputation of the Berliner Ensemble was at its height—not only in the sense that it invited imitation but also that it stimulated writers and directors to develop his ideas in a critical spirit both within the German Democratic Republic (Volker Braun, Peter Hacks, and Heiner Müller) and further afield (Max Frisch, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Peter Weiss, Edward Bond, and Peter Brook). Since that time, the techniques associ-

ated with it have become incorporated into the standard repertoire of effects in international theater.

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Epistolary Novel

Traditional definitions and descriptions of epistolary fiction, and, specifically, the epistolary novel, epitomize the schizophrenic elitism inherent in modern literary criticism. On the one hand, the letter per se, subsumed as a subgenre under autobiographical writings, is valued because it provided the developing modern novel with a naturalized link to historical authenticity. The letter supposedly grounded the novel in empirical reality. For this purpose, 18th-century novels, circumspect for their fictionality and their portrayal of bourgeois interiors that revealed the previously hidden lives of women, often include editorial prefaces that base the novel's existence on the circumstantial discovery of a "bag of mail," as in Christian F. Gellert's *Leben der schwedischen Gräfin von G**** (1750; *Life of the Swedish Countess G****). In such works, the author hides behind the professional objectivity of an editor, simply collecting and sorting an autobiographical narrative rather than inventing it. The result is a "double fictionality," by which one fiction authenticates the other in form of a fiction (H. Brown). In addition, once the 18th-century epistolary writers stripped the letter of most of the classical ideas of rhetoric and style, they raised the aristocratic idea of aesthetic "Natürlichkeit" (naturalness) to the genre's new code (Nickisch, Nies). Due to women's perceived role as mediators between culture and nature, authentic letters by women or letters written as women would have supposedly written them presented a "natural origin," which could then be

framed within an authorial narrative. Samuel Richardson professedly based his epistolary novel of morality, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), on his model book of letters for educated young women. One of the most famous instances of letters producing a fiction around their author's voice and their historical authenticity are the *Lettres Portugaises* (1669; *Portuguese Letters*), supposedly written by the narrator herself, a young nun; we have recently discovered, however, that the work was written by Claude Barbin himself after all. But even before the authorship was suspect, writing a *la Portugaise* became the *crier dernier* style for a whole generation of amorous correspondences and epistolary novels.

On the other hand, the letter's attraction for expressions of desire, whether in the form of personal confession, scandalous gossip, or political challenge, has also imbued the epistolary novel with a heightened sentimentality, as in Sophie von La Roche's *Geschichte des Fräuleins von Sternheim* (1771; *The History of Lady Sophia Sternheim*) and Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; translated as *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *The Sufferings of Young Werther*), which was a vent for excess and licentiousness. Choderlos des Laclos's *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782; *Dangerous Liaisons*) is an example of the latter, so-called extravagant narratives (MacArthur), not only in content but also in form: the rake Marquis de Valmont writes his most famous love letter to

virtuous Madame de Tourvel—the letter that finally proves his honorable intentions to her—on the naked back of a prostitute. While the letter form thus imparted its fiction of legitimacy to the new genre, the modern novel, it also imparted to it its incestuous and adulterous desires (also the desire for the transgression of its generic limits, desires that both founded and challenged the novel's status [Tanner]). With Mikhail Bakhtin, one could call the epistolary novel the most obvious expression of polyphonic discourse. Hans Robert Jauss even goes so far as to see a displacement of the sentimental novel of the 18th century by a self-reflective critique of the novel via letters.

In addition to the importance of the epistolary form for the modern novel during the course of its development in the 18th century, authors and scholars in the period conducted their literary theory and philosophy as, not just in form of, epistolary correspondence and thereby, as Habermas (1987) and Heckendorn Cook have argued, expanded their bourgeois private sphere to a literary public. For the German context, Gert Mattenklott explicates how the “longing for autarchic self-creation” reached its high point with the Romantics and their “embracing of theory and novel.” As evidenced by Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde* (1799) and his *Gespräch über die Poesie* (1800), the Romantic mixture of reflections, letters, and bildungsroman ruptured narrative authority, which in turn structurally shaped the form of the modern novel. According to Karl Heinz Bohrer, Gustav Hillard, and Gottfried Honnfelder, the letter exhausted its special qualities as a dialogic medium in the process. With the discontinuity and dissolution of the individual subject, the letter supposedly lost its ability to communicate and became just another manneristic form of self-reflective narrative.

The critical bias inherent in these dualistic genre definitions marks the history of the epistolary novel and articulates itself in the separation of the letter's “particularity of material existence in a specific historical moment” from its vehicle function for literary or theoretical contents (Kauffmann, 1992). In the wake of positivist science, annotated editions of letters chosen for their autobiographical authenticity and for their historical value exemplify the first extreme. Their role was to supply substantial evidence for the master narratives of literary criticism and historiography. Even today, editions of letters and epistolary novels are chosen according to preexistent biases such as fame, fortune, scandal, literary merit, and historical evidence. With the advance of feminist criticism and social history, new editions reflect a change in focus. The “ordinary” letter has become the center of attention for many period and local studies. Due to the increased availability of these letters, which previously had to be read in libraries and archives, more and more essays about epistolary theory and fiction concentrate on or include the “familiar” letter (Goldsmith). The other extreme includes studies in which letters simply carry out the critic's aesthetic directions (Bohrer). Both extremes of epistolary theory are interested not so much in the letters themselves as in the subjects who wrote the letters and the individual subjects who constitute themselves in and through the letters. For theories based on Gellert's postulation that the letter stands in for oral dialogue, that it is a “direct personal expression of a subject's feelings and intentions,” the questioning of these subject positions automatically results in a proportional superfluity of the epistolary novel (Nolden).

With the conventional or imaginary sending of a letter, the activities and personnel involved in writing and reading are sepa-

rated by time and place and defined accordingly. In addition, a letter, real or metaphorical, is a dispatch, conceived of as a physical object moving through time and space (e.g., a message in a bottle, *Rohrpost*, or *Briefpost*); its very existence as a letter presupposes a detachment from its originating environment (writer, sender, place, and time). But as the discussion about the subject-position should have made clear, it is not just the letter that changes location; the subject itself is dislocated in the process. Jacques Derrida studies this result of the postal system in his theoretical epistolary novel *La Carte Postal* (1980; *The Postcard*). With the advance of mechanically and electronically handled mail, mail-order business transactions, computerized banking, and electronic mail via fax, satellite, or computer, it is understandable that literary scholars find it difficult to sort out their letters. Ivar Ivask and John L. Brown's essays in the special issue of *World Literature Today: The Letter: A Dying Art?* (1990) provide an example of this difficulty in their melodramatic accounts of the fate of the letter in a media age. Ivask believes that scholars and readers alike find a respite from “impersonal experimentation for experimentation's sake” in the letter form, which lets them “share in the realities of our common human experience in time and place.” Brown states that all agree that “the health of the letter has been dealt a fatal blow by the telephone, the telegram, the cassette, the fax, and other technical innovations that have deprived it of its *raison d'être*. The authentic ‘personal’ letter (factitious as this can often be) has been further devaluated by the rise of computerized mail.” The insecurity about the “law of genre” also points to the larger problems and challenges for literary criticism today. The complexity of communication forms and their interaction with the epistolary form necessitates interdisciplinary cooperation and a diversity of methodological approaches.

When scholars and writers speak of the trend of modern epistolary fiction toward aesthetic monologization (Bohrer) or even proclaim the end of the letter as a communicative medium and a literary device (Honnfelder), their arguments can only be understood if situated within the anxiety about the fate of art and the subject in our postindustrial age: “[P]ublic discussion increasingly conjured up the end of the letter. Throughout the 20th century the tendencies to declare the death of the letter became stronger. Blamed was the extension of other communication media which let the letter appear as a *curiosum* in the public mind.” This tendency, characterized here by Angelika Ebrecht, reflects an uneasy cultural pessimism, which is in turn fueled by a rigidly normative definition of genre. This definition found new nourishment in the modernist crisis of the subject, the subject's dislocation in the technological age, and this self-conscious subject's attempt at expressing its crisis as an inversion of the private/public dichotomy of the Enlightenment: “Now letters should constitute less the public sphere than shelter the private sphere from the transformation through a cultural i.e. social situation conceived as destructive” (Ebrecht). During a time of instability such as the early decades of the 20th century, the letter's major function again became its character as a vehicle, its ephemeral quality, and this inspired Jürgen Habermas (*Wege aus der Moderne*, 1988) to see modernism as an unfinished project: “In the enhanced valuation of the transitory, the liminal, the ephemeral, in the celebration of the dynamic, the longing for an immaculate, pausing presence announces itself. As a self-negating movement, modernism is ‘longing for true presence.’”

The very “waywardness” of the letter is invested with the ability to transcend its content and move beyond the limitations of its time and place (H. Brown). In Hugo von Hofmannsthal’s *Ein Brief* (1902; translated as *A Letter* or *The Lord Chandos Letter*), which connects this therapeutic function of the letter most notably with the critique of language, the letter ambiguously attests to the impossibility of establishing meaning, while at the same time enabling a transcendence of the hermeneutic crisis. Hans Bemann’s *Erwins Badezimmer; oder, Die Gefährlichkeit der Sprache* (1984; *Erwin’s Bathroom; or, The Danger of Language*) continues Hofmannsthal’s tradition by employing the letter form as a means to restore the polysemic potential of language for humanity’s and humanism’s survival against all odds (Göttsche, Simon). Indeed, the increase in publications of epistolary novels at the end of the 20th century, most noticeable in the internationally popular *Griffin and Sabine* art-book trilogy by Nick Bantok (1991–93), speaks of a desire for simplification and comprehension of communications technology, postindustrial networks, postcolonial liaisons, and hybrid connections (sexual, racial, and cultural). It is as if the letter were sending itself beyond each crisis into a stable universe while taking its participants back toward the Enlightenment idea of an individual existing in a mediated, yet well-temperate harmony with nature. The letter form is deaestheticized to preserve its cognitive potential for the process of aestheticization.

As a sample of the quantity and diversity of contemporary epistolary fiction in Germany, and as a suggestion for further reading, I offer the following titles, although many more could be mentioned: Marga Berck’s *Sommer in Lesmona* (1951; *A Summer in Lesmona*), Christine Brückner’s *Ehe die Spuren verwehen* (1954; *Before the Traces Disappear*) and *Das glückliche Buch der a.p.* (1970; *The Happy Book of a.p.*), Ingeborg Bachmann’s *Malina* (1971; *Malina*), Peter Handke’s *Der kurze Brief zum langen Abschied* (1972; *Short Letter Long Farewell*), Ulrich Plenzdorf’s *Die neuen Leiden des jungen Werther* (1973; *The New Sufferings of Young Werther*), Irtraud Morgner’s *Leben und Abenteuer der Trobadora Beatriz nach Zeugnissen ihrer Spielfrau Laura* (1974; *Life and Adventures of Trobadora Beatriz*), Friederike Mayröcker’s *Die Abschiede* (1980; *The Farewells*), Stefan Heym’s *Ahasver* (1981; *The Wandering Jew*), Wolfgang Hildesheimer’s *Mitteilungen an Max* (1983; *Missives to Max*), Herbert Rosendorfer’s *Briefe in die chinesische Vergangenheit* (1983; *Letters Back to Ancient China*), Natascha Wodin’s *Briefe aus Rußland* (1984; *Letters from Russia*), Hans Bemann’s *Erwin’s Badezimmer; oder, Die Gefährlichkeit der Sprache* (1984; *Erwin’s Bathroom; or, The Danger of Language*), Peter-Jürgen Boock/Peter Schneider’s *Ratte—tot . . .* (1985; *Rat—dead*), and Eva Demska’s *Hotel Hölle, guten Tag . . .* (1987; *Hotel Hell, Good Morning*).

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See also Bildungsroman; Goethe, *Die Lieder des jungen Werthers*; Sophie von La Roche

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