mines, the august singularity of the paternal autochthon. While the subterranean invention of the canal is set in a hidden space between two terms, the walnut and the willow—but as well a desire and its realization, or a crime and its discovery—the superfluity of that "between" is nonetheless the ingenious ground from which "me, I" needs to speak. For that reason, the subject of the anecdote in which Rousseau indulges himself is neither Mlle Lambercier's comically exposed *derrière* nor M. Lambercier's augustly proud tree, but an artful device that works below the surface, effective because covered over, as called for in the other maxim that directs this work: "Omnia vincit labor improbus."

There is, however, another sense in which the aqueduct anecdote is a conduit. By its interposition we are led from the clever little architect at Bossey to the serene designer of Elysée, the gardener who disguises herself in those willows "which grow by themselves." Likewise, a link is established between the walnut tree and the water-jet, both symbols of ceremonial paternal glory. Diverting the element that sustains that glory into other channels demands a "labor improbus"—a dishonest work—that produces the subject of the autobiographer's art no less than and no differently than that of the novelist's. The aqueduct—the channel of duplicity—connects, finally, Rousseau to the figure of the woman forced underground.

5 / DETOUR SIGNS
Les Liaisons Dangereuses

I notice . . . that I have written a volume, having projected to write only a word.

The Marquise de Merteuil

This letter has led me farther than I expected.

The Vicomte de Valmont

OUR reading of Rousseau's novel follows the path of a double detour which is both the deflection that at several crucial moments menaces the straight line of inheritance from father to son and the principle of prolongation which preserves life in the garden. In either mode, the detour maintains an underground relation to the woman who both relieves a stagnation in the father's identity and threatens to drain its vital substance. Uncovering the various subterfuges and secret conduits that run throughout the novel—and beyond—is therefore a work of excavation.

In Choderlos de Laclos's only novel, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the detour has surfaced; indeed, it constitutes the readable surface of the text. If, that is, we can still call *readable* a text which is almost entirely constructed out of such deviations from the sense of it all. As a letter-fiction or a textual field of meaning delimited by the two alternating poles of sender and receiver, *Les Liaisons* adopts as its condition of possibility of meaning the doubleness or duplicity that also allows for, even necessitates, the possibility of a deviation of that meaning from the addressed destination. Reading this novel cannot be a simple matter, since a letter arrives, if it arrives, only in its (possibly) detoured form, having taken (perhaps) a borrowed path.[1]

While any letter-novel adopts the same condition of possibility/impossibility, *Les Liaisons* offers its readers relatively

little protective cover behind which to forget or ignore the text's possible duplicity. To begin with, the device of the frame, which could serve to contain the careening deviations of the letters, is rendered useless precisely because it is two-sided: the editor's preface is itself preceded by a publisher's foreword that advises us, ironically it would seem, to disregard the editor's claim for the authenticity of the letters. And at the other limit of the text, a similar dismantling of the limit occurs: the word "End" is succeeded by an ambiguous note from the publisher which alludes to a possible continuation of the adventures of Merteuil and Cécile. A simple effect of this tampering with the frame from within the fiction is the erosion which overtakes the attempt to settle upon the limits of the text from without. By encompassing with his own introduction and notes those which are part of the text of the novel, the modern editor (Yves Le Hir, for example, for the Garnier edition) is functioning at least in part in a mode already figured by the fictional editor, so that one reads this gesture, which presumes fixed terms on the object, as already inscribed from within the object. The job of editing these letters, if only insofar as it requires setting the terms of a beginning and an end, is a very tricky business. At these limits, no less than in the main body of the novel, something risks going astray.

In a certain sense, Rousseau's novel describes the detour as the connecting principle of the epistolary form, that from which and by which the letters proceed. Significantly, it is the principle to which Julie refers in the long letter of recapitulation that marks a break in the text by offering a summary of the events thus far. Recalling the first moments of their passion, Julie writes to Saint-Preux:

> I knew my heart and judged myself to be lost at your first word. . . . I tried vainly with a feigned coldness to keep you distant in the *tête-a-tête*. This constraint itself was my downfall: you *wrote*. Instead of throwing your first letter into the fire or carrying it to my mother, I dared to open it. That was my crime, and the rest necessarily followed. [Pp. 341–42]

At the two crucial moments which are the writing and the reading of the first letter, Julie retrospectively points to a fatal divergence from the straight and narrow. In the first moment,

writing bypasses the constraint imposed on the spoken exchange. In the second moment, reading deflects the letter from its direct path into the fire or into the mother's hands. Neither of these moments, however, is a simple deviation.

By the terms of Saint-Preux's first letter, what must be restrained is precisely the passion that threatens to lead the pedagogical exchange off its reasoned course.[2] But at the same time as the letter he writes circumvents this constraint, it also offers itself as a shortcut back to the path of virtue. He writes: "I can see, Mademoiselle, only one way to get out of the difficulty [*embarras*] I am in. . . . Show my letter to your parents; have me thrown out of your house. . . . I cannot flee you on my own" (p. 32). The solution which Saint-Preux proposes here is precisely the road not taken that Julie regrets: showing this letter to her mother or throwing it into the fire. One way or the other, Julie's analysis, which situates her crime at the moment the novel opens, suggests that it is only in some region before the letter that she was not already covered with the shame of her passion for Saint-Preux. Destroying the letter or bringing it home to mother are finally equivalent means of short-circuiting the reading of the letter and of remaining therefore in that prefictional region before the crime. Reading it, however, Julie engages the mechanism of the double-bind, that is, the *written* imperative *not to read* (to show the letter to her mother) which in order to obey she must disobey. Once engaged, the double-bind will continue to proliferate the letters and thus widen the gap which separates Julie from her pretextual innocence and from the possibility of a return to the mother.

This recapitulation is a necessary digression in our approach to *Les Liaisons* since Laclos, to a certain extent, has duplicated Rousseau's novel in his own. This relation is set out already on the title page, which includes an epigraph chosen from the first preface to *Julie*. " 'I have seen the morality of my time and I have published these letters.' " This quotation in a changed context produces an equivocation in the referent of "these letters," a forced ambiguity through which one collection of letters may be substituted for the other. In that switch, however, *Julie*'s positive moral example is siphoned off in the direction of *Les Liaisons*'s negative example. This embezzlement or diversion of funds

already suggests the (mis)use which Merteuil makes of *Julie* as a source in her preparations for the seduction of young Belleroche: " . . . I read a chapter of *Le Sopha*, a letter from *The New Heloise*, and two fables of La Fontaine to record the different tones I wanted to adopt."[3] Just as Merteuil's practice of seduction results in a *détournement de mineur*, Laclos's (mis)appropriation of Rousseau's novel swerves it off course on an aberrant trajectory.

Yet the digression which is *Les Liaisons* in its relation to *Julie* would not be possible if that first novel were not already operating in the indirect mode of the letter. If we restore the epigraph to its original context, we find that it is within just such a departure from a straight moral lesson that Rousseau inscribed his novel. "Just as large cities need the theatre, corrupt people need novels. I have seen the morality of my time and I have published these letters. If only I had lived in a time when I would have been obliged to *throw them into the fire*!" (p. 5). The oblique path of the moralist / novelist, however, who instead of burning such letters sends them on for others to read, announces very precisely that other deviation figured in the letters: to wit, Julie's failure to throw Saint-Preux's first letter into the fire. Through its tangential address to "the morality of [its] time," in other words, the letter-novel always risks going astray, falling into the wrong hands. The check on this potential for deviation is, as we know, Rousseau's warning in the same preface to the chaste girl to close his book before it is too late.

A closer comparison between this preface to *Julie* and the editor's preface to *Les Liaisons* would suggest that, once again, Laclos took Rousseau as a model. One finds the same apology for the faulty style and the same modest prediction that such a work will have only a limited appeal. There is, however, one noteworthy divergence from Rousseau's presentation of his work. The author of the preface to *Les Liaisons* in effect doubles the potential for the dangerous drift of these letters into the wrong hands by warning "the youth *of both sexes*" of the abuse ("always so close to the good way") into which such letters could lead. He concludes: "Far from recommending this work to youth, it seems to me very important to divert [*éloigner*] young people from reading anything of this kind" (p. 5). We have here

an initial indication of how Laclos's novel works to compound the original mistake that Julie identifies with the reading of a first letter and that leads Rousseau to single out the "chaste girl" from the audience of readers. By doubling the abuse of the letter, Laclos removes the only check on that abuse, for the check is grounded finally in the sexual opposition. Once the concept of outside-the-book (or before-the-letter) is no longer defined with reference to sexual difference, every other differentiation that operates within the space of the letters—writer/reader, sender/receiver, seducer / seduced—is set adrift on a course that threatens to take with it the very shores of anchored stability. No chaste girl can find a place either inside or outside such writing.[4]

When we write, then, that Laclos's letter-fiction duplicates Rousseau's, that too must be understood in two senses. That is, there is both a repetition of certain features of the intrigue and a deflection of these features into the misleading orbit of the double. The couple Cécile/Danceny, for example, are but a more naive, more prosaic version of the couple Julie/Saint-Preux. Like the Swiss lovers, the Parisian innocents discover desire in the pedagogical situation and begin a correspondence in the same fashion as Rousseau's characters. Once begun, however, that correspondence rebounds by means of a set of reduplications. First, Merteuil, acting as Cécile's other mother, acquires the girl's confidence precisely by authorizing the continuation of her exchange with Danceny. Valmont enters at an analogous moment to reinstate that exchange after it has been interrupted by Mme de Volanges (which is to say, by Merteuil). Valmont's liaison role soon yields to his position as Danceny's proxy with Cécile, and the exchange of letters is briefly short-circuited by a sexual exchange with the mailman. For the series to be complete, it only remains for Merteuil to seduce Danceny away from Cécile, in the guise this time, however, of the young girl's substitute.

This turning aside of the source of the letter-fiction in *Julie* remains, nevertheless, a pretext for a far more disruptive trajectory which binds together Valmont, Merteuil, and Tourvel and propels them beyond a fail-safe point. It is within this other trajectory that the potential for the letter to go astray comes closest to dismantling the structural oppositions which support

the reader's capacity to follow and arrive at the drift of the text. Yet, if one is not to short-circuit the reading of these letters, it is this possibility of being set adrift that has to be engaged.

Already in her third letter to Valmont, Merteuil compares his delaying tactic in the project to seduce Tourvel to a side trip, a slow journey along back roads. "But you, who are no longer yourself [*qui n'êtes plus vous*], you are behaving as if you were afraid of succeeding. Since when do you travel by short spurts and on side roads [*des chemins de traverses*]? My friend, when you want to *arrive*, fast horses and the main road!" (p. 25). What is at stake in this excursion, as Merteuil here reminds him, is Valmont's reputation as a seasoned adventurer on the high road of seduction. Indeed, her impatience with his overdue arrival has initiated the correspondence between the two libertines, since the first letter to the Vicomte opens with an appeal for a speedy return: "Come back, my dear Vicomte, come back. What are you doing, what could you be doing at your old aunt's house? . . . Leave right away, I need you. . . . You will receive this letter tomorrow. I demand that tomorrow, at seven o'clock in the evening, you be here with me" (pp. 9–10). In effect, Valmont defers this rendezvous until almost the end of the novel—four months of narrative time or almost 150 letters later—by which time, of course, he has missed his appointment. In that space of his deferral, Valmont is between engagements: not yet and no longer the seducer of Tourvel, no longer and not yet Merteuil's lover. The interval of this novel is that of an interim between two points of arrival, two projects of seduction, two women—which is to say, two correspondences. Thus, in order to describe the effects of jealousy within this triangle—or any other effects—one cannot cut short the letter's course, since it is there that something gets sent off in another direction.

It is not long before Merteuil is warning Valmont of the danger of writing. "But the real blunder is having let yourself write [*vous être laissé aller à écrire*]. I defy you to foresee now where this may lead you" (p. 67). If Merteuil here sounds a warning of the possible deviations which the letter may impose on the course of Valmont's seduction, it is not only because they could delay consummation. What is potentially more dangerous is the space

now created for a different response, one which is other than the one requested. Her own letter continues with the counterpoint of the spoken tactic where this interval all but disappears and where "the presence of the loved object makes us desire to be conquered." She closes with a final piece of advice: "Listen to me, Vicomte: you have been asked to stop writing. Take advantage of this request to repair your mistake [*faute*] and wait for a chance to speak" (p. 68).

Valmont's reply to this letter is deceptively simple:

> Why go to such lengths to prove what everyone knows? To go quickly in love, it is better to speak than to write. . . . Whatever the case may be, a lawyer would tell you that the principle does not apply to the question at hand. In effect, you presume that I have the choice between speaking and writing, *which I do not*. [P. 69]

On a first level, Valmont's reply recalls the pragmatic constraints of his situation. Ever since his first declaration, Tourvel has avoided the *tête-à-tête*. Like Saint-Preux, therefore, Valmont is prompted to write his first letter in order to get around this obstacle in his path. On another level, however, the logic of this moment is one in which the concepts of project as a straight course to the object and of detour as (potentially) a drifting away from that object are confused. What Valmont signals here as his own lack of choice is the necessity of the detour *within* the project if it is to arrive at its goal. His procedure at this moment, in other words, must—in order to proceed—include the possibility of the letter's loss of direction.

Merteuil's reminder of proper procedure in such situations, on the other hand, figures something like an irresistible presence to itself of the seducer's project in a flawless performance that combines intonation, tears, gesture, and tender looks. "That is why," she writes, "the most mediocre play, which one could never bring oneself to read, never misses having an effect in the theater" (p. 68). Merteuil's criticism of Valmont's performance, however, calls up finally an image of a sovereign actor whose impeccable *jeu* leaves one speechless, defenseless. Her logic, which clearly sorts out a choice between speaking and writing and between, therefore, a faultless and a deficient execution of a project, is the same which leads another of Valmont's critics to imagine, even if only in passing, "perfect evil." "No one could

have resisted perfect evil [*le mal parfait*]: a Valmont who does not write letters could not have been unmasked."[5] The concept of the choice between writing and not writing, in other words, is the concept of a project thought in its perfection, what in this context would occupy the irresistibly seductive place of "le mâle parfait," the perfect male—man, that is, before the (fault of the) letter. Thus, the blunder or *maladresse* with which Merteuil reproaches Valmont is given this other sense of something lacking within a man's project to have a woman, a fault which is marked by the address of a letter.[6]

Yet, when Merteuil urges Valmont to employ another kind of *adresse*—that of the skill or dexterity of the combatant—she does so in a mode which in effect substitutes for the "attack" on Tourvel the example of an attack on Merteuil herself. That is, by advising Valmont to adopt a change of tactic, her letter at the same time urges him to use a change of address—to turn and return his attentions to her.

> For myself, I confess, the thing that flatters me most is a hearty, well-mounted attack . . . which maintains an air of violence even in those things which we concede, and which flatters skillfully [*avec adresse*] our two distinct passions, the glory of defense and the pleasure of defeat . . . and sometimes it even happens that I give myself up, simply as reward. Just as in the ancient tournaments, beauty gave the prize for valor and skill [*adresse*]. [P. 25]

It is this letter, letter 10, which continues with an intimate description of Merteuil's preparation for a night with her current lover, that provokes Valmont into requesting just such a return to the marquise's favor. Merteuil will respond with a contract whose terms are simple: she agrees to become Valmont's mistress again but only as the prize for his eventual victory over Tourvel.

It is clear to any reader of the novel that the exchange which takes place at this moment between Valmont and Merteuil is highly significant for the unraveling of the plot. What may be easily overlooked, however, in this re-destination of Valmont's project, is a small confusion that accompanies that exchange and that is already perhaps a signal of another, far more consequential, disturbance later in their correspondence. Briefly, letter 20,

which contains Merteuil's proposal for the renewal of their liaison, goes somewhat astray. A note from the "editor" indicates that before Valmont received it, he had already sent two more letters to Merteuil (numbered 21 and 23), the second of which discloses that he has written to Tourvel.[7] In the exchange which then ensues about this blunder, Valmont neglects to acknowledge receipt of the contract. In fact, he does not refer to this promise until letter 58 and then not again until letter 99, on what he thinks is the eve of Tourvel's capitulation. "Finally, my lovely one, I will arrive without delay at your door to demand that you keep your word. You have no doubt not forgotten what you promised me after my victory?" (p. 229). By this time, of course, and just as Merteuil had warned, Valmont's correspondence with Tourvel has led him way off course. The (double) arrival he announces for the next day will not take place as foreseen. Again, Valmont misses his connection and the fiction continues.

If we ask, however, at what point the project to seduce Tourvel and win Merteuil's favor goes awry, the answer would have to be duplex—would have to recognize, that is, that already at the outset a difference bifurcates the point of departure. In that simple notion of the desire to arrive another desire is already crossing it like a *chemin de traverse*, since Valmont's progress toward Tourvel is also a progress toward Merteuil in the terms of that contract which we have deferred reading until now:

> As soon as you have had your beautiful, pious woman, and have furnished me with proof, come and I am yours. You know, however, that for important affairs, the only proof is a written one. In this fashion, on the one hand, I will be a reward instead of being a consolation. This idea pleases me more. On the other hand, your success will be sweeter as it will become a means of infidelity. So come, come as soon as you can and bring me the token of your triumph, just like our brave knights who deposited at the feet of their lady the brilliant spoils of their victory. [P. 42]

In effect, Merteuil proposes a circular trajectory for Valmont's project, one which will bring it all back home. For the major part of the novel, this circularity, whereby the seduction of Tourvel is posed as merely a pretext for the return to Merteuil, disguises a double inscription which is no less duplicitous on the one hand

than the other. Valmont is engaged on a path in the course of which he risks losing his identity as a skillful seducer in the address to Tourvel. On the other hand, therefore, he steers directly toward his object by referring to that source of his identity in the correspondence with Merteuil.

The circular notion of the return, by short-circuiting the address of the letter back to a point before the novel opens, also disguises the reader's engagement in the text. It sets out a model of reading as a bypassing of the text, a reading, in other words, of an impossible origin of the book. It is that region alluded to in an editor's note about the beginning of Valmont's and Merteuil's liaison: "Since this affair was altogether ordinary and since it was also quite anterior to the period of these letters, we thought it best to eliminate [*supprimer*] this whole correspondence" (p. 10). The suppression referred to here leaves the beginning of the relation between the two principle correspondents in the space of an origin which is outside the text, preexisting and thereby causing the letters which one reads. This causality is given the minimal necessary support when the editor points out that in this first liaison one would find the *pretext* for the revenge on Gercourt, a motif that explains the intrigue of the novel, excepting, of course, Valmont's seduction of Tourvel. It is this exception which the structure of circularity attempts to reappropriate by describing a trajectory in which the end—the goal—is also a return to a pretextual, preliteral beginning.

Of course, the editor's decision not to include this earlier correspondence has a practical explanation. The book has to begin somewhere. This constraint has nonetheless the effect of veiling the source of the novel's peripeties. Since the reader can only defer to the editor's better judgement in this matter, the hidden origin is allowed to function as that cache of meaning which explains the letters from a point outside their crisscrossing circuits. The novel's sense is thus held in reserve and the reader is encouraged subliminally, that is, from the margins at the bottom of the page, to direct his/her course through the series of letters back to this point which cannot be read. The text's reader is thus given a way out of the maze that is a shortcut around the dangers ahead.

For an idea of why one might agree to take such a shortcut, consider the conclusions of two critics who have little difficulty imagining what transpired between Valmont and Merteuil during their first liaison. Each would seem to want to lift the veil thrown over the letters at the outset in order to set straight the record of the power balance between the two former lovers—to put things back where they belong. Their efforts, therefore, will focus on Merteuil's fraud, her pretension to have more than she is entitled to. The title chosen by one of these readers, Aram Vartanian, already announces rather precisely the mystification he will uncover: "The Marquise de Merteuil: A Case of Mistaken Identity." We quote from the conclusion of this study of Merteuil's false androgyny:

> The Marquise is not, as she imagines, Valmont's match. Her superiority, more apparent that real, results in part from her exceptional talents, but especially from her assumed double role, which puts at her disposal, in dealing with others, the weapons peculiar to both sexes, a portion of which remain, moreover, secret weapons for her unsuspecting victims [. . .]. In the *dénouement* that follows, the proper role of each sex is re-affirmed with a vengeance.[8]

Similarly, Georges Daniel does not hesitate to read from a position before the letter of the text, from which point it is possible for him to conclude that "by a totally free and finally gratuitous decision [Merteuil] has chosen to wear a mask. She cultivates the art of dissimulation without necessity."[9] Beneath her veils, in other words, the marquise has nothing to hide. Both of these readers follow a circular course through the novel back to an unwritten scenario where roles are properly distributed between man and woman, the strong and the weak, the one who has it and the one who has nothing.

Valmont, however, is in a different position. If he accepts the conditions of circularity and the possibility of a return to an origin, then it can only be in order to better disguise that dispersion of the letter which he engages with the other hand. Thus, the circular strategy is a *garde-fou*, a cautionary mechanism which, like Ariadne's thread, allows him to follow all the angles in the other's labyrinth with the assurance that he can return to his point of departure. In effect, by superimposing the return to Merteuil and to an original source of identity on the uncharted

terrain of the address to Tourvel, Valmont contrives to have the one in the other, to "have," that is, Merteuil in Tourvel, to "have," therefore, his identity, but as singular, detached from its source. The address to Tourvel thus also operates as a safety device which guards against a return, once and for all, without recourse, to the origin of identity in the other.[10] It is as double that Valmont can judge his project to be sublime, a singular departure from that repetition of one more woman, *une femme de plus*, which is the seducer's lot. And because his goal is other than a simple object, he risks missing it in a "premature triumph."

> What then is our weakness! What is the power of circumstances if I myself, forgetting my projects, risked losing, by a premature triumph, the charm of a protracted battle and the details of a painful defeat! If, seduced by a young man's lust, I thought for a moment of letting Mme de Tourvel's conqueror, for the wages of his labor, be paid only with the insipid advantage of having had one more woman [*une femme de plus*]! Oh! let her submit, but first let her do battle; may she be too weak to win but strong enough to resist; let her savor slowly the feeling of weakness and be constrained to admit defeat. Only the lowly poacher kills the stag taken by surprise in its hiding place; the real hunter must bring him to bay. This project is sublime, is it not [*ce projet est sublime, n'est-ce pas*]? [P. 50]

As a double and therefore deferred seduction, Valmont's project is to put an end to seduction, both a term and an apotheosis. Successful, Valmont would have found a way to continue having "one more woman" even as he brings the series to a close.

It is, however, not only Valmont's duplicity which is masked by the structure of circularity. Merteuil is no less engaged in a movement between two destination points. We noted above that letter 20, which contains the contract, gets somewhat lost in a crosscurrent of Valmont's letters about Tourvel. This confusion, which the editors vainly try to sort out, may be easily overlooked by a too-circular reading. If we return now to the terms of this proposal, we find that it cannot be read simply—another reason, perhaps, that Valmont delays so long before replying. In effect, Merteuil proposes the contract as a means of putting off Valmont's request that he be allowed to "recover those moments when we knew how to attract happiness without tying it down

with the help of illusions" (p. 34), to return, in other words, to the state of their first liaison. Merteuil's response is the contract, which she introduces in these terms:

> It is not that I refuse permanently, but I am deferring [*je diffère*] and I am right. I might otherwise inject some vanity into our meeting and, once the game has begun, one no longer knows where [or when] to stop [*on ne sait plus où l'on s'arrête*]. . . . To avoid this risk, here are my conditions: As soon as you have had your beautiful, pious woman. . . . [P. 42]

In this preamble to the contract, Merteuil signals that Valmont's desire to return to some preillusory domain of pleasure, to an immediate, rather than a detoured, gratification, must itself be postponed or risk becoming lost in the game of not knowing where one stops and the other begins in a continual adjournment of arrival. Thus, the contract which puts an end (both limit and goal) to Valmont's seduction of Tourvel is, on the other hand, a contract to defer that end with Merteuil. It can only offer the illusion of some end and therefore of some return to an immediate, original correspondence. Valmont makes the mistake of not reading this interval in Merteuil's letter and he thus will attempt to shortcut the distance back to the marquise.

I do not mean that Valmont fails to read the letters Merteuil addresses to him in a simple sense. Rather, what he neglects to read, until too late, is that deviation which engages these letters and which confuses the opposition between a direct course and a circuitous one. Unlike Valmont's, Merteuil's dual correspondence cannot be sorted out between two addresses and distributed according to two notions inscribed alternatively. She writes only six letters outside her exchange with the vicomte. When compared with Valmont's total of nineteen letters to other correspondents, the difference is the excess of the thirteen letters he sends to Tourvel. Merteuil's letters are already letters to another and if he misreads them then, as we have seen, it is in part the better to ignore his own disjunction and that loss of a singular identity which it is his project to reappropriate.

There are several different paths one could follow which would discover traces of Merteuil's double address. Let us, however, go at least part of the way she herself describes in letter 81, that

history of her duplicity. Note first of all that this self-portrait is prompted by Valmont's skeptical opinion of Merteuil's ability to survive her attack on Prévan. He fears she is being imprudent in taking on such a formidable project. This warning, therefore, complements Merteuil's earlier caution to Valmont that, by entering into a correspondence with Tourvel, he was proceeding too prudently and thereby risked losing his way. When Merteuil replies to this warning it is to assure him that she has no need of his prudence in order to keep on course toward the goal of seducing Prévan.

> But that you could think that I need your prudence, that I would go astray by not deferring to your opinions [*que je m'égarerais en ne déférant pas à vos avis*], that I should sacrifice a pleasure, a fantasy, to them! In truth, Vicomte, that is to take too much pride in the confidence that I have consented to have in you! [P. 172].

It goes without saying, however, that the letter in which Merteuil describes her own prudence, the trained faculty for keeping herself on course, risks going astray.

Merteuil's project, in a limited sense, is to "submit" to Prévan's advances while nevertheless defeating his intent to discredit her virtue publicly. Her aim, therefore, is to "have" Prévan in both the sexual sense and the sense of a dupe. "As for Prevan," writes Merteuil at the end of this letter, "I want to have him and I will have him; he wants to talk and he will say nothing about it [*je veux l'avoir et je l'aurai; il veut le dire et il ne le dira pas*]" (p. 181). In a larger sense, Merteuil's project is to have the other without giving up anything herself, to possess outside of an exchange in the public or symbolic register. It is only outside that register that she can have her own pleasure without becoming lost in the meaning which sustains public exchange, the meaning of the seducer's triumph and the woman's humiliation.[11] In this sense, then, Merteuil's is also a sublime project, for, like Valmont's, it would defeat the end of seduction.

This project, nevertheless, must engage in exchange with men and thus with the seducer's meaning. Merteuil has done a long apprenticeship in preparation for Prévan, who is only the most recent in the series of men she has known. If we retrace this series

to its assigned beginning in letter 81, we find that it is precisely a certain knowledge, or *savoir*, that Merteuil wants to have. It is a knowledge of the man but one which no man can have. What Merteuil wants (to have/to know—*avoir/savoir*) is her own *jouissance*, but from a position which already denies that need to have and to know. It is in these terms that Merteuil describes her first "adventure":

> Like all young girls, I was seeking to figure out love and its pleasures, but . . . I had only vague ideas that I could not pin down. Even nature, who has since given me nothing to complain about, had as yet provided no clue, as if she were working in silence to perfect her work. Only my head was excited. I had no wish for pleasure, I simply wanted to know [*je voulais savoir*].[12] The desire to learn suggested the means.
>
> I felt that the only man with whom I could speak about this subject without compromising myself was my confessor. I decided right away what to do. Overcoming my embarrassment and boasting of a sin which I had not committed, I accused myself of having done *everything that women do* [*tout ce que font les femmes*; in italics in original]. That was the expression I used, but in saying this I actually did not know what it was I was saying. My wish was neither altogether disappointed nor entirely fulfilled [*ni tout à fait trompé, ni entièrement rempli*]. The fear of betraying myself kept me from saying any more. But, as the good father berated me for such a great evil [*mal*], I concluded that the pleasure must be extreme. Thus after the desire to know it followed the desire to taste it. [P. 176]

This passage describes the beginning of Merteuil's project to have (to know) her own pleasure with a man's complicity but without his knowledge, to have what the man has/knows without exchange. Note first of all that the lack of a sign from her body of its own pleasure in itself is what must be supplied by a sign from some other place. That place will be the confessional, the scene of a particular kind of exchange which is situated in the margins of social discourse. It is thus a space within which Merteuil can strike a compromise with that discourse—in order to learn what she needs to know—without at the same time compromising herself. The confessional is also a sublime place since it provides access to the perfection Merteuil has yet to achieve, that is, to the perfect man, who, in Merteuil's terms, is

one who gives her what she wants to have but says nothing about the exchange.

In this space, Merteuil confesses to "everything that women do." The "everything," however, is precisely what is lacking, what nature has failed to signify to her and in her and which thus can only be signified from some point beyond her own power to signify herself as an "everything," that is, as a finished woman. The lack is both confessed and denied, acknowledged and hidden, by the same expression which disguises the demand for the other's knowledge behind the sign of "everything." The phrase, one could say, both makes a demand and fills it, or rather makes no demand in order to disguise the demand it is making: "The fear of betraying myself," writes Merteuil, "kept me from saying any more." This closure of the demand for something else outside her limited nature is what keeps it from being closed off in a simple answer. Rather, like the question, the good Father's response defers the knowledge of pleasure through another sign: "evil" [*le mal*] (*"le mâle"?*). Merteuil is left wanting, her wish, as she writes, "neither altogether disappointed nor entirely fulfilled."

It is in this formulation of a "neither . . . nor" of Merteuil's desire to know/to have (*savoir/s'avoir*—to know/to have oneself) that we can read the double address to Valmont. In that other confessional space of letter 81, Merteuil again exposes—with less embarrassment and in more detail, to be sure—"everything that women do." As in the initial scene, however, a total *savoir* is deferred. Something remains still outside the closed circle of the self-portrait or the confession, a remainder that leaves the desire for self-possession neither completely thwarted nor totally satisfied. The deferred remainder, that which contradicts the closing off of "everything" and sends Merteuil off course, of course, is the letter.

"These precautions," writes Merteuil of her prudent procedures, "and those of never writing, never giving up [*livrer*, also to deliver] any proof of my defeat, might appear excessive but have never seemed to me sufficient" (p. 179). Once again, Merteuil discerns a choice between writing and not writing and derives a governing principle of her prudence. Yet, just like Valmont when he initiates his correspondence with Tourvel, she

finally has no choice but to borrow the term which she excludes in principle. As a confession of "everything that women do," this passage is sundered in its address to the other and thereby, perhaps irretrievably, is sent into the wrong hands.

Merteuil, however, believes she possesses a return guarantee, an insurance that her letter will not go astray but will arrive intact and undivided at its destination. She continues:

> Having looked into my heart, I have also studied there the hearts of others. I learned that everyone guards a secret which it is important to keep hidden. . . . Like a new Delilah, I have always used my power to take this important secret by surprise. . . . It is true that since [the end of our affair] I have given up [*livré*] all my secrets to you. But you know what *interests* bind us to each other, and whether, of the two of us, it is I who should be accused of imprudence. [Pp. 179–80]

In this allusion to the principle which sustains the secret exchange between Merteuil and Valmont, to the guarantee of silence which keeps their joint project on course, the reader is also given a glimpse of the form which the rupture of that pact will have to take: a publication of each other's secrets through a detour imposed on the letter. For the intrigue to end, as we know, Merteuil need only deflect one of Valmont's letters outside its circuit (probably letter 96, which is addressed to her but which she passes on to Danceny) in order that every other letter in the collection be veered off course and delivered to another address. Thus, if the book and its secrets are delivered—*livrés*—into the hands of a reader, they arrive by not arriving, by not stopping at their destination.

Yet, for there to be a book, this not-arriving, this game of not-knowing-where-one-ends, must end somewhere, just as we have already remarked that the letters must also begin somewhere. That is, so that the letters do not continue their course beyond the end of the book, another guarantee supplements the failed contracts between Valmont and Merteuil, serving to close off the circuit and to return the letter to its source. Something else protects the secret of the letter's drift. In *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, this "something else" shows up in the space allotted to the only character who, as the fiction has it, writes from outside the several diverging circuits of correspondence, in those marginal

notes on the bottom of the page. Two of the final notes, in particular, give some notion of what is at stake in this other pact of secrecy, the one the editor signs with the reader.

The first occurs as a note to the last passage we quoted from letter 81, where Merteuil comes dangerously close to exposing what she alludes to as the secret of Samson's strength.[13] The editor intervenes at the moment Merteuil reminds Valmont of their common "interests" and addresses this aside to the reader: "You will learn below, in letter 152, not M. de Valmont's secret but more or less of what sort it was. And the reader will understand that we are not able to enlighten him any more in this regard" (p. 180). Turning to letter 152, which is the last from Merteuil to Valmont before their secret war is declared, we find the passage that more or less reveals what cannot be revealed about Valmont. The gravity of the moment is hardly disguised by Merteuil's sarcasm:

> I could speak up but your life would be neither less brilliant nor less peaceful. And, to be honest, what would you have to fear? You might be obliged to leave, if, that is, they gave you enough time to get away. But can't one live as well elsewhere as here? On the whole, then, provided that the French court left you alone wherever you settled down, you would only be changing the scene of your triumphs. [P. 355]

We may ask to know the secret that Merteuil—teasingly or fearfully?—will not name and that the editor, appealing to discretion, cannot disclose. But it would be a pointless question since no one, apparently, can tell—including Merteuil, who, in spite of her threats, keeps silent to the end.[14] Had she not, then we have the editor's assurance of his own discretion in the affair, that supplementary guarantee. The contract not to deliver Valmont's secret, moreover, is one to which the readers will no doubt agree once they have some idea of the kind of offence involved. Suffice it to say that, were it to become known, the Crown itself might not leave such a crime unpunished. Valmont's transgression, it is suggested, is no less than an act of lèse-majesté, an attack on the symbol of legitimate power in a monarchy. Readers will also therefore infer, from Valmont's typical mode of attack, that his act of lèse-majesté could—if revealed—challenge the legitimacy of inherited rule. It is this

hereditary destination of power which is guaranteed a straight line of descent by the editor's pact of silence with the reader.[15] In effect, the pact recognizes a danger to an order exterior to the novel, an order which comprises and structures the act of reading. It is thus in the reader's interest to keep a certain detour hidden.

The next editorial intervention on the vicomte's behalf suggests that not only will certain detours be silenced but still others will be enforced if the book is to arrive at its end: that is, quite simply, for the book to arrive, a certain letter—or letters—cannot. The note is appended to letter 154, from Mme de Volanges to Mme de Rosemonde. The former writes to announce the reception of a letter (which contains still another letter) and a certain decision she has made.

> I am sending you a letter I received from M. de Valmont, who has decided to choose me as a *confidente* and even as a mediator between him and Mme de Tourvel, for whom he included a letter in the one he sent to me. I sent back the former, which I enclosed in my reply to the latter. I am passing this letter on to you now and I think you will agree that I could not nor should not do anything that he asks of me. . . . But what will you think of his despair? First of all, must one believe it or does he simply want to deceive everyone right up to the end? [P. 358]

The signal for the note follows the word "end," at which point the editor interrupts to say, "It is because we found nothing in the rest [*la suite*] of this correspondence which could resolve this doubt that we have decided to suppress M. de Valmont's letter [*on a pris le parti de supprimer la lettre de M. de Valmont*]." As in the preceding note, the editor is here interjected as a backup system to insure nondelivery. Whereas, however, the discretion of the first note would seem to protect someone or something (M. de Valmont, the reader, the book) from a devastating revelation, this note also has the function of disclosure: a letter we learn, has been suppressed, not passed on.

Yet, no less than those other detours taken by the authors of the letters, this note can neither fully contain nor control the space of the excluded, suppressed term. Quite clearly from Mme de Volanges's description, there were two letters from Valmont, neither of which is included in the published collection. The

first, which was addressed to Volanges herself, was sent on to Mme de Rosemonde, while the other, addressed to Tourvel, was returned to the sender. Yet the editor writes that he has decided to suppress "the letter from M. de Valmont." Which one? And why does the decision to suppress one letter entail suppressing as well not only the other letter but even the fact that this correspondence was double?

Modern editors of Laclos's work have agreed that the letter referred to in this note is the one which Laclos himself drafted and then crossed out in his final revision of the manuscript. It is addressed to Mme de Volanges and seems to be unfinished. The two most complete modern editions include this draft in appendix. (Curiously, however, in the Garnier edition, the signal for the note which would lead the reader to this letter in an appendix is missing!) Neither editor—Yves Le Hir for the Garnier edition; Maurice Allem for the Pléïade series—appears to wonder about the letter addressed to Mme de Tourvel, the one which Volanges says she returned unopened after reading Valmont's request to pass it on. This request, which we can read only in appendix, describes quite a different project for the vicomte.

> I know that my procedure [*démarche*] might appear strange to you. It surprises me myself. But despair seizes its means and does not calculate them. Besides, we share such an important and such a precious concern [*intérêt*] that it must set aside [*écarter*] every other consideration. Madame de Tourvel is dying, Madame de Tourvel is miserable. We must give her back life, health and happiness. That is the goal to be reached and any means which can assure or hasten the success are valid. . . . I plunged the dagger into your friend's heart but I alone can remove the knife from the wound. Only I have the means to cure her.[16]

Is the life which Valmont wants to give back to his mistress just another devious step in what is finally a deadly ruse? No one can tell.

This letter is suppressed, notes the editor, "because we found nothing in the rest [*suite*] of this correspondence which could resolve this doubt." Thus, what is suppressed is the *suite*, or continuation, of the doubt, the undecidability of Valmont's dual address to Tourvel which plunges in the knife with one hand and draws it out with the other. What is suppressed is also the

suppression of the *other* letter from Valmont. We still have no clue as to why Volanges's decision to return Valmont's letter unread is reinforced and repeated by the editor.[17] Yet, given what we already suspect about the need to protect Valmont's secret, we might wonder if a similar public interest in the stable representation of power is not also at stake here. Who or what is delivered—saved—by the rerouting of Valmont's letter(s)? Who or what is given a reprieve from the general breakdown of the delivery system and allowed to arrive at a destination? While none of the letters' authors will be spared, their publication nevertheless serves to vindicate the only actor in the comedy who does not write: Prévan, the master seducer and Valmont's rival. The scene takes place one evening after the theater in the salon of the Comédie Italienne:

> So that nothing might be lacking from [Mme de Merteuil's] humiliation, it was her misfortune that M. de Prévan, who had not shown himself anywhere since his adventure, at that moment came into the small salon. As soon as they noticed him, everyone, men and women, surrounded him with their applause. He was, so to speak, carried before Mme de Merteuil by the public, which formed a circle around them. I was told that Mme de Merteuil pretended not to see or hear anything and that her expression did not change! But I am sure that is an exaggeration. In any case, this scene, which was really an ignominious one for her, lasted until her carriage was announced. As she was leaving, the scandalous booings increased. It is horrible to be related to such a woman. M. de Prévan was warmly welcomed by all of his fellow officers who were there and *no one doubts* that he will soon be reinstated to his post and rank. [P. 391]

Rehabilitated, Prévan saves more than himself. It is this theatrical moment which puts an end to the drama of the double inscription for all the remaining actors, the assembled society.[18] While a single figure—Samson redivivus— stands at the center of the public which has driven from its midst the scandal of his double, of the woman, a circle closes. No doubt remains.

Or rather no doubt would remain if only one knew for sure the reader's address. As the novel approaches its end and all the correspondence begins to swerve towards another destination, one letter gets diverted or intercepted for lack of a name on the envelope. It is Mme de Tourvel's last message, which she dictates

to her attendant. But before she makes known to whom the letter should be sent, she falls unconscious again "so that [the chambermaid] failed to learn to whom it should be addressed." Once again, it is Mme de Volanges who intercepts this dubious communication before it gets out of hand.

> I was at first surprised that the letter itself was not sufficient to instruct her, but when she replied that she was afraid of making a mistake and that her mistress had nevertheless commanded her to send this letter right away, I took it upon myself to open the envelope. I found inside the message which I am sending you and which, in effect, addresses no one since it addresses so many people. It would seem, however, that it was at first to M. de Valmont that our unfortunate friend tried to write but that she yielded without realizing it to the disorder of her mind. Whatever the case may be, I decided that this letter should not be delivered to anyone. [P. 367]

In effect, Valmont seems to be only one among the many possible addressees of this letter, which is 161 in the collection. But if he is invoked, it is in several guises and by several voices, as may be seen in this sample from the French text which alternates between second person and third person address, *tutoiement* and *vouvoiement*.

> Etre cruel malfaisant [. . .] Mais qu'il est différent de lui-même [. . .] Mais quoi! c'est lui . . . O, mon aimable ami, oui, c'est toi, c'est bien toi! Quelle illusion funeste m'avait fait te méconnaître? . . . Tourne vers moi tes doux regards! . . . Dieu! c'est ce monstre encore! . . . Que pouvez-vous bien avoir à me dire? Ne m'avez-vous pas mise dans l'impossibilité de vous écouter comme de vous répondre? N'attendez plus rien de moi. Adieu, Monsieur. [Pp. 369–70]

This letter is diverted by Mme de Volanges, who has decided that it should be delivered to no one. She passes it on, nevertheless, to Mme de Rosemonde, who in turn hands it over to the editor, who, finally, includes it in the collection. Thus, for a letter which should not be turned over to anyone, Tourvel's last communication ends up addressing, in Mme de Volanges's phrase, "too many people." Curiously, therefore, this doubtful correspondence that dispenses with the singular address and disperses a multitude of senders and receivers slips through the editor's

resolve, which operated, in the case of Valmont's questionable appeal, to suppress just such a persistence of doubt. There would appear to be yet another courier at work, one who defeats the editor's discreet refusal to forward misaddressed or fraudulent mail.

We have already noted two moments when Laclos, in what is assumed to be his final draft of the novel, hesitated over the place of a letter in the collection: letter 20, the contract letter, which initially followed letters 21 and 23, and Valmont's letter to Mme de Volanges, which Laclos first copied in the final manuscript and then crossed out.[19] Letter 161, which is headed "La Présidente de Tourvel to . . . ," was likewise the object of a certain indecision, since Laclos initially placed it before letter 160, the explanatory or cover letter from Mme de Volanges to Mme de Rosemonde. More puzzling, however, is the mobility of this letter in the autograph manuscript, which Le Hir reports as follows:

> We still have perhaps the first draft of one of the letters: that of Mme de Tourvel to the Vicomte de Valmont [*sic*: Le Hir makes clear in his index that it is letter 161 to which he refers], and which we here include in facsimile. In this draft, the letter was not numbered, only the initials of the correspondents are written, and it is on a separate sheet, thus making it easier to slip [*glisser*] into the desired place. These are all indications that this page was not intended for a copyist or even the publisher but was reserved for Laclos himself. [P. xviii]

Le Hir is cautious in suggesting that when Laclos made a final draft he did not recopy letter 161 but merely slipped in a first draft which was on a separate sheet among the pages of the revised manuscript. This careful description, however, cannot explain why this letter alone might have escaped a final revision nor why Laclos might have wished to preserve its mobility to the very end, its *glissement* into the text like a kind of fly sheet.

Although this account cannot tell us how and when the "desired place" of this letter, which is also to say its address, was finally decided, Le Hir does not hesitate to supply the part of that address which is missing in the published text ("La Présidente de Tourvel to . . . ") when he refers to it simply as the letter from Mme de Tourvel to Valmont. In this manner, the published work

restores a slippage to its place in the text—and at the very place where the editor works to pin something down. In its definitive version, in other words, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* reverts to an undecidable mode of address.

If there is another courier at work disseminating the loose mail which the editor will not pass on, might it not be in the guise of the publisher that he addresses us, the readers of this deviant work? Recall that the letters stop when a final note from this publisher suddenly reopens the pact of silence.

> For reasons of our own and other considerations which we shall always consider it our duty to respect, we are forced to stop here. At the present moment, we cannot pass on to the reader either the rest [*la suite*] of the adventures of Mlle de Volanges or an account of the sinister events which crowned the misfortunes or completed the punishment of Mme de Merteuil.
>
> One day perhaps we will be able to complete this work. But we cannot promise anything on this subject [*nous ne pouvons prendre aucun engagement à ce sujet*]. Even if we could, we should still think ourselves obligated to consult the taste of the public, which does not have the same reasons as we do to be interested in [*s'intéresser*] this reading. [P. 395]

This enigmatic intervention would seem, once again, to invoke a pact of silence, which, by forcing the book to a close, contains the detour before it can drift any further. Yet the last lines of the note shift the responsibility for this closure from author to reader, from those "reasons of our own" for ending the book of the opening sentence to the "reasons . . . to be interested in this reading" of the closing line—the reasons, that is, to continue reading beyond the forced ending. The reader, in other words, is being released by the author of this note from the contract negotiated earlier by the editor. This address sets aside the appeal to a common discretion and to an accord on the need for a protective veil thrown over the truth. Inserted in the place of a common interest, that which may be in danger if certain things are revealed, is a recognition of the reader's difference, the reader who "does not have the same reasons as we do to be interested in this reading." The only condition set on the continuation of this reading is the disengagement of interests—which is also, however, an acknowledgment of an implicit transaction between

reader and text in the reflexive space of the verb *s'intéresser*. If, then, the author cannot promise to deliver the rest of the work, it is because, for the text to pass beyond the stopping point where a certain order is restored, readers will have to engage themselves in what still remains to be written.