FICTIONS OF FEMININE DESIRE

Disclosures of Heloise

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The Portuguese Letters

> We have nothing new to say on the question of these dispositional states. They often, it would seem, grow out of the day-dreams which are so common even in healthy people and to which needlework and similar occupations render women especially prone.
>
> Breuer and Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*

> . . . a woman, seated at her embroidery frame, an insipid task which occupies only the hands, dreams of her lover, while the latter, galloping on the plains with his squadron, is in trouble if he makes a single false move.
>
> Stendhal, *On Love*

HELOISE'S letters, written from within her cloister, describe a general breakdown of that structure of opposition which alone could allow for a conversion. As we have seen, her text is highly unstable, constantly reversing and passing beyond the meanings it poses. In their mobility, the letters attempt to dodge the immobilizing terms that Abelard has placed on their experience and, at least for a moment, to break a silence. This deconstruction of stable meaning is the activity which threatens the edifice Abelard has built and in which he has enclosed, along with Heloise, his unruly past. For this reason, the correspondence continues after a certain point only with answers to questions about monastic rule. The limit placed on their exchange is set at the barrier that defines Heloise's claustration, so that by drawing the line Abelard can proceed to reconstruct the walls behind which she agrees (in ambiguous terms, it is true) to remain. The cloister, in this manner, exists not only as the physical site of a woman's enclosure, but also as a bar to a disruptive practice of the language. As Abelard's analogy of the black bride illustrates, the cloistering of the woman, by removing her from circulation in a public domain, sets up a freely mobile masculine desire as the noncontradictory self-referential source of meaningful distinction. On the other hand, the movement of Galatea, her flight into the willows, suspends the very possibility of such distinctions

between outside and inside, seen and unseen, and, finally, subject and object of the flight. It raises the question which Heloise repeatedly puts to her lover, the question of precedence, or who follows whom.

At stake in the exchange between Heloise and Abelard, then, is the possibility of stable meaning and the proper functioning of structural oppositions. By breaking the silence of the cloister, Heloise uncovers a puzzling zone of indeterminacy which is covered over again only when she agrees to return to the cloister. In that indeterminate space, the discourse of the master encounters another image of its own mastery and stability.

This movement into the no man's land between feminine closure and masculine mobility will take us now to a text that has often been compared to the letters of Heloise and Abelard: *The Portuguese Letters*.[1] Such comparisons, however, leave us with an even more obvious distinction between the two texts: while Heloise writes in a dialogue with the letters from Abelard, Mariana's letters are punctuated only by the silence of her lover. That this absence of the other's response could nevertheless lead Mariana outside the closure of her own cloistered discourse is one reason why, before reading those letters, we will consider another example of the power of a woman's speech. It comes from the literature of psychoanalysis.

It was the idea that by understanding the nature of a disorder one could learn more about the proper functioning of a mechanism which led Freud, in the 1890s, to concentrate on the study of neurotics in order to refine the model of the human psyche. During this period, he published his various studies on hysteria. It is to these earliest theoretical writings and case histories of hysterical women that historians of psychoanalysis—beginning with Freud himself—have turned to isolate the first appearances of what were to become the fundamental discoveries of that science. After the turn of the century, while these concepts were being developed, Freud's publications only rarely speculated on specifically feminine-inflected structures, and it was not until after 1920 that the Oedipal scenario was worked out in any detail in relation to women. In this interval, many of the troubling implications of understanding hysteria would be de-

ferred, so that even as late as 1931 Freud would readily concede that psychoanalysis had not progressed beyond the prehistory of feminine sexuality.[2] This confessed inadequacy has tended to obscure the fact that, during the period of its own prehistory, psychoanalysis was centrally concerned with the question of what women want.

In the first stage of the investigation of hysteria, Freud and his collaborator, Josef Breuer, attempted to explain the onset of this disorder with the neurophysiological model. In this account, the hysterical symptom was the sign of a psychic defense against the onslaught of organic changes during puberty. As Freud, however, began to interview more and more hysterics (Breuer, in circumstances I will discuss, having given up their collaboration), he discovered that the great majority of them had similar stories to tell once they could be led to recall their earliest childhood: a story of seduction or even rape by the father, or a fatherlike figure. This in turn led Freud to adopt the theory of the etiology of hysteria: at an age before she could react with understanding, the hysteric had been the victim of a sexual attack or attempted seduction. The event, in its most minute particulars, was stored in the memory until, at puberty, when its significance could be assessed and the correct conscious associations made with what had been learned of sexual behavior, the memory attempted to find its way into the active reminiscences and was blocked.

It is only at this point that the hysterical symptom is formed by means of the process Breuer and Freud agreed to call conversion. Because the memory is denied the path into consciousness which would lead through a chain of unpleasant associations, the powerful affective charge which is attached to it cannot be abreacted, or, if one prefers, dealt with and thereby diminished. As this process of abreaction, of placing a particular thought or memory in the associative chain of coded values and meanings common to all members of society, is short-circuited, the associations are forced to occur elsewhere. The hysterical symptom breaks out in a physical complaint for which no organic cause is present. The specific form the symptom takes is thus always contingent on some detail from the repressed seduction scene: for example, a throbbing pain or numbness in some part of the

body which the seducer had touched. The hysteric thereby strikes a compromise with the offending remembrance: it is to remain outside her consciousness, the agency whereby she functions as an accepted member of society as represented by its codes, but it will be given total control over her body.

Whereas this theory of hysterical symptom-formation and its treatment only needed refinement as Freud gained more experience of hysteria, he was not long in detecting the basic error in his trauma or seduction theory. In 1897, two years after the publication of *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud began to suspect that the memory of the specific event was frequently masked by several layers of fantasy which had to be identified as such and penetrated before one could arrive at the truth of the trauma. This process of a progressive dismantling of fictions was made more difficult by the lack of any mark distinguishing the fantasized recollection from the true memory. As Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fliess, "there is no 'indication of reality' in the unconscious, so that it is impossible to distinguish between truth and emotionally-charged fiction."[3] Freud held to the view for several months that the fantasies were defensive formations which decoyed conscious remembering away from an awful truth, but, in September 1897, he confessed to Fliess what he had finally admitted to himself: "Let me tell you straight away the great secret which has been slowly dawning on me in recent months. I no longer believe in my *neurotica*."[4] In other words, Freud was forced to dispense with his theory of a real seduction and to consider the implications of the hysteric's total invention of such an "event."

The major implication—and the reason Freud delayed for several years publishing a retraction of the trauma theory—was the sexualization of childhood and even infancy, through recognition of which psychoanalysis broke from its parent disciplines of psychology and neurology. Among the latter effects of this revolution, one can read the whole of what has come to be the theory and practice of Freudian analysis. But we are interested here in more localized implications of this shift, the implications for the analysis of hysteria, which tend to become lost in Freud's eagerness to get on to the problems of little boys.[5]

What gives the hysterical fantasy its specific structure is the

use of the passive voice as a fictional device to hide an active desire. In order to read the material with accuracy, the subject—object, seducer—seduced syntax must be reversed: for "I was violated" one reads "I (wished to) violate." The guilt which would result were the wish given access to consciousness has at least three supports: (1) the guilt that attaches to a forbidden desire for the father; (2) the guilt that attaches to the false accusation of the father; (3) the guilt associated, for the girl, with an active pursuit of a desired object. This third possibility necessitates the recourse to the duplicity of the passive voice, which is the reversal mechanism of the fantasy and which makes it at least partially acceptable to conscious memory.

Freud's discovery of the hysteric's duplicity occurred at about the midpoint of his self-analysis as recorded in his correspondence with Fliess. As the editor of the translated edition points out, the two investigations had a dynamic relation to each other, the former giving Freud insight into his own Oedipal scenario (what he called his hysteria) and the latter, the first intimations of the Oedipus complex, giving him a different means of approach to the hysteric's complaint.[6] The validity of the Oedipal model began finding constant affirmation in successful analyses, with one result being that Freud's caseload—which in 1897 was so low that he started taking on patients free of charge—increased steadily, to the point that a year later, in October 1898, he could report his daily exhaustion from "an avalanche of patients," half of whom, he notes, were now men.[7] The technique, which would emerge only later, sought to bring the Oedipal material into conscious view so as to move toward a resolution that compensated the renunciation of the mother with an opening onto the whole field of legitimate sexual activity. The motor of this displacement had to be an identification with the father as active sexual partner, an identification which entailed renouncing—repressing—the child's passivity in the sexual encounter with the mother.

When, a number of years later, Freud attempted to specify the pertinent differences between the male and female passages through the Oedipal stage, he alternated between, on the one hand, insisting on a single model for both sexes (the phallic phase), so as not to discard too early the universal entry into the

conflict, and, on the other, the necessity of explaining the contrast in the forms of emergence from the conflict: the fact that the little boy exits wanting to be like the father—with the important exception of his choice of mate—and the little girl exits wanting to have a baby. Luce Irigaray has shown how, in order to arrive at this distinction, Freud had to invert his procedure in the case of the feminine model, working backwards from the norm of female sexuality and positing various transformations or shifts within the triangular structure which could produce the (desired) result.[8] But as another result, the model of the feminine Oedipus has no internal consistency, and the genetic logic of Freud's argument has to be forced. The only thread holding it together is the prior knowledge of where it has to lead.

It would appear that, like Freud perhaps, we have let ourselves be lured away from the question of hysteria by the not-so-tragic mask of Oedipus. But the detour may have been necessary to put us back on our course by reminding us that, while Oedipus lives out a long and relatively fruitful life in a spirit of contrition, his daughter Antigone must choose between an early death and a humiliating submission to the state.[9] The early investigations of hysteria brought Freud very close to a realization that would be overshadowed by the happy insight of Oedipus and then denied when, later, he attempted to extend Oedipal causality to matters female.

Simply put, the hysteric's symptomatically convulsed and contorted body states eloquently the lack of any acceptable resolution for the conflict between active sexual impulses and the coded laws of the society into which she must insert herself. While, like her brothers, she has to move out of the enclosing duality with her mother and make room for a third party, this move towards socialization halts at the limits which define the family unit. Nor can the renunciation of the mother be compensated by a shift from a passive to an active position in the syntax of seduction. The active subject of the discourse of desire—represented by the father—cannot be made available to the girl-child through identification if the socialization process is to go forward only as far as expected. Thus, the girl's entry into a larger social network is as the object of another's discourse. The position of active subject of the transitive verb is barred by the

structure of the father's law, which Catherine Clément discerns as follows: "Women must circulate and must not cause to circulate [*La femme doit circuler et non pas faire circuler*]."[10] Feminine culpability is the inevitable support of this circulation order, since a transgression of the passive, intransitive female position if structurally homologous to a transgression of the incest prohibition, and therefore the grounds for that culpability can shift: to desire the father or to desire *like* the father are mutually reinforcing of the feminine exclusion. Coming to terms with this double injunction, or rather accepting the terms of silence it imposes, distinguishes the production of the feminine from that of the masculine, for in the latter process desiring the father and desiring like the father exclude rather than reinforce each other. Thus, the boy-child has a choice, although to be properly masculine he must make the right choice. This is to state in revised form what we have already implied: the social code compensates the boy for the repression of the first source of sexual pleasure with the offer of another form of sexual activity, while the analogous process of feminization demands the repression of the original pleasure even as it bars access to the pleasure sought by "masculine" desire.

This analysis of the fundamentally hysterical character of the feminine norm is the inadvertent byproduct of Freud's investigation into its more pathological manifestations. Even from within the context of our general suspicion of this norm, we can still understand this work, conducted in quite a different context, as asking the question of why some women are more hysterical than others. In the course of his long association with hysterics, Freud revised his answer to that question several times, until in 1909, in one of his last essays on the subject, he wrote:

> One may often observe that it is just those girls who in the years before puberty showed a boyish character and inclinations who tend to become hysterical at puberty. In whole series of cases the hysterical neurosis is nothing but an excessive overaccentuation of the typical wave of repression through which the masculine type of sexuality is removed and the woman emerges.[11]

Hysterics, in other words, are girls who must work extra hard to become women because their "boyish character and inclinations" have been allowed to develop unchecked for too long.

The hysterical symptom as solution is ambiguous on more than one level. First of all, as a sign, it is constructed out of the confrontation between, on the one hand, the impulse to signify desire, to assume a place in the social network which is a function of that desire, and, on the other hand, the powerful exclusion which blocks that place. Second, therefore, the hysteric comes to occupy a position midway between the masculine and feminine insertion into the symbolic register of social exchange. The conscious negation of what Freud termed the "masculine type of sexuality" secures her status as a circulated object, while at the same time the physical symptom is a mute sign of her activity as a cause of that circulation. To Freud's famous observation that "hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences," one would have to add that their reminiscences cause them to suffer precisely to the extent that the doors leading out of the stifling family triangle of their past and into the register of symbolic activity are marked "Men only."

While Freud's theoretical conclusion concerning hysteria stopped considerably short of any questioning of the active/passive distinction, the descriptions of his analytic technique, which emerged almost directly from his early treatment of hysterics, repeatedly confirm the implications that have been drawn. Already in the first case reported in any detail in the *Studies on Hysteria*, that of the pseudonymous Anna O., which was conducted by Breuer, the discovery was made which was to determine the whole course of psychoanalytic therapy: that the most reliable antidote or cure for the hysterical symptom was talking. Indeed, Breuer did not come to the case of Anna's hysteria with any prior understanding of the worth of the method, which he called "cathartic." It was entirely Anna's invention of her own speech, which she called "the talking cure"—in English since one of her symptoms was the loss of her ability to use or understand German—that led gradually to the identification and the conscious recall of the events signified by various symptoms. Once spoken, the symptom evaporated, as the memory no longer required an hysterical conversion in order to signify itself.

As Freud took over the method Breuer had stumbled upon, he systematically eliminated all of the extraneous elements to the

"talking cure" which were holdovers from earlier techniques: hypnosis, hydrotherapy, electrotherapy, and so on. He also promoted to a principle of his technique Anna's assurance in leading the way to her own recovery, following a course which Breuer had considered particularly inefficient as it took in far more than the limited symptomatic behavior. In his introduction to the case of Dora, Freud explains the reason for this partial abdication of the physician's control:

> [At the time of the publication of *Studies on Hysteria*] the work of analysis started out from the symptoms, and aimed at clearing them up one after the other. Since then I have abandoned that technique, because I found it totally inadequate for dealing with the finer structure of neurosis. I now let the patient himself choose the subject of the day's work, and in that way I start out from whatever surface his unconscious happens to be presenting to his notice at the moment.[12]

All of his other refinements of the technique were aimed at forcing the neurotic into the position of conscious subject of his / her own discourse, which meant, in the case of an hysteric, permitting the unconscious wish to signify desire to come to consciousness by defeating a measure of the repression that detoured it into a physical symptom. Dora's recovery, for example, lay along the path of the conscious realization of her desire for Herr K., and behind that, for Frau K., a realization which had been effectively blocked by her fantasy of Herr K.'s sexual aggression toward her.[13]

This formulaic description of hysteria's cure cannot, however, disguise its significant limitations. If at the source of the disorder is the process of normal feminization, that process whereby the girl-child exchanges the sexual scene of infancy for the guilty scene of adult sexuality, then, despite Freud's open-minded attention to the field beyond the specific symptom, the theory which does not question this process cannot yield anything but a technique for treating symptoms. This is very nearly the conclusion reached by Breuer and Freud at the end of their first theoretical paper on hysteria, where they concede a most significant limitation on their treatment: "It is of course true that we do not cure hysteria *in so far as it is a matter of disposition*."[14] Insofar,

in other words, as little girls persist in growing up with a "boyish character and inclinations."

In a sense, the treatment of hysteria cannot move beyond its earliest and most spectacular failure, the case of Anna O. This failure is not recorded by Breuer, whose case history implies that he conducted the cure to a complete success. In fact, Anna did eventually recover more or less, but only after Breuer had precipitously dropped her case. When Freud discussed the incident almost thirty years later in his "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement," he attributed his colleague's gradual loss of interest in their collaboration to what happened the last time Breuer visited Anna. The details are recorded in Jones's biography.[15] It appears that after announcing to the girl and her family that the treatment had effectively run its course, Breuer was suddenly called back to Anna's bedside, where he found her in the last throes of hysterical pregnancy. His former patient let him know in no uncertain terms that the child she was laboring to produce was his. Breuer, of course, could not have anticipated these effects of the process which would later become known as transference. It seems that he could not bear the spectacle of such monstrous language from a woman of Anna's education and that he felt in some oblique way responsible for her degradation. On the other hand, perhaps he saw in that moment the powerful force unleashed by the "talking cure" and feared that its violence could not be spent until it had upset every notion of decorum and propriety.

Freud was at the same time less frightened by what Breuer called the hysteric's "private theatre" and more determined that it should not get out of hand. His treatment, after all, as he frequently told his *neurotica*, could not be expected to produce a miracle reordering of the circumstances of their lives, the circumstances which the analysis revealed as lying at the source of their illness. The *Studies on Hysteria* concludes with this exchange between Freud and his patients:

> I have often been faced by this objection: "Why, you tell me yourself that my illness is probably connected with my circumstances and the events of my life. You cannot alter these in any way. How do you propose to help me then?" And I have been able to make this reply: "No doubt fate would find it easier than I do to relieve you of

> your illness. But you will be able to convince yourself that much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common unhappiness. With a mental life that has been restored to health you will be better armed against that unhappiness."[16]

The powers of the analyst are not to be compared with those of an all-knowing fate. The former can content himself with bringing patients under his care to accept the chance limitations on their happiness and to renounce the futile rebellion of their bodies. While giving the hysteric the means to translate her mute symptom into the common language, analysis nonetheless risks becoming an agent of censure, helpless as it is to change the circumstances of a woman's life. The course of the treatment therefore also risks describing a circle, for at its end is the rediscovery of the enforced silence and inactivity to which the hysteric's body had refused its submission. In the course of its trajectory, the analysis will have operated a displacement: "to suffer, as always and in all cases, but this time out of guilt instead of suffering physically without knowing why."[17] Knowing her guilt, the former hysteric will be less *disposed* to break the silence.

In suggesting above that the treatment of hysteria could not move beyond its first failure, I was thinking of the case of Dora. The analyses were separated by about seventeen years, during which time Freud had totally revised his theory of hysteria and its treatment in view of the discovery of sexuality's role in the neurotic formation. It was this discovery that so disturbed Breuer, causing him to retreat in haste from Anna's cure and giving Freud his first evidence of the mechanism of transference. It is then significant that Dora's analysis, which, unlike Anna's, was conducted in full cognizance of the sexual material, broke down in almost the same circumstances as the earlier one. Freud, in his postscript to the case history, attributes Dora's premature decision to end her treatment to the process of transference, which he had neglected to recognize and thus, as he puts it, failed to master in good time.[18] There are, no doubt, many possible contingent explanations for this oversight, some of which Freud discusses. We might wonder, however, if the lapse does not point to the continued dismissal of a woman's discourse even within the context of its therapeutic retrieval. Did Freud, in other words, share Breuer's motive for—if not his reaction to—

the failure to anticipate his own objectification within the dynamic of Dora's desire?

But there is still another way to read the final scene in Dora's drama. It is to imagine that, even if Freud could not understand the language of her transference until too late, Dora knew all too well what was coming. She timed her exit from the professor's life to rob him of the exquisite pleasure of turning her into the perfect closed circle of the successful analysis, forcing him to preface his case history with repeated disclaimers as to its adequacy for the understanding of hysteria. Knowing what was coming, Dora decided not to wait until the doctor took yet another one of her productions, dismantled it, and left her "a common unhappiness." From Freud's perspective, such a refusal of the health his treatment might have restored for the pleasure of a petty revenge is the clearest sign of a continued pathology. For Dora, however, might not a few physical tics represent a small price to pay for her escape from the promised cure? After all, it is possible that Dora's relapse was only secondarily the revenge that Freud, in his disappointment, took it to be. What he terms her "flight from life into disease" may have had as its propelling force a desire which, in order to reverse its direction, would have had to renounce all activity.

One could object that Dora's protest was an exercise in futility, ending as it did in another ambiguous symptom which left intact the fundamental exclusion of her discourse from the common language.[19] Clément, for example, places an important reservation on the effect of the hysteric's contestation:

> It's true, hysteria upsets and disturbs the family . . . but very little in comparison with the passage into action which is writing, political action, the passage into inscription in the symbolic. This is not the case with Dora for one cannot say that the fact of her passage to posterity through Freud's text and even Freud's failure is a symbolic act. . . . The distinction between those who properly fulfill their function of protest, even with all possible violence (but which is afterwards closed off again), and those who arrive at symbolic inscription by whatever means they get there seems essential to me. To create scandalous scenes, to throw fits, to upset the relations within the family, all of that can be closed off again.[20]

It is true that Dora's voice is never heard again. Her protest, if that is what it was, is only an echo in Freud's text, her name the

title, not the signature. Even that name is not hers but one Freud lends his character to protect his former patient. The woman he calls Dora is thus put into circulation as the object of a clinical exercise without the risk that she might be called to account as the subject of these sordid confessions. These pages are a testament, finally, to Dora's silence.[21]

If, therefore, we are looking for such an inscription of the posthysterical subject in the symbolic order, an inscription which would modify the fundamental exclusion of that act, it will have to be elsewhere. Dora, however, and the other characters in Freud's hysterical plots, will at least have given us an idea of where to look. What if one of them had left a written account of her passage out of a closed hysterical silence? As a record of this passage, the account would have to substitute for the conventions of the case history the conventions of autobiography, so that to imagine such a text is to imagine the interlocutor as the silent pole through which passes the invention of the writing subject. The analytical scene would, in a sense, return to its point of departure with Anna's discovery of "the talking cure" but displace Breuer's intervening narrative point of view. Such a text, therefore, would have to renounce the gallant protection of the cloak of pseudonymity, the borrowed name bestowed by a man, and agree to disclose its scandalous activity.

For an idea of what such a text could be, has been, we can read the five letters which a woman who calls herself Mariana wrote to her unnamed lover. The letters have been published for more than three hundred years with the title *Letters from a Portuguese Nun* or, simply, *The Portuguese Letters*.[22]

Mariana, a nun in a Portuguese convent, has had a brief affair with an officer in the French forces which occupied Portugal in the 1660s. The seduction seems to have proceeded in a Don Juanesque fashion, with assurances of unending devotion and hints of a respectable conjugal future. With Portugal safely secured to the French alliance, however, the *chevalier* has been called back to France, leaving his erotic conquest behind with only a few vague promises of a return. It is shortly after this departure that the first letter is written.

The first image with which this letter names the loss is that of the lover's eyes:

> Can it be true that this absence, for which my suffering, although it is very ingenious, cannot find a name sinister enough, will deprive me forever of looking into those eyes where I saw so much love, and which allowed me to experience feelings [*mouvements*] that filled me with joy, which took the place of everything else and which, finally, were all I needed [*me suffisaient*]? Alas! Mine are deprived of the only light that gave them life, they have nothing left but tears.[23]

The lover's eyes, as the source of light, joy, love, *mouvements*, in short, "everything else," focus the loss just as they provided Mariana with her brief experience of *suffisance*. This adequacy of visual reflection from eye to eye—from source of light to mirror and back again—is closed upon itself in a silent exchange. The nostalgia for that moment of the unbroken circle is marked in the inadequacy of the exchange that takes it place—through words which always fall short.

The visual relation, through which one glimpses directly the spontaneous *mouvements* of passion, has given way, then, to the tenuous linking provided by the letter.[24] At the beginning of this correspondence, the letter attempts through its allegorical rhetoric to resurrect the body's own power to signify. Love, pain, sighs, ill-fortune, and heart are all personified as message-senders:

> A thousand times a day, I send my sighs toward you, they seek you out everywhere, and, as my own reward for so much anxiety, they bring me back the same brutally honest message as my ill-fortune, which in its cruelty cannot bear me to flatter myself, and which tells me at every moment: "Cease, unfortunate Mariana, cease consuming yourself vainly looking for a lover whom you will never see again. . . ." Your last letter reduced my heart to a bizarre state; it felt such powerful agitations [*mouvements*] that it seemed to want to separate itself from me in order to go find you. [Pp. 39–40]

Mouvements, then, find their linguistic translation in a rhetoric of personification by means of which Mariana signifies herself as a loose conglomerate of symbolizing impulses whose unifying principle—the lover's eyes—is absent.

> I was so overcome by all those violent emotions that I remained unconscious more than three hours. . . . Since these events, I have been indisposed many times, but how can I ever be free of such complaints as long as I must go without seeing you? [P. 40]

The figures correspond to the body's uncontrolled production of the symbols of its shattered unity—the symptomatic language of the trauma.

In this first letter, as in the next, Mariana's discourse remains caught in the paradox of its nostalgia for the silent adequacy of lover and beloved. So as to see herself once again as the object of her lover's gaze, she welcomes her current suffering at least insofar as it gives her proof of her continued subjection: "It seems to me that I am fond of those miseries of which you are the sole cause" (p. 39); "I understand [these misfortunes] without complaint because they come from you" (p. 40); "I do not want to nurture a hope which would surely give me some pleasure and I want to be sensitive only to pain." The first letter ends with the formulation of a demand in which Mariana reclaims her position as object, as passive victim of the other's acts: "Adieu, I cannot write any more. Adieu, love me forever and make me suffer still more pain" (p. 42).

Mariana cannot give up the letter writing and return to the previous accord of the lover's silent correspondence because the fact of writing has altered irrevocably the significance of that silence. By breaking the silence, her letters disturb the reflection and reveal cracks in the mirror. The more she writes, the more she reads in her lover's continued lack of response a declaration which accuses the very notion of *suffisance*:

> It seems to me that I am doing the greatest possible disservice to my heart's feelings in trying to communicate them to you in writing. How happy I would be if you could measure them through comparison with the violence of your own! But I must not leave it to you [*me rapporter à vous*—more literally, refer myself to you]. [P. 43]

In the absence of an assured redundancy, the letter is forced to pursue an exploration of the gap and thereby to widen, rather than close, the distance which separates Mariana and her lover.

> Shall I never see you again here in my room, with all the passion and frenzy that you used to display? But alas, I am deluding myself and I know only too well that all the feelings [*mouvements*] that stirred my heart and mind were for you only the products of a fleeting pleasure and they passed as soon as that pleasure ceased. [P. 44]

Thus do the letters, these poor substitutes for a transparent relation, destroy little by little that which can only be recovered as a delusion, a fiction.

The third letter opens by addressing two questions to this abyss: "What will become of me and what would you have me do?" (p. 47). The articulation of the question of the other's desire no longer operates a closure, for an excess is produced which cannot be dissociated from the fact of the articulation itself. While the first letter calculated that articulation as a loss, in this letter it functions as a surplus which comes to fill in the void discovered by the question of the self. In effect, the third letter marks stages in the birth of the writing subject.

It is in the first lines of this letter that Mariana announces her project of a cure, for which purpose she must adopt both positions in a dialogue of confrontation:

> I had even contemplated several half-hearted projects whereby I would concentrate all my efforts on curing myself. . . . Yet having finally only myself to combat, I could never have foreseen all my weaknesses nor anticipated everything that I now suffer. [P. 47]

As if to demonstrate this combat, the letter proceeds to trace a circle of reversals which represent skirmishes in Mariana's battle with herself: first, the fear of the lover's indifference, then anger at the certain signs of that indifference, followed by regret that the man she loves cannot experience her exquisite pain, horror at the thought that she has wished such suffering on him, and, finally, gratitude that, through his indifference, he has been spared her misery. In the course of that spiral, Mariana writes: "I know neither who I am, not what I am doing, nor what I want. I am torn by a thousand conflicting feelings. Can anyone imagine a more deplorable state?" (p. 48). Mariana pauses briefly for this overview before plunging back into the fray, and in the space

defined by that triple unknown, the question with which the letter began has been reformulated as a statement.

To this series of unknowns, Mariana adds a fourth, which, like the others, is thrown up in the midst of a circular movement of contradictions. "I do not know why I write to you," she writes (p. 49). From this point on, the project of the cure is taken over by the process of losing her ignorance about why she writes. Beginning with the third letter, then, it is the relationship to her own discourse about her desire which counteracts and displaces the suffering in her relationship to her lover.

Although the effects of this displacement are most evident in the final two letters, the crucial third letter acts as a pivot in Mariana's eradication of silence and ignorance through writing. For example, she makes the discovery of a discrepancy in her own text which she equates with the *mauvaise foi* of her lover:

> It seems to me that I can be little pleased with either my grief or the excess of my love . . . I live, faithless creature that I am and I do just as many things to preserve my life as to give it up. Oh! it shames me to death—is my despair then only in my letters? If I loved you as much as I have said a thousand times I do, why have I not already died long ago? I have deceived you and it is your turn to reproach me. [P. 49]

Even as she recognizes the hyperbolic cast of her rhetoric, that excess of her love which is only in her letters, Mariana is seemingly unable to renounce the comfort it affords, for she includes the exclamation "It shames me to death [*j'en meurs de honte*]." Yet with the recognition she has already come very close to this statement in the next letter, where the effect of the displacement is unmistakable: "I write more for myself than for you; I am only trying to comfort myself" (p. 58). Indeed, the letters, as the sole locus of the hyperbolic figure "dying for love," are themselves one of those "things" Mariana does to preserve her life.

The third letter is in this respect exemplary, for it contains no reference to the sort of physical disruptions that interfered with the act of writing the first two, bringing each of them to an abrupt close—letter 1: "Adieu, I cannot write any more" (p. 42); letter 2: "Your poor Mariana cannot write any more. She feels faint as she finishes this letter" (p. 46). Instead, the third letter is punctuated by the hyperbole of death, that is, a figure which has a rhetorical

rather than a physical force. "This thought kills me and I am frightened to death that you were never deeply touched by any of our pleasures" (pp. 47–48). Toward the end of the letter, this figure assumes the form of a fantasized rehabilitation of that perfect correspondence, in silence, between the two lovers:

> Treat me mercilessly! . . . Write me that you want me to die of love for you! . . . A tragic end would force you no doubt to think of me often, you would treasure my memory and perhaps you would be deeply moved by my sudden death. . . . Adieu, promise me that you will miss me tenderly if I die of grief. [P. 49–50]

The letter, however, refuses to end there. The melodramatic vision of "a tragic end" cannot cancel out the obscure sense which Mariana has just acquired of a break within the first-person subject of her letters. The relationship between her despair and the letters she writes exceeds the limits of a representational schema through the fictional possibilities of her own discourse. Mariana is forced to confront the notion that, as she writes, she is producing rather than merely registering the events of a subjectivity.

> Adieu, I wish that I had never met you. Ah! I sense keenly the falsity of that sentiment and I know, as I am writing to you, that I prefer to be miserable in my love for you than to have never met you at all. [P. 50]

Once again, Mariana has become a reader of her text and as she does so she superimposes two versions of her seduction: the first, which has prevailed until now, is the melodramatic vision of her victimization; the second, which has yet to be explored, accords a place to her active desire. The second version only appears through the foregrounding of the writing subject and the momentary awareness of its active inscription. That is, it is only to the extent that Mariana affirms the break between the subject of the letters and the imaginary self-presence of silence, of death, that a move beyond the static closure of her victimization fantasy will become possible.

It is with the announcement of such a move that the third letter ends. Unlike the first two letters, where physical symptoms take over the signifying process and force the writing to a close, the third text resists the censuring agency. "My letters to you are too

long; I am not very considerate of you and I ask your forgiveness. . . . It seems to me that I tell you far too often how intolerable my situation is" (p. 50). Still reading what she writes, Mariana moves to moderate that exaggeration, affirming as she does so the desire that has erupted within her silence and the language it has given her:

> Yet, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for the despair which you caused me, and I detest the tranquillity in which I lived before I knew you. Adieu, my passion grows with every minute. Oh! how many things I have to say to you!

With that final proleptic phrase, Mariana is inscribed as/inscribes all the possibilities of the language that her tranquillity denied. It is at the same time the announcement and the realization of the passage *outside*.

The fourth letter, the longest in the series, is also the first to use a paragraph break. This formal interruption is emblematic of a more important breakthrough, however, since this letter provides the scene for the reenactment of the memory which is at the origin of Mariana's "intolerable state." The breakthrough has indeed already occurred, for what is reenacted and recalled is a passage outside tranquillity's walls. Our epigraph from Stendhal, with its opposition of insipid domesticity and hazardous exteriority, sets the stage for this passage and for the scene of Mariana's seduction by her *chevalier*-lover. As she recalls that moment, however, her place in the action becomes ambiguous:

> Dona Brites has been after me these last few days to leave my room and, thinking to distract me, she took me for a walk on the balcony which looks out over the town of Mertola. I followed her, and was struck right away by a painful memory which made me cry the rest of the day. . . . She brought me back in and I threw myself on the bed. . . . I often saw you pass that spot with a charming air, and I was on the balcony that fatal day when I began to feel the first effects of my unfortunate passion. It seemed to me that you wanted to please me, although you did not know me. I convinced myself that you had noticed me among all of those who were with me. I imagined to myself that, when you stopped, you wanted me to see you better so that I might admire the skill and grace with which you handled your horse. I was seized by fear when you took him over a difficult spot. In a word, I took a secret interest in all your actions. I

> felt that you yourself were not indifferent to me and I understood everything you did to be for me. [P. 55]

Mariana's memory is brought into focus when she leaves her cell and passes outside the walls of the convent. Her resistance to such a move, which is signaled here, has already been noted in the second letter: "I leave my room as little as possible, this room where you came so often to see me" (p. 46). Once on the balcony—a neither-here-nor-there space which hangs between the convent and the world outside—she is "struck by a painful memory" of an earlier occasion when she had stood in the same place and looked out at the distance. Back in her room, the details of the scene arrange themselves on the page, where Mariana's syntax folds back on itself several times: "I often saw you. . . . It seemed to me that you wanted to please me. . . . I convinced myself that you had noticed me. . . . I imagined to myself that . . . you wanted me to see you better. . . ." The imaginary dimension of these events produces a reversal within the subject/object relation so as to hide Mariana's activity of observation and, behind that, the "first effects" of her desire. The text, however, betrays that imaginary mechanism whereby all activity and all risk is shifted onto the horseman. The desire that brings Mariana out onto the balcony also takes her beyond its narrow limits into the domain of the horseman, for, as she writes, "I took a secret interest in all your actions. . . . I understood everything you did to be for me." That is: *Je prenais pour moi tout ce que vous faisiez,* which also translates as "I took everything you did for myself." By means of that double-entendre, Mariana's text signals the desire to speak from the position of the horseman, to take its chances in the world outside the quiet cloister.

Retrieving that desire from beneath the screen of the opposing fantasy of her passive victimization has been the work of these letters. In the process, the letter itself has become the vehicle of the passage out of the cloister. Like her *chevalier,* Mariana pushes it forward with a skill and a grace, riding/writing her way over the dangerous obstacles in her path. It is a process, then, of taking back her word, of breaking her promise of silence:

> I should not write this to you . . . I am often convinced that I should not demonstrate so violently feelings which you disavow. For a

> long time now an officer has been waiting for this letter. I had resolved to write in such a way that you would receive my letter without disgust. But it is too extravagant. I must finish it. Alas! It is not in my power to bring myself to do so. . . . It is true that I should not write to you about a love that displeases you. . . . I am starting over again and the officer will leave. What does it matter if he leaves; I am writing more for myself than for you. I am only trying to comfort myself. And thus, the length of my letter will frighten you so that you will not read it. [Pp. 55, 57–58]

That Mariana might frighten her lover by her letters, by the exercise of unbridled, violent love, returns us once more to the remembered scene. In this reprise, the man on horseback has (been) ridden off and the woman is writing on the balcony.

The fifth and last letter consolidates the breakthrough of the preceding two. Its six paragraphs of varying lengths signal the greater control exercised over the structure. As Mariana is writing to take leave of her lover, her first concern is to establish the finality of this act of writing to him. It is an intent which can only be realized by the intervention of a third person, to whom Mariana defers the task of writing the other's name:

> I am writing to you for the last time. . . . At the first opportunity, I will send you everything I still have of yours. Do not fear that I will write to you. I will not even put your name on the package. I have asked Dona Brites to take care of all of that for me. [P. 63]

Before she ends this letter, Mariana will be tempted to retract her decision so as to demonstrate with a future letter the anticipated success of her self-administered cure. But, in a final reversal, she ends as she began: "I will not write to you again" (p. 69).

Between the terms of this repetition, the letter conducts an analytic review of the case that restores the context of Mariana's encounter with her *chevalier*. Had not each of them been taken in by a mirage promising uninterrupted self-satisfaction, *suffisance*?

> I understand that, ordinarily, a nun is hardly well-suited for love. Yet, if one could be reasonable about such things, one would do better to set one's sights on her rather than on other women for there is nothing to prevent her from dwelling continually on her love. She is not distracted by the thousand little things that entertain and occupy women of the world. It occurs to me that it cannot be very pleasant to see one's mistress always preoccupied with trivial things. [Pp. 64–65]

Thus, it is not hard to imagine how a man of the world, wishing for once to inspire a single-minded passion, might find his interests best served in a convent.

There are limits, however, on whatever credit he might have thought was his due. The limits are those which have been placed on Mariana's worth.

> I cannot deny that you have the advantage over me and that you inspired in me a passion that caused me to lose my mind. But there is little cause for you to boast: I was young and credulous. I have been closed up in this convent since childhood. The only men I had ever seen were unattractive and I had never received the sort of flattery which you lavished on me. It seemed to me that the beauty you found in me and that you gave me to see was not mine but a debt I owed you [*il me semblait que je vous devais les charmes et la beauté que vous me trouviez et dont vous me faisiez apercevoir*]. [P. 68]

To break with this imaginary economy is to clear the way for another, one in which her woman's worth cannot be calculated in the terms of another's inflated discourse. Canceling the debt, Mariana concludes that the *chevalier*, after all, took very little risk within the closure of the limited society which is the convent.

As with the third letter, Mariana brings the final one to a close by doubling back on her position so as to find another, more significant, place from which to speak.

> I am mad to keep repeating the same things, I must leave you and not think of you anymore. I believe that I will not even write to you again. Am I obliged to give you an exact account of all my different feelings [*suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements*]? [P. 69]

The question is rhetorical but still poses an interpretive choice for readers who would put something in the blank that follows it. One could imagine, for example, Dora flinging similar words at Freud as she left his office for the last time. And, on the evidence of those final words on the page, the "case" of Mariana, like Dora's case, might be judged a failure.

How do we write the end of *The Portuguese Letters?* In other

words, what do we start writing at the point where Mariana stops? What would it mean to write, for example, that "there is no other way out except to stop writing. . . . Mariana's final decision, to stop writing, is truly the only authentic one. . . . Her repression is thus total?"[25] Why, in the case of Mariana, could one appear to be making sense with a notion such as "authentic repression?" We can only conclude that to read these letters toward such an end is to attempt the obliteration of Mariana's passage out of silence. But an ineradicable and immeasurable interval differentiates the silence which precedes this text from the blank that follows it. And in that blank, we are free to imagine a postscript not unlike the next letter Mariana proposed to write, a letter attesting to the success of her cure: "I want to write you another letter so as to show you that I will be more at peace perhaps in a little while . . . and that I only remember you when I want to do so!" (p. 68).

3 / A MOTHER'S WILL
The Princess de Clèves

> I am convinced that the dismantling of a single "phantom" can go as far as to modify the structure of the great abominable Truth—postulated but inexistent—which, nevertheless, rules the Universe. Each time this happens, there is a small victory of Love over Death. Such is also the inspiration of the present essay.
>
> Nicolas Abraham, "The Interlude of 'Truth' "

IT has become a commonplace to invoke *The Princess de Clèves* as France's first novel in the current sense and to credit its author, Madame de Lafayette, with the introduction of a number of techniques which were to guarantee the success of the genre. As with most *idées reçues*, this one has more place in a collective mythology than in literary history, since that history demonstrates the novel's gradual evolution rather than its sudden apotheosis.[1] Nonetheless, one is tempted to admit that as a mythical (rather than historical) origin, Mme de Lafayette's novel has a reasonable claim. Its setting is plausible yet unhampered by historical accuracy, thus distinguishing it from both the idyllic lack of context of the *grands romans* and the preemptive detail of the historical *mémoire*. Historical event intervenes more as a loosely structuring element, marking narrative time at intervals sufficient to signify duration. Peripheral characters appear only in their manifest roles as members of Henri II's court, while the central characters—Mme de Chartres, the prince and the princess, Nemours, and, to a lesser extent, the Vidame—are each represented at the juncture of their courtly exteriors with what is hidden, denied, or silenced by that appearance.

This last element of the novel constitutes no doubt its most important innovation of fictional technique, for it requires the intervention of a narrator who has no logical way of knowing