Discourses of Desire

GENDER, GENRE, AND EPISTOLARY FICTIONS

Linda S. Kauffman

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ithaca and London

Duino Elegies

3

Disorder and Early Sorrow: *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*

The Portuguese Nun. 1808. Mackenzie's engraving was published in *Letters from a Portuguese Nun to an Officer in the French Army,* trans. W. R. Bowles, 2d ed. (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1817). It is reproduced courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Writing under Erasure

Who does the Portuguese nun belong to? Why are all her letters unsigned? Who signs *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun?* The letters appeared anonymously in French in 1669, ostensibly translated from the Portuguese. For three hundred years, scholars have tried to identify the translator, the nun, and the chevalier to whom she writes, who seduced her while he was stationed in Portugal with the forces of Louis XIV. In 1669 the lover was identified as Noël Bouton, the Chevalier de Chamilly, who later became marshal of France. Guilleragues was identified as the man who translated the letters from Portuguese into French. In 1810 a scholar named Boissonade discovered a handwritten note in his first edition of the letters, which identified the nun as Mariana Alcoforada. Her existence was confirmed in 1876. A Maria Ana Alcoforado had become a nun at the age of sixteen at the Convent of the Conception in Béja, Portugal, in 1656; between 1665 and 1667 when this affair would have taken place, she would have been about twenty-five, he thirty. In 1709 Maria Ana became mother superior; in 1723 she died. The discovery of Maria Ana led Portuguese scholars to translate the letters "back" into Portuguese; this reconstructed version was then hailed as a masterpiece of Portuguese literature. (In libraries around the world to this day, the text is still listed under Portuguese literature.)

In 1926 a number of discrepancies between the text and the life of Maria Ana Alcoforado were examined by F. C. Green. The real nun was a member of an old, distinguished family, for example, but the fictional nun complains of "la médiocrité de ma condition." In 1962 Frédéric Deloffre and J. Rougeot presented evidence to prove that Gabriel-Joseph de Lavergne de Guilleragues was not the translator but the author of the letters. These scholars have not eliminated all skepticism, however; some still maintain that the work was at least inspired by some authentic letters written by a Portuguese woman; others believe that they belong to Portugal, although no Portuguese original has ever been found. Peter Dronke, for instance, maintains

that the entire issue "remains . . . wide open," and Yves Florenne, in a recent edition of the letters, argues for "a woman's voice." Jean-Pierre and Thérèse LaSalle, moreover, recently discovered seven additional letters, which clearly precede the five extant letters chronologically and form a coherent whole. All twelve letters appear to be the work of one author, but the editors do not draw definite conclusions in favor of either the nun's or Guilleragues' authorship.[1]

Both the duration and the vehemence of this controversy have a surprisingly sustained intensity. What is at stake is national pride in a literary classic, for one thing. One Portuguese critic sees the letters as the only beautiful work produced by his country in the seventeenth century.[2] A solution to the ancient dispute over art versus *génie* is also at stake. Critics on one side cite the letters as proof that natural genius—the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings—is sufficient to produce great art. One of the ironies of the dispute, as Deloffre points out, is that many of the artists who are the most self-conscious in their own work—including La Bruyère, Laclos, Stendhal, Sainte-Beuve, and Rilke—endorsed the view that these letters were the product of *génie*. (Rilke) translated *Lettres portugaises* into German in

1. For a discussion of the history of the letters, see Frédéric Deloffre and J. Rougeot, "L'Enigme des *Lettres portugaises*," in *Lettres portugaises, Valentins, et autres oeuvres de Guilleragues* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. v–xxiii. The English translation of the French *Lettres portugaises* by Donald Ericson is in Maria Isabel Barreño, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*, trans. from the Portuguese by Helen R. Lane (New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. 339–62. Since Ericson's arrangement of the letters follows a discredited chronology, and since his translation is sometimes inadequate, I occasionally make minor changes, which are noted parenthetically in the text, along with page numbers to this edition. When I quote the French version along with the English, Deloffre and Rougeot's page numbers are cited parenthetically. See also F. C. Green, "Who Was the Author of the 'Lettres portugaises'?" *Modern Language Review* 21 (1926), 159–67. Luciano Cordeiro, in "*Soror Marianna: A freira portugueza*," (Lisbon: Livaria Ferin, 1888), argues that Guilleragues based his fictional letters on authentic Portuguese originals by the celebrated nun. More recently, the entire debate was rehearsed in the *Times Literary Supplement* by Margaret C. Weitz, 15 Oct. 1976, p. 1306, and Peter Dronke, 5 Nov. 1976, p. 1397. See also Yves Florenne, Introduction, *Lettres de la religieuse portugaise* (Paris: Librairie générale française, 1979), p. 77; Jean-Pierre LaSalle and Thérèse LaSalle, *Un Manuscrit des lettres d'un religieuse portugaise: Leçons, interrogations, hypothèses*, Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature 6 (Paris: Biblio 17, 1982).

2. Theophilo Braga, cited in Edgar Prestage, trans., Introduction, *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (London: D. Nutt, 1897), p. xxvii. D. Nutt's edition is a reprint of an 1893 edition printed by Constable Press and limited to 500 copies; it was reprinted again in 1900 in Portland, Me., by Thos. Mosher.

1913; their influence on the *Duino Elegies* has often been remarked.)[3] The opposite view holds that the letters are too carefully constructed, with too many allusions to classical texts and Racinian tragedy to be the work of an unworldly and wholly uneducated nun. But perhaps an altogether different issue has given the debate its lasting ferocity, for many have cited these letters to demonstrate the difference between feminine writing and masculine writing. Those who maintain that the letters are the authentic work of a woman cite the disorder, the passion, the vehemence of her emotion as evidence. Sainte-Beuve, for instance, "gives a large place to 'la Portugaise' among the female authors of letters written at the moment of passion, with a particular charm in their disorder."[4] In *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* similarly, the vicomte de Valmont confesses to the marquise de Merteuil that he has taken pains with his letters to give them the appearance of disorder, because "sans déraisonnement, point de tendresse"; that emotional abandon, that irrationality, he argues, is what makes women superior writers of love letters.[5] One of the few dissenters from this dominant view of woman's superiority where either love or writing is concerned is Rousseau, who reasoned:

> Women, in general, show neither appreciation nor proficiency nor genius in any part. They can succeed in certain short works which demand only lightness, taste, grace, sometimes even philosophy and reasoning. They can acquire scientific knowledge, erudition, talents and anything which can be acquired through hard work. . . . They may show great wit but never any soul. They are a hundred times more reasonable than they are passionate. Women know neither how to describe nor experience love itself. Only Sappho and one other deserve to

3. Rilke, like Goethe before him, was much impressed by the *Portuguese Letters;* among the many critics who have cited the influence of the letters on Rilke, see Deloffre and Rougeot, "L'Enigme des *Lettres portugaises,*" p. vi; and Barreño et al., *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters,* p. xi. What Rilke may have found particularly resonant in the *Portuguese Letters* is the renunciation of any claim to extratextual authority. In the *Duino Elegies,* as Paul de Man points out, Rilke converts personal destinies or subjective experiences into figures by focusing on a void or a lack: "Hence the prevalence of a thematics of negative experiences . . . the insatiability of desire, the powerlessness of love, death of the unfulfilled or the innocent . . . the alienation of consciousness." See *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 49–50.

4. Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, "Du roman intime; ou, Mademoiselle de Liron," in *Portraits des femmes* (Paris: Didier, 1852), cited in Deloffre and Rougeot, p. vi.

5. Pierre-Ambroise-François Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses,* 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Durand Neveu, 1782), letter 70, 1:71.

be counted as exceptions. I would bet everything I have that the *Portuguese Letters* were written by a man.[6]

Thus, the very qualities that led previous critics to define the letters as feminine writing—the transports, the intensity, the anguish—led Rousseau to wager that a man wrote them. He identifies the female with mind rather than with heart, with cold calculation rather than burning passion. Ironically, although his view of women is diametrically opposed to that of other critics, it is just as negative, for where the others maintain that women can only write what they feel, Rousseau asserts that they are incapable of creation because they are incapable of feeling.

The *Portuguese Letters* are perhaps the most dramatic example in the genre of the dynamic process of dialogism—between texts and languages—and of reaccentuation. They indeed had such a phenomenal impact on both sides of the English Channel that to write "à la portugaise" became a veritable code for a certain style—written at the height of passion in a moment of disorder and distress. In July of 1671, for instance, two years after the letters were published, Mme de Sévigné could write her daughter and mention, "Brancas has, at last, wrote me a letter, crouded with expressions of such tenderness, that it makes ample amends for all his past forgetfulness and neglect. He talks amain to me of his heart in almost every line. Were I to answer him in the same strain, I should make a true Portuguese epistle of it." ("Si je le faisois réponse sur le même ton, *ce seroit une portugaise.*")[7] The scores of sequels to and imitations and translations of the letters attest to their continuing popularity: before 1740 the English translation of the letters went through ten printings; the imitative *Seven Portuguese Letters,* through five printings; eight verse versions and a bilingual edition were published; and Sir Roger L'Estrange's *Five Love-Letters, from a Nun to a Cavalier, with the Cavalier's Answers* went through four print-

6. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La Lettre à d'Alembert sur les spectacles* (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1758), note k, pp. 193–94, trans. Peggy Kamuf, "Writing like a Woman," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society,* ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980), p. 290. I am indebted to her analysis of the correspondence in this article.

7. Mme de Sévigné, *Court Secrets: or, The Lady's Chronicle. Historical and Gallant. Extracted from the Letters of Madam de Sévigné, which have been suppressed at Paris* (London: Henry Curll, 1727), p. 31. Mme de Sévigné's letter to Mme de Grignan, dated 19 July 1671, is cited in Max von Waldberg, *Der empfindsame Roman in Frankreich* (Strasbourg and Berlin: Verlag von Karl J. Trubner, 1906), pp. 45–122.

ings. Aphra Behn, Mary de la Rivière Manley, Jane Barker, Mary Davys, and Eliza Haywood all wrote enormously popular versions of the letters, imitations of them, or sequels to the originals.[8]

The cultural assumptions underlying the code of the Portuguese style deserve mention, for Portugal was commonly viewed as the land of passion and the nun's sexuality, sensuality, and sensibility were attributed to the extremes of heat, intensity, and mystery in her environment. Until quite recently these assumptions, which so influence the assessment of feminine writing "à la portugaise," had never been examined, although a great deal of ink was spilled trying to reach a definitive conclusion about the letters' origin and authenticity and about the genius and gender of the author. Godfrey Singer, for instance, struggles valiantly with the problem:

> The . . . letters are a long complaint of the Nun for what she calls, after the fashion of the abandoned Ariadne, "my Inconsiderate, Improvident, and most unfortunate Love." Incidentally, the woman berates her lover in good round terms that are occasionally reminiscent of the writing of a

8. Robert Adams Day, *Told in Letters: Epistolary Fiction before Richardson* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1966), pp. 32–37, 112. See also Day's appendixes, which provide chronological lists of English letter fiction, 1660–1740, notes on epistolary miscellanies, and letter fiction in periodicals. See also Jean Rousset's "Une Forme littéraire: Le Roman par lettres," in *Forme et signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel* (Paris: Corti, 1962), chap. 4; and François Jost, "Le Roman épistolaire et la technique narrative au XVIIIe siècle," *Comparative Literature Studies* 3 (1966), 397–427, revised and reprinted as "L'Evolution d'un genre: Le Roman épistolaire dans les lettres occidentales," in *Essais de littérature comparée* (Fribourg, Switz.: Editions universitaires, 1968), 2:89–179, 380–402. Among Jost's six basic types of epistolary novels, one is the "type portugais"; another is the "type Abélard"; a third (relevant in terms of Barthes's reaccentuation in *A Lover's Discourse*) is the "type Werther." Each of Jost's classifications revolves around one significant work that spawned scores of imitations and sequels; my focus has been on generic transformations and the formal and thematic similarities in amorous discourse.

To cite but a partial list of the imitations and sequels in which the influence of *Lettres portugaises* is most pronounced: Aphra Behn, *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (part I, 1683; part II, 1685; part III, 1687). Mary de la Rivière Manley, *Letters Written by Mrs. Manley. To Which Is Added a Letter from a Supposed Nun in Portugal, to a Gentleman in France, in Imitation of the Nun's Five Letters in Print,* by Colonel Pack (1696). *Memoirs of the Fair Eloisa, a Nun, and Abelard, a Monk,* said to be by Sir Roger L'Estrange and included in *Familiar Letters of Love, Gallantry, and Several Occasions* (1694; six editions by 1724). Eliza Haywood, *Love in Excess* (1719); *Letters from a Lady of Quality to a Chevalier* (1721); *Love-Letters on All Occasions* (1730). Mrs. Jane Barker, *A Patchwork Screen for the Ladies; or, Love and Virtue* (1723) and *The Lining of the Patchwork Screen* (1726). Mrs. Mary Davys, *The Works of Mrs. Davys,* including *Familiar Letters betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* (1725).

> man rather than of a woman. Not that there is present any suggestion of indelicacy, but rather that the tone of much of the writing is possessed of a masculine vigor. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the translation is the work of a man, Sir Roger L'Estrange. . . . It is difficult to say with any degree of finality whether the difference between the English and the French versions is that of the writing of man and woman or the natural difference between the more masculine English timbre and the less masculine French. . . . We might wish to avoid the original Nun as a dangerous individual in her just anger.[9]

Singer traps himself in a tangled web of definitions here. Men's writing is indelicate; women's writing lacks vigor; the entire English language is "more masculine" than French. Significantly, Singer seems unaware of the fact that he is taking the man's point of view as he writes; like the chevalier, "we" might wish to avoid the nun, assuming "we" are men. Furthermore, the note of unease with anger is one that will sound again and again, for whether the male critic is speaking of Clarissa or Rosa Coldfield, he will expose the same fear and dread of female rage. Singer follows the tendency of most critics of the *Portuguese Letters,* who use the letters to support preconceived notions about the difference between masculine and feminine, between artifice and natural creativity, between Portugal and France, France and England. As the letters are thus made to encode and enclose difference, what frequently gets lost in translation is the woman, as Mariane gets lost between Singer's sympathy for the object of her rage and the translation of Roger L'Estrange.

Leo Spitzer, writing twenty years later, also takes the man's side. In "Les *Lettres portugaises,*" Spitzer concludes that the correspondence of Heloise and Abelard was entirely rewritten by Abelard. Furthermore, since the letters were reprinted in seventeenth-century France, they must have been the models for the *Portuguese Letters,* which he believes were also written by a man. Of Mariane, he says: "It is . . . characteristic that Mariana never tells us the name of her lover, she who does identify her own role in the drama under the name of Mariana. She never thinks of putting him before her and giving him a reality outside of herself. We are in the presence of a 'narcissistic' love." Like

9. Godfrey Frank Singer, *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1933), pp. 46–47. On the myth of Portuguese passion, see for example, Prestage, Introduction, *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun,* p. xxviii. On cultural assumptions about feminine writing, see Kamuf, "Writing like a Woman," pp. 284–99.

Singer, Spitzer uses his role as critic to defend the man's position; he quite arbitrarily decides that the chevalier is a "brilliant French officer . . . a well-balanced nobleman who cannot be impolite to a woman. He's a ladies' man. . . . But what of it? Isn't it natural for a young and ebullient officer of aristocratic birth, 'likeable,' unmarried . . . ? It is not the infrequent and cold responses of the lover but the narrowness of her image of him that killed Mariana's passion."[10] (Saint-Simon, incidentally, offers a quite different view; he confesses in his memoirs that no one, after seeing or hearing the dullard Chamilly, could understand how he had inspired the kind of unparalleled passion that is revealed in the famous *Lettres portugaises.*)[11] Spitzer implies that the man is the woman's opposite in everything. He is brilliant, she is untutored; he is well-balanced, she is unbalanced; he is likable, she is narcissistic, a killer of love. Thus, after erasing Heloise as an author in Abelard's correspondence, Spitzer proceeds to erase the Portuguese nun's predicament, her pathos, and the power of her discourse.[12]

Barbin's *Avis*

When the *Portuguese Letters* first appeared in Paris, the publisher, Claude Barbin, attached the following *avis au lecteur:*

> With much care and difficulty I found the means to recover an accurate copy of the translation of five Portuguese letters which were written to a gentleman of high quality who was serving in Portugal. I envisioned with such eagerness all those who are well versed in matters of passion—either knowing how to extol it or how to seek it out—that I believed I would be doing them a special favor in publishing them. I do not at all know the name of the one to whom they were written or of the one who made the translation of them. However, it seemed to me that I would probably not be displeasing either of them by making the letters public. It is hard to believe that [had I not published them] they would

10. Leo Spitzer, "Les *Lettres portugaises,*" *Romanische Forschungen* 65:1–2 (1954), 94–135, trans. Kamuf, "Writing like a Woman," p. 296.

11. Duc de Saint-Simon, *Memoires,* ed. A. de Boislisle, 45 vols., Edit. des Grands Ecrivains de la France (Paris: Hachette, 1879–1930), 11:10–11, cited in Deloffre and Rougeot, "L'Enigme des *Lettres portugaises,*" p. viii.

12. Kamuf, "Writing like a Woman," pp. 295–98. See also Nancy K. Miller, "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," *Diacritics* 12 (Summer 1982), 48–53, and "I's in Drag: The Sex of Recollection," *Eighteenth Century* 22:1(1981), 47–57.

not eventually have been published [by someone else] with misprints that would have blemished them [my translation].

It is a strange message. If the letters were indeed written by Guilleragues, then the author must have conspired with Barbin (a shrewd judge of literary taste who was also the first to publish Mme de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* and the first French edition of *Don Quixote*). By pretending that the letters were authentic, Barbin pandered to the public taste for "found letters"; he knew well how seventeenth-century audiences disliked fiction. He was also aware of how the claim of authenticity would enhance the scandalous appeal of the letters. His *avis* is thus a guarantee of authenticity and a certification of his own authority, for he recounts the trouble he has taken to print the letters and to secure a correct copy of the translation. The last line is both a justification and a validation; the implication is that if Barbin had not published the letters, someone else would have botched the job. He highlights his authority again when he points out that neither the male to whom the letters are addressed nor the translator will be displeased to see these letters in print.

Barbin has neglected to mention the most crucial element in the text: the woman. Amid his efforts to validate his own authority, Barbin never once mentions the author—the Portuguese nun. In deciding to publish the letters, he takes the displeasure of the seducer and the translator into consideration, but he never considers whether or not the nun might be displeased. It is as if the possibility of her displeasure or her dishonor are of no consequence. Paradoxically, the *authenticity* of the text depends on its illegitimacy; what makes it authentic is that it does not have a father. Barbin's role thus resembles that of the midwife; he "delivers" an illegitimate text to readers who will be well pleased to receive it, precisely because it is a "natural" product. Barbin further buttresses his authority by defining in advance the sort of readers he has in mind; he subtly flatters their pride, sensibility, and exclusiveness, for he has published the letters as a "special favor" to only those who worship or pursue passion. Since the glorious emotions to which his readers will respond are the nun's, it seems all the more curious that Barbin erases her from this preface, particularly since by making her prominent he would have further substantiated his claim of authenticity for the letters. That Barbin would thus work against his own purposes is the first of many paradoxes in this enigmatic text. While trying to create the illusion that the

letters came from the nun's pen, he in effect erases as he writes, for—as in the criticism of Singer and Spitzer—what gets lost in Barbin's emphasis on the translation from Portuguese to French is the woman who writes. Regardless of whether we view the nun as fictional or authentic, she is disenfranchised in Barbin's preface. What the preface erases, the letters restore: the erotic scene of writing.[13]

The Metamorphosis of Rhetoric

Disenfranchisement is at the margins of the plot in the *Portuguese Letters,* for Mariane's seducer comes to Portugal to expand his king's conquests. The chevalier makes a conquest of Mariane, then sails home to France, leaving her without resources to recover, to escape from the convent, or to confront the family and the church she has defied. He has as little concern for the woman as for the colony and loses interest after her first letter, for she complains in her second of hearing nothing from him in six months. When he writes again, he has nothing to say; the nun notices how difficult it is for him to fill half the page. In his final letter, he vows eternal friendship; in response the nun pours out her rage and bitterness at his hypocrisy and treachery.

The nun's first words, "Considère, mon amour," reveal the characteristic doubleness of amorous discourse, for they are addressed both to the chevalier and to herself. She maintains that ambiguity throughout her letters, oscillating between the pathos of an interior monologue and the fury of a tragic tirade. "Consider, my love, how extremely lacking you have been in foresight. You have been betrayed, miserable one, and you have betrayed me with false hopes. A passion on which you have built so many prospects for pleasure can give you now nothing but mortal despair, equalled only by the cruelty of the separation which causes it" (339, minor changes). As happens so often in amorous discourse, the heart acts as a separate entity that sometimes obeys and sometimes betrays the heroine. The heart is the organ of all the nun's diverse *mouvements;* this one word recurs more

13. Kamuf discusses the erotic scene of writing in Heloise's letters in *Fictions of Feminine Desire: Disclosures of Heloise* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1982); Roland Barthes describes the consecration of the amorous scene in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), pp. 192–93, 216–17.

frequently than any other in her letters. In the restricted vocabulary of seventeenth-century France, it designated the passions, the spontaneous impulses, the ecstasies, the desires that escape the control of the will and even the conscious mind.[14] The act of writing about these *mouvements*, therefore, is a conscious attempt to relive and recover spontaneous desires that were initially unconscious. Mariane speaks of *mouvements* again when she records her response as reader after receiving the chevalier's letter. "Your last letter has left my heart in a strange state; its agitation was so strong that it seemed to be trying to separate itself from me to go in search of you" (340). ("Votre dernière lettre le réduisit en un étrange état: il eut des mouvements si sensibles qu'il fit, ce semble, des efforts pour se séparer de moi, et pour vous aller trouver" [40].)

As Heloise does with Abelard, the Portuguese nun makes an idol of the chevalier and then consecrates herself to the idol. In retrospect, she establishes a beginning, middle, and end to the affair: it becomes a story. She declares, "From the first moment I saw you my life was yours, and somehow I take pleasure in sacrificing it to you" (339). The nun has turned her first view of the chevalier into an event, a scene that is "fiction" in both senses of the word, a story and a lie, for a few pages later she contradicts herself by noting that, although she was charmed when she first saw the chevalier, the "first stirrings of . . . passion" came not on that first day but later (345). Thus the phenomenon of love at first sight is an invention after the fact; what we first love is a scene, and this scene consecrates the object we are going to love. The structure of the nun's narrative thus repeats the same pattern Paul Zumthor relates to medieval texts—the latent narrative scheme proceeds from first sight of the beloved to the first meeting, and from the waiting period before the lovers fall in love to the aftermath of abandonment.[15] So eager is the nun to enshrine the scene in her memory that she slips into the imperfect tense, which in amorous discourse, Barthes observes, is "the tense of fascination. . . . From the start, greedy to play a role, scenes take their position in memory: often I feel this, I foresee this, at the very moment when these scenes are forming."[16] The nun recollects the birth of her passion in the imperfect tense:

14. Deloffre and Rougeot, Glossaire of *Lettres portugaises*, pp. 265–66.

15. Paul Zumthor, "The Text and the Voice," *New Literary History* 16 (Autumn 1984), 67–92.

16. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 217.

> It was on this balcony that, charmed by your bearing, I so often watched you ride by; and I stood on this balcony on that fateful day when I felt the first stirrings of my unhappy 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 with 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 were not indifferent to me and I understood everything you did to be for me. (345, minor changes)

The tenses in French reinforce the fictiveness of the process: je me *persuadai,* je *m'imaginai,* je *m'intéressais,* je *sentais,* je *prenais* pour moi tout ce que vous *faisiez.* This last phrase can also mean "I took everything you did for myself"; the chevalier's actions, his looks, his emotions were appropriated by the nun, who invented a meaning for them that could have absolutely no basis in reality, since she had not yet even met him.[17] From the outset, then, the chevalier is the object of a desire that thrives on imagination, roles, scenes, theater.

This passage is one of the most direct allusions to the *Heroides,* for Phaedra's avowal of love for Hippolytus is nearly identical; there is even the same distinction drawn between first being charmed and later feeling "piercing love lodged in my deepest bones." Phaedra confesses that she is enamored of Hippolytus' "hardness of feature. . . . Whether you draw rein and curb the resisting neck of your spirited steed, I look with wonder at your turning his feet in circle so slight; whether with strong arm you hurl the pliant shaft, your gallant arm draws my regard upon itself. . . . To say no more, my eyes delight in whatso'er you do" (4:77–84). In both passages the heroines admire the beloved's mobility; the nun's lover, after all is a chevalier, an expert rider. The three Marias will make the connection of women to horses explicit, referring frequently to their pleasure in passages that are not very different from Phaedra's lust for Hippolytus. Elsewhere, the Portuguese women defy men to try to "break our spirits with the bridle and a tight rein." They go so far as to reverse the traditional paradigm of the immobility of the woman weaving with the mobility of the chevalier in this passage:

17. On the lover as rider and the double entendre of "je prenais tout ce que vous faisiez," see Kamuf, *Fictions,* pp. 62–63.

> They wanted the three of us to sit in parlors, patiently embroidering our days with the many silences, the many soft words and gestures that custom dictates. But . . . we have refused to be cloistered, we are quietly or brazenly stripping ourselves of our habits all of a sudden. . . . The three of us will weave even more webs if necessary—cunning spiders spinning out of our own selves our art, our advantage, our freedom, or our order.[18]

The shift from woman as spinner (and spinster) to woman as spider is worth noting, since it resembles the conflation of Arachne in Ariadne that, as we have seen, is a repeated motif from Sappho onward. The Marias similarly oscillate between images of webs as imprisoning or creative; what unites Phaedra, the Portuguese nun, and the Marias, what enables them to escape the immobility that would otherwise imprison them, is the inscription of desire in the act of writing.

Time is perhaps the most flexible prop in the theater of the nun's emotions, for she moves from the imperfect tense of fascination to the future tense of incertitude, and the past tense of nostalgia. Since her letters have no date, no time, no salutation, no signature, they indeed seem removed from praxis. Being dateless, they seem ageless; they exemplify the temporal autonomy of narrative.

In the nun's reverie on the balcony, the use of the imperfect tense is sustained by repetition: the nun often watched the chevalier ride by, and every time she would engage in the same process of fiction making. Her ritual reenactment whenever he appeared establishes a link between repetitive event and narrative inspiration that, significantly, depends on an absence. They did not yet know one another, but the nun fills in the gaps by narrating what she felt, imagined, persuaded herself to believe. This moment marks the birth of her vocation, the vocation of iterative narrative.[19] All amorous discourses are iterative. The heroine ceaselessly evokes a beloved who no longer cares (or never did) and reiterates events (such as lovemaking) long since past, as if she can discover some law of recurrence that either will make the lover reappear or will sustain her reveries by focusing on quantity and reciprocity. "A *thousand* times *a day I send* my sighs to you; *everywhere* they seek you out, but all they *bring* me *in return* for *so*

18. Barreño et al., *The Three Marias*, pp. 17, 34, hereinafter cited parenthetically in the text.

19. See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980), chap. 3.

much anguish is the warning voice of my sad fate, which will not let me console myself, which *keeps whispering,* 'Stop, Mariane, *stop torturing* yourself *in vain; stop seeking* a lover whom you will never see *again*'" (339–40, my italics). All the italicized words reveal the nun's obsession with repeated utterance, with two moments at the same time, with the duration and frequency of iterative narrative.[20] The mere act of standing on the balcony, on the site where she first consecrated her love, has such cumulative force as a result of iteration that the nun is overwhelmed with painful memories for the rest of the day; everything reminds her of when she used to see him—all objects, all sights, all words. The nun is obsessed with questions of motive, cause and effect, repetition and return. What made the chevalier keep riding by her balcony? What made him keep coming to her room? What made him leave her on certain occasions and not on others? What aroused him then and what might arouse him now? Why did he write initially, then remain silent for six months? How can she get him to write frequently? How can she sustain her own passion by writing?

The answer to the latter question lies in the technique of the letters. Critics have long been puzzled by the apparent masochism of Mariane's many confessions of "affection for this misery which you alone have brought upon me" and her exhortations to the chevalier to "continue to make me suffer" (339, 341). After contemplating the happiness she would feel if she could join him in France, she demurs, "I will not nourish a hope that is so sure to give me pleasure; I wish to have only feelings of sorrow" (341). By nourishing her sorrow, she thus sustains her passion in a variety of remarkably subtle ways. First, she takes pleasure in justifying his actions, despite all the evidence of his treachery. As in the *Heroides,* the process of retrospection begins with denial and disbelief. It is inconceivable that the chevalier will not return, will not write, that she will never see him again, that he seduced and abandoned her. She tries to imagine this possibility, then rejects it: "But no, I cannot bring myself to think so harshly of you; I am too deeply interested in justifying you. I do not wish to believe that you have forgotten me. Am I not unhappy enough without tormenting myself with false suspicions? And why should I force myself to forget all the efforts you made to convince me of your love?" (340). Just as Hypsipyle justifies Jason by saying that "Love is quick to believe; may it prove that I am hasty, and have brought a groundless

20. Ibid., pp. 116, 138–43.

charge against my lord!" (*Heroides,* 6:21–22), the nun quickly replaces her doubts with remorse for having doubted in the first place. This posture becomes increasingly untenable as time goes by, but the nun's commitment to it intensifies rather than diminishes. Not only does she exhort the chevalier to increase her suffering, but after thanking him for the "despair you cause me," she confesses in the third letter, "I despise the tranquillity in which I lived before knowing you. Adieu . . . my love grows with every moment. How many things I still have to say to you . . ." (352). The three sentences have a logic characteristic of amorous discourse. Having made the lover the repository of all identity and desire, the heroine memorializes everything that is related to the image of the beloved and despises everything else. The very confession (which is not unlike Heloise's audacious claim that she would rather be Abelard's whore than Augustus' empress), not only proclaims but augments desire. The act of writing, in other words, arouses desire, and the more she desires, the more she has to say.

Another reason that the nun holds so tenaciously to her suffering is that it enables her to sustain the illusion of the chevalier's active engagement with her, for she prefers anything—even his active hatred—to his indifference. She bombards him with questions concerning his wishes, his desires, his demands of her, when the sad fact is that he wants nothing because he no longer cares for her. To ward off recognition of this fact she stages confrontations, as in her third letter: "What will become of me; what would you have me do? I find myself so far from everything I had once anticipated. I imagined that you would write me from all the places through which you passed, and that your letters would be very long; that you would sustain my passion with the hope of seeing you again" (349). Frequently in iterative narrative, the heroine is forced to recognize that when the future becomes present, it seldom resembles the vision she had of it in the past. The sense of distance and detachment is particularly notable here, for it is marked by paralysis as well as disappointment. The nun recognizes that some action must be taken to remedy her situation, but she is incapable of initiating it. Rather than doing, she asks, "What is to be done?" She appeals to the lover, invokes action, threatens vengeance, vacillates between alternatives from sentence to sentence, but does nothing. Her questions echo those of Ovid's Ariadne, lamenting her exile from her lover, her father, and her homeland ("What am I to do? Whither shall I take myself. . . . where am I to go?" [10:59, 64]). Deloffre and Rougeot cite many examples of the persistent pattern of such resemblances

between the *Heroides* and the *Portuguese Letters.* They do the same thing with Racine's heroines (Phaedra, Hermione, Medea), citing Guilleragues' many Racinian allusions and his friendship with Racine as evidence that Guilleragues wrote the letters. But while meticulously accounting for these allusions to the *Heroides* and to Racine, the two scholars make no attempt to place the letters in the context of amorous discourse. What Guilleragues and Racine took specifically from Ovid was a conception of erotic desire fueled by absence, by memory and retrospective recital, by the violent vacillation between love and hate, thoroughly removed from exterior scenes and action.[21]

In her first letter, Mariane still believes that the chevalier may send for her or at least write to her, but subsequent letters chart her slowly dawning awareness of utter abandonment and betrayal. She nevertheless continues to proclaim her fidelity and to defy those who would make her repent. In her second letter, she reveals the increasingly fictive nature of her project when she poignantly confesses:

> I could content myself with your remembering me, but I dare not be sure even of that. When I saw you every day I did not limit my hopes to this, but you have made me understand that I must submit to your will in everything. And yet I do not regret having adored you. . . . I am even glad to have been betrayed by you. All the harshness of your absence—eternal though it may prove to be—in no way diminishes the strength of my love. I want the whole world to know of it. I make no secret of it, and I am delighted to have done all that I did for you alone and in defiance of all propriety. It was my honor, my religion, to love you desperately for the rest of my life once I had begun to love you. (354–55)

Since the nun speaks elsewhere of the risks she has taken by outraging the morals of her church, country, and family, each of whom could exact vengeance for her transgressions, it is particularly notable that

21. See Deloffre and Rougeot, "Analyse d'un chef-d'oeuvre," pp. 3–33. The editors discuss the literary circle in which Guilleragues moved, which included La Rochefoucauld, Mme de Lafayette, Mme de Sévigné, Racine, and Bussy-Rabutin (paraphraser of Heloise's letters). My comments on the nun's inaction are indebted to Roland Barthes's discussion of Racinian Eros in *On Racine,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964). Barthes, too, fails to place the *Portuguese Letters* within the genre, a failure that seems all the more paradoxical since he was later to make his own contribution to the genre, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1977). There is no question that he was thoroughly familiar both with the *Heroides* and with the *Portuguese Letters,* although he makes no direct reference to either in his *Lover's Discourse.*

she, like Heloise before her, takes an audacious stand here in defense of her own honor. From this self-assertion, however, she goes to the other extreme of absolute submission to her lover's will: in this, too, her motive is identical to Heloise's, for the fiction of the lover's mastery and command over her is necessary to sustain the illusion of his abiding interest. It is, in short, yet another strategy to circumvent the reality of his indifference.

The nun has a variety of other such strategies at her disposal, which have long puzzled the critics. They are scandalized, for instance, by her desire to become the chevalier's servant; she tells him that she would have served him with far more zeal than his two Portuguese servants, whose happiness she envies (45). When she goes so far as to speculate about waiting on the chevalier's new mistress, critics cite the passage as evidence of her madness, her degradation, her masochism.[22] The nun's suggestion does not appear unusual, however, when it is placed within the context of amorous discourse. Ovid's Briseis, we may recall, suggests that Achilles let her "be a lowly slave of yours. . . . Only let not your lady be harsh with me, I pray . . . and suffer her not to tear my hair before your eyes, while you lightly say of me: 'She, too, once was mine.' Or, suffer it even so, if only I am not despised and left behind—this is the fear, ah woe is wretched me, that shakes my very bones!" (3:75–82). The passage illustrates the heroine's characteristic desperation in negotiating with her lover; Briseis offers herself on the condition that the new mistress not abuse her, then immediately reverses herself and confesses that she would rather endure anything than abandonment. What most critics of the *Portuguese Letters* have overlooked, moreover, is that the suggestion to serve her rival is a strategy calculated to keep all possibilities, all desire, and all writing open—to exclude, to conclude nothing. In her fourth letter, the nun recalls that the chevalier once confessed that he loved a woman in Paris; she urges him: "Write me everything she says to you. Perhaps I will find in them some reason to console myself or to make me more inconsolable. . . . Everything that means something to you is very dear to me, for I am completely devoted to all that interests you. I have no interest left in my own life. Often I think I have

22. E.g., Spitzer, pp. 121–22; Peter Dronke, "Héloise and Marianne: Some Reconsiderations," *Romanische Forschungen* 72:3–4 (1960), 223–56. Deloffre and Rougeot discover a parallel in Catullus' Ariadne, who similarly suggests to Theseus that he take her along as his slave. See "Analyse d'un chef-d'oeuvre," p. 6.

enough humility to serve her whom you love" (347). The French makes even clearer the speculative nature of her thought here. ("J'y trouverais, peut-être, des raisons de me consoler, ou de m'affliger davantage. . . . Il y a des moments où il me semble que j'aurais assez de soumission pour servir celle que vous aimez" [57].) It also reveals the close alliance of sorrow and joy, hatred and love. By her fourth letter the nun has reached the point where her vocation can be sustained equally by consoling or by tormenting herself—with the emphasis on *herself*. The chevalier has become increasingly irrelevant to the emotions she seeks to nurture. Indeed, by the end of this letter she has made the astonishing discovery that the chevalier is irrelevant even as a correspondent; rather than send her letter, she keeps it to continue writing.

This remarkable process of fiction making is launched in the very first paragraph of the first letter, when the nun refers to "this separation, to which my grief, imaginative as it is, can give no name poignant enough" (339) ("cette absence, à laquelle ma douleur, toute ingénieuse qu'elle est, ne peut donner un nom assez funeste" [39]). *Ingénieuse* means not only "ingenious" but "gifted," "clever," "inspired," "imaginative"; *ingénier,* moreover, means "to strain one's ingenuity, to exercise one's wits." These nuances of ingenuity and exercise are highlighted in the three Marias' response to the nun's letters when they confess that their main interest, like Mariane's is "not so much the object of our passion, which is a mere pretext, but passion itself . . . not so much passion itself, which is a mere pretext, but its exercise" (1). As with *ingénier,* the word *funeste* has nuances not captured by "poignant," including connotations of fatality and death. It thus reinforces the nun's declaration in the next sentence: "Alas, my eyes have lost the only light that gave them life; they have nothing now but tears, and I use them only in incessant weeping since I have learned that you are determined upon this separation which I cannot bear, which will yet be my death" (339).

Even death, which is one of Mariane's major obsessions, has a fictive quality that becomes more pronounced as the chevalier becomes more remote, although as early as her first letter she confesses that her memories are so overwhelming that "I flattered myself with the thought that I was dying of love" (340). In subsequent letters, the fantasy escalates. She imagines that the chevalier wants her to die of love, which she not only is willing to do but anticipates with great

voluptuousness. If the chevalier desires her death, his feelings are still volatile; hatred is far better than indifference. In one tumultuous paragraph in her third letter, the nun's thoughts move swiftly from her lover's ingratitude for all she has sacrificed, to remorse, then defiance. She concludes by revealing the fictive nature of despair:

> I have lost my reputation. . . . But I am well aware that my remorse is not so real; that with all my heart I should gladly have wished to risk greater dangers for love of you; and that I take a fatal pleasure in having put life and honor at stake. . . . It even seems to me that I am not so completely satisfied either with my grief or the excess of my love. . . . I live, a faithless creature, and do just as much to preserve my life as to destroy it. Ah, I die of shame! My despair exists only in my letters! (350–51)

The source of Mariane's dissatisfaction with her grief and her love is that neither is excessive enough; she concludes with the speculation that writing not only augments despair but creates it. "If I love you as much as I have told you a thousand times," she reasons, "should I not have died long ago? I have deceived you; it is for you to reproach me. . . . Treat me harshly, reproach me that my emotions are not ardent enough; be more difficult to please; let me hear that you wish me to die of love; I entreat you to help me in this way so that I may overcome the weakness of my sex and put an end to my irresolution by genuine despair" (351). By thus distinguishing the despair writing creates from a "genuine" (*véritable*) despair, the nun signals once again that she is straining her ingenuity, and that—as with her *ingénieuse* sorrow—her project is illusory, fictive, tied more to her letters than to her lover. By the end of this letter, her imagination has leapt forward to envision the effect her suicide would have on him; she perceives that he would probably boast of having inspired such a desperate passion and would exploit it to seduce other women. Ovid's heroines, we may recall, engaged in precisely the same anticipatory process; Briseis, for example, tells Achilles, "If your love for me has turned to weariness, compel the death of her whom you compel to live without you!" (3:139).[23] The repetition and parallelism emphasizes the cause-and-effect relation between his abandonment and her death; it is a rhetorical strategy that fixes responsibility on the se-

23. Cited in Deloffre and Rougeot, "Analyse d'un chef-d'oeuvre," p. 5.

ducer, compelling him to take the consequences and pursue them to their logical conclusion. Thus, as with Ovid's heroines, the Portuguese nun's threats of suicide are designed to make the seducer feel guilty; they are a last-ditch effort to see if death will evoke a response from the man unmoved by love. The only act that postpones her suicide is writing.

Writing is the gesture by which the nun simultaneously effaces the possibility of suicide and keeps it legible. She does the same thing to the chevalier by diminishing him and elevating her passion. The doubleness of the project is characteristic of amorous epistolary discourse: the erotic scene of writing is also the site of exorcism. Far from recollecting the chevalier in tranquillity, the nun dwells on his treachery, his baseness, his ingratitude, his selfishness. Even his love-making was grossly inept. Her greatest moments of happiness, she now remembers, were always spoiled by doubts of his fidelity, and fears of abandonment. Whereas she treasured every moment they spent together, he frequently chose to squander his time hunting or gambling. He is, she finally realizes, unworthy of her passion, and she warns him to be aware that she now sees all his despicable qualities: "Sachez que je m'aperçois que vous êtes indigne de tous mes sentiments, et que je connais toutes vos méchantes qualités" (63). Lest he take too much pride in his conquest, she reminds him that she was young, credulous, sheltered in the convent since childhood and that everyone had spoken well of him. She is particularly embittered by the realization that the conquest was carefully calculated from the outset and that even his passion was feigned:

> I am all alone in my unhappiness. This is what crushes me, and I shudder at the thought that in all our pleasures, your deepest feelings were never really engaged. I realize now the deceitfulness of all your acts. You deceived me every time you said that it made you happy to be alone with me. Your ardors and transports were due only to my importunity; you had calculatingly planned to kindle my passion; you looked upon it only as another conquest and your heart was never really moved by my love. (349)

Initially, the nun occupies herself in trying to understand why the chevalier is in a "frenzy" to make her unhappy. By her last letter, however, she is forced to recognize that she has not mattered enough for either passionate love or violent hatred, although she has at-

tributed both extremes to him from the outset. The nun prefers even enmity to ennui, because it would necessitate the chevalier's active involvement and his remembrance of her. She, similarly, prefers feeling jealousy to confronting a void. In her last letter she says: "I would have endured your hatred and even all the pangs of jealousy which your affection for another woman might have aroused in me. Then, at least, I would have had some passion to combat, but your indifference to me is insupportable" (357, minor changes).

Like Ovid's heroines and Heloise, Mariane is obsessed with the paradoxical relation of spontaneity and calculation. The nun discovers that, even in abandoning oneself to passion, one must remain aloof, suspicious, and one must learn to suspect man's motives, sincerity, engagement. Passion, she learns, inevitably involves some measure of calculation and artifice; in both love and letter writing, spontaneity is a carefully nurtured illusion that relies on artifice. Love, moreover, is seldom reciprocal, never symmetrical; one cannot make oneself loved, however volatile the force of one's own feelings are, as the nun reflects poignantly:

> Why must I learn from you the imperfection and pain of an attachment that is not lasting . . . the whole bitter course of a passionate love that is not mutual? What blind and malicious fate is it that drives us irresistibly to those who have feelings only for others? . . .
>
> From the very beginning, all too openly, I made you aware of my deep passion; one should use more subtle art to make oneself loved. One must be ingenious in finding means to inflame a lover. Love alone is not enough to arouse love. [Il faut de l'artifice pour se faire aimer; il faut chercher avec quelque adresse les moyens d'enflammer, et l'amour tout seul ne donne point de l'amour (67).] (358, 361)

The French *adresse* has a particular pointedness here, since it is related to the body and to love as well as to letters. The first meaning refers to the body's movements; physical activities demanding *l'adresse*, require skill and dexterity; in context then, the nun means that one must be sexually expert to inflame a lover. The second connotation involves finesse, savoir-faire, delicacy of spirit; and the third—an address on a letter—relates to the letter the nun is writing. Finally, *l'adresse* is also an appeal to the lover. Therefore, if love is inseparable from artifice, so are letters. That this correspondence becomes a veritable vocation for the nun is made abundantly clear when she contrasts

his indifference to her absorption in her project; she pities his inability to love, to feel, to be deeply involved, maliciously hinting at one point that perhaps he is only aroused by ill-treatment from his mistresses. Like Ovid's heroines and Heloise, she explores the distinction between heart and pen, between feelings and writing, when she reflects: "It seems to me that I am doing the greatest possible wrong to the feelings of my heart in trying to make them clear in writing to you. How happy I should be if you could guess them by the violence of your own!" (353). Writing inevitably falsifies passion by spelling it out; hearts that are truly in sympathy do not need writing—or even words. This compulsion to express the inexpressible is a characteristic paradox of amorous epistolary discourse, as is the heroine's complaint that she has been consigned to a medium of expression antipathetic to feeling. Yet she is already reconciling herself to the only medium she has; as early as this second letter, indeed, her focus begins to shift from the lover's absence to the process of composition. Furthermore, although this letter begins with an assertion that writing distorts passion and does violence to the purity and depth of feeling, Mariane goes on to comment on the transitory nature of "fleeting desire, coming and going with the pleasure of the moment" (354). Writing, in contrast, endures. Even its falsifications are advantages, for instead of having to dwell on the chevalier's new mistresses, the nun instead can defy him "to forget me utterly; I flatter myself that I have brought you to such a point that your pleasures must be imperfect without me; and I am much happier than you because I am much busier" (354). Only in her letters can the nun dispense with the unpleasant facts about the chevalier's present pleasures by persuading herself, flattering herself, that she is indispensable; such defiance of the facts would not be possible if he were present. As a nun, relieved of distractions from the world outside the convent, only one thing keeps Mariane so busy: the vocation of writing, the relentless rearrangement of past, present, and future.

By the end of this second letter, the nun's desire has become more and more detached from the actual object; she ends by remarking, "My love no longer depends upon the way in which you treat me" (355). As Barthes observes, "The subject lives the scene without being . . . deceived by it. Classical rhetoric possessed a figure of speech to express this imagination of the past, hypotyposis . . . the

image takes the place of the thing."[24] By the fourth letter the nun no longer needs even to mail what she writes; she allows the lieutenant to leave without delivering her letter and recognizes that "I write more for myself than for you. I want only to release myself" (348, minor changes). ("J'écris plus pour moi que pour vous, je ne cherche qu'à me soulager" [58].) *Soulager* signifies the easing of burdens, pressures, feelings, the release of pent-up frustrations. She effaces the chevalier by focusing increasingly on her motives for writing and on a retrospective recital of her involvement with him. He did not seduce her, she now maintains; instead, "the violence of my own desire seduced me" (342).

By her fifth letter, she has so exorcised him that Mariane can clearly distinguish between the chevalier and her passion: "I realized the whole terrible power of my love only when I exerted all my efforts to rid myself of it! . . . I discovered that it was not so much you as my own passion to which I was attached; it was remarkable how I suffered while struggling with it even after you had become despicable to me through your wretched behavior" (357). He is odious, but her desire remains intact; she recognizes by her fifth letter how completely the actual lover is a mere pretext for her passion. Her last letter, indeed, is a mixture of cold rage and the lucidity that comes with repudiation; it is written in response to the cold, curt, hypocritical note she has just received from him, in which he swears eternal friendship. This response lets her know that he has received all her previous letters and that they left him unmoved. She is filled with fury: "I detest your frankness and easy-going attitude. Did I ever sincerely beg you to tell me the truth? You needed only never to write; I would never have searched to be disburdened of my illusions" (357, minor changes). The question is convincing evidence that she has been conscious of the fictiveness of her endeavor from the outset. But this realization nurtures rather than nullifies her desire. What she dismantles is not her passion but its object: "I realize now that you are not worthy of my love; too clearly now I see all your despicable qualities" (357, minor changes).

Critics have frequently compared the nun to the Princess of Clèves, criticizing both heroines for their renunciation of the world

24. Barthes, *On Racine*, p. 18.

for the cloister. Few have understood that the Portuguese nun, like the princess, acts not to renounce but to preserve her passion.[25] For Mariane, as for Heloise and Ovid's heroines, passion is not the consolation prize after the real man departs but, instead, the mark—the goal, the objective, the distinction. The act of writing becomes the proof of the distinction between the man and the desire; this vocation enables the nun to proclaim, "J'ai éprouvé que vous m'étiez moins cher que ma passion" (62). The word *éprouvé* is perhaps the most crucial in this letter; it signifies the attempt to test, to verify certain qualities; it also refers to what one learns from experience, as well as one's trials, what makes one suffer. All three meanings should be considered simultaneously both here and in another crucial passage, which begins with the words *N'éprouvé-je:*

> Have I not proved that a heart is never more deeply affected than when first it is made aware of the depths of feeling of which it is capable? All its emotions are centered upon the idol which it builds for itself. Its first wounds are neither to be healed nor to be effaced. The passions which come freely to the heart's aid and give it power to express and satisfy itself afford it a profound emotion that is never to be recaptured. All the pleasures which it seeks, *though without true desire to find them*, serve only to show that nothing is so dear to it as the remembrance of past sorrows. (358, my italics)

The italics point up the underlying impulse of amorous discourse: to make the past present without ceasing to cherish it as memory. The erotic scene can be evoked endlessly through repetition and rehearsal; therefore the heart does not even desire to find the pleasures it seeks.[26] Mariane memorializes what she loves most, which is what she herself has created: her desire and her discourse.

Her fifth letter commences with the declared aim of writing for the last time, in obedience to the chevalier. But the letter displays the same transgression of the beloved's injunction that Heloise's last letter to Abelard contained, for the nun contradicts herself near the end when she says: "I shall write you just one more letter to show you that in time I shall perhaps be more composed. What pleasure I shall take

25. On the Princess of Clèves, see Nancy K. Miller, "Emphasis Added: Plots and Plausibilities in Women's Fiction," *PMLA* 96 (Jan. 1981), 36–48.

26. Barthes, *On Racine*, pp. 17–18.

in reproaching you for your wickedness when it no longer touches me so deeply; and when I have come so far as to tell you that I despise you, that I am able to speak with complete indifference of how you deceived me, that I have forgotten both pleasures and sorrows . . . how then I shall rejoice!" (361). The passage reveals yet another rhetorical strategy characteristic of amorous discourse: the resolution to express the indifference that lies ahead. Paradoxically, the anticipation of such indifference enables the writing to go forward, since it necessitates still another letter, which will demonstrate that indifference. Ironically, if the nun were ever to become truly indifferent, she would have no interest in writing to the chevalier. Her situation is the opposite of the one Proust will later describe in *Remembrance of Things Past:* "[Swann] had made a vow that if ever he ceased to love [Odette] . . . he would implacably exhibit to her an indifference that would at length be sincere . . . [but] with his love had vanished the desire to show that he was in love no longer."[27] The Portuguese nun, in contrast, consumed with the desire to show that she no longer loves, demonstrates that she is through neither desiring nor writing. Her last words reveal that writing is always inaugural, always in the process of becoming. "I am a fool to keep repeating the same things over and over again. . . . But I will write no more. Am I obliged to give you an exact account of all my diverse impulses and feelings?" (362, minor changes) ("Je suis une folle de redire les mêmes choses si souvent. . . . je crois même que je ne vous écrirai plus; suis-je obligée de vous rendre un compte exact de tous mes divers mouvements?" [69]).

The question marks a radical departure from the premise of the nun's early letters, which was that the chevalier was withholding the thing she most needed and that he owed it to her to meet her needs and her demands. Here, she in a sense turns the tables, by implying that it is the chevalier who needs, who is making demands on her. The word *compte* is particularly evocative, since it suggests the evaluation of a quantity (like the amount of love the nun gave him). It can also signify a profit, an advantage; the profitable advantage the nun has

27. Cited by Genette, pp. 80–81. Genette cites the same impulse in *Jean Santeuil:* "Sometimes passing in front of the hotel he remembered the rainy days when he used to bring his nursemaid that far. . . . But he remembered them without the melancholy that he then thought he would surely some day savor on feeling that he no longer loved her. For this melancholy, projected in anticipation prior to the indifference that lay ahead, came from his love. And this love existed no more (p. 38)."

discovered is the act of writing. *Rendre un compte* means "to analyze, to expose, to explicate"; the nun's five letters are themselves an *explication de texte* in which she simultaneously analyzes and exposes her desire. Amorous discourses frequently revolve around such confrontations couched in economic terms. The heroine feels that the seducer owes her something; she wants to settle accounts, to make him pay. In all amorous discourse, the heart is the gift that the lover imagines giving away; it is what the lover values above all, and every time it is "returned," it is all that remains.[28] Thus, the nun demands payment for having given away her heart—and with it her identity, for the chevalier's abandonment initially made the nun feel annihilated; she reflects in her last letter that he had filled her with a passion that drove her out of her mind. She now sees that he stole her being when he stole her heart. He first created her out of nothingness, then capriciously plunged her back into nothingness, reducing her to a sense of utter nullification.[29] She recalls, "Never before had I heard such charming things as you were continually saying to me. It seemed to me that I owed to you the attractions and beauties which you discovered in me, and of which you first made me conscious" (362).

The nun's fifth letter thus represents an escape from annihilation, from nullification. She finally discovers that he did not invent her or her beauty; he possessed her, but the traits he found in her were there all along. With the realization that they are her possessions, not his, she regains her self-possession. Writing is thus a strategy of recuperation, in the senses both of healing and of reparation. (Again, the significance of the chevalier as colonist and of the nun's disenfranchisement as conquest comes to mind.) In the process of self-reparation, Mariane simultaneously achieves her desire for recognition and recognizes her desire. All her *divers mouvements*—her various transports, impulses, emotions, passions—will continue to be the subjects of and motives for her discourse. At the end, by effacing the chevalier, yet keeping him legible, she keeps the circuit of desire open. The nun inaugurates her true vocation of writing by the "end" of her letters; Roland Barthes's amorous fragments similarly help to illuminate the paradoxes—as well as the strategy of recuperation—at play in all discourses of desire: "To know that one does not write for the other, to know that these things I am going to write will never

28. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 52.
29. See Barthes, *On Racine*, pp. 27–28.

cause me to be loved by the one I love (the other) . . . that it is precisely *there where you are not*—this is the beginning of writing."[30] In confronting this characteristic paradox, the Portuguese nun becomes one of the elect, canonized not just by passion but by the art that makes her letters a pivotal document in the canon of amorous discourse.

30. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, p. 100.

8

Poetics, Passion, and Politics in *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*

The Portuguese Nun. This engraving by R. J. Beedham of a painting by Joanne Gill appeared in *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun,* trans. E. Allen Ashwin (Talybont Dyffryn, North Wales: Francis Walterson, 1929). It is reproduced courtesy of the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, University of California, Los Angeles.

Laws and Outlaws

> This text . . . seems to be made . . . to make light of all the tranquil categories of genre-theory and history in order to upset their taxonomic certainties, the distribution of their classes and the presumed stability of their classical nomenclatures. . . . I am convinced that fundamental rights are bound up in all of this: the law itself is at stake.
>
> JACQUES DERRIDA, "La Loi du genre/ The Law of Genre"

The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters is the collaborative work of three Portuguese women, Maria Isabel Barreño, Maria Teresa Horta, and Maria Velho da Costa. When it was written in 1971, Horta was literary editor of a Lisbon newspaper; Barreño and Velho da Costa were writers and researchers at the Ministry of Economics. The text consists of letters, poems, and fragments inspired by the original *Letters of a Portuguese Nun.* The impact of the modern text can perhaps best be measured by the severity of the backlash against it. Published in the spring of 1972, it was immediately hailed as a masterpiece, but by May it had been banned, and within a month a censorship committee ruled that the authors and everyone else involved in the book's publication would be prosecuted for "abusing the freedom of the press and outraging the public morals and decency." The government was apparently counting on them to assume the roles of powerless victims. Monique Wittig suggests that the Portuguese censors were furious at the text's immediate success and that this anger accounts for the unusual severity of their treatment.[1] The trial began in October 1972 and, in order to ruin the women financially, it was prolonged well into the spring of 1974. The authors were imprisoned, feminist protests were mobilized internationally, embassies were besieged with protests, and a statement was prepared for the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

1. Monique Wittig and Evelyne Le Garrec, trans., Introduction, *Nouvelles Lettres portugaises* (Paris: Editions Seuil, 1973), p. 8.

The Portuguese government was clearly unprepared for the feminist mobilization; it apparently expected to imprison the women (one of whom is tubercular) for six months to two years without a public outcry, much less one of such massive international proportions. On 18 April 1974, one day before the three women were to be sentenced, the court inexplicably adjourned; a week later the Caetano-Salazar dictatorship was overthrown by a junior officers' coup. Even after the coup, however, the three women still had to stand trial. This is why they consistently maintain that revolutions come and go, but women remain oppressed; this is why they maintain that they owe their freedom not to the coup but to the concerted effort of the feminist movement throughout the world. Three days after they were acquitted, the Movimento de liberacão das mulheres was founded, with prominent participation by Barreño and Horta.[2]

Why did the text arouse such a vehement response? What were the three Marias' crimes? Clearly, some transgression of the law was at stake, but what? First, a transgression of gender: the three women write "like men"; they are sexually explicit, frank about their bodies, their desires, their fantasies, their sexuality. They analyze the patriarchal structures and the repression that creates violence between lovers, within families, throughout society, continuously interweaving the personal plight of individuals with the political consequences of repression. They give women who have been silenced through the ages a name, a voice, a heritage, creating a female history and genealogy in the letters of mothers, daughters, sisters, aunts, nieces. They break the law of genre as well as of gender by interweaving "historical" letters that are fictional, interpolating tales of Gothic horror, essays, poems, puzzles, and legal documents. The text is an incitement to insurrection, based on the conviction that "when woman rebels against man, nothing remains unchanged" (158).

It is simultaneously a radical reenvisioning of writing and revolt, defiance and desire, *and* it is an amorous epistolary discourse. I have

2. See Wittig and Le Garrec, pp. 7–11; and Robin Morgan, "International Feminism: A Call for Support of the Three Marias," in *Going Too Far* (New York: Random House, 1975), pp. 220–27; Helen R. Lane, Translator's Preface to Maria Isabel Barreño, Maria Teresa Horta, Maria Velho da Costa, *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters* (New York: Bantam, 1976), pp. ix–xv (the edition hereinafter cited by page number parenthetically in the text); Dan Hofstadter, review of *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters*, *New Leader*, 23 June 1975, p. 18. An earlier volume of poems by Maria Teresa Horta had also been banned as "erotic." See H. M. Macedo, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Dec. 1975, p. 1484.

chosen to conclude with *New Portuguese Letters* because, although some would argue that its achievement does not match that of the other texts in my study, it does reiterate all the essential characteristics that I have been tracing. These traits, indeed, reappear in unexpected combinations. The three Marias' lament of exile evokes the *Heroides*; the seclusion of the cloister returns us to Heloise and Mariane; the tyranny of families and social codes recalls Clarissa and Rosa Coldfield. *New Portuguese Letters* thus demonstrates that the more a genre evolves and the more complex it becomes, the better it remembers its past. The three Marias revisit and revise the original nun's letters, casting them in a new light that illuminates their subsequent literary history, and history in general. That reaccentuation is dialogic: it is simultaneously a multilingual (French and Portuguese) discourse and an assertion of another logic and another modality based on dialogue. *The Three Marias* combines the erotic and educational strains of epistolarity; it is both a love letter and a legal challenge. It is also a theoretical experiment, a narrative performance that purposely subverts the traditional divisions between reading and writing, fiction and reality, politics and poetics. By focusing on politics and history, the three Marias make explicit what was implicit in the nun's original letters—the parallels between the colonization of Portugal and of woman, between the country as colony and woman as conquest.

Genre theory maintains that no new contribution to a genre is merely a product of a preexisting system; "to signify in history," says Todorov, "is to proceed from difference not merely from repetition. Hence the work of art . . . always involves a transforming element, an innovation of the system."[3] As with my previous texts, this one must be viewed in terms of its innovative experiments. By including an anticanonical text, I mean to call into question the process by which the critical reception of a text influences its canonical status; I shall return to this question in the last section of this chapter. As an experiment, moreover, *New Portuguese Letters* points to new directions in which the genre of the amorous epistle might move. One of the three Marias' many innovations involves multiple addressees; although we have seen multiple correspondents in previous discourses such as

3. On dialogism, see M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 415–21. On generic systems, see Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 186.

Clarissa, here for the first time three authors collaborate, writing directly to one another. They make visible in the text itself the kind of dialogue and critical exchange that went on behind the scenes in Lady Bradshaigh's collaboration with Richardson. They also write letters directly to the original Portuguese nun, thus blurring the boundaries between the letter as literature and literature as a letter once again. Among all the texts in my study, indeed, this is the first that presents the other as a woman. She is addressed with all the passion that was reserved for the absent male in previous discourses.

The exercise of passion is the Marias' subject from their opening declaration: "...Granted, then, that all of literature is a long letter to an invisible other, a present, a possible, or a future passion that we rid ourselves of, feed, or seek. We have also agreed that what is of interest is not so much the object of our passion, which is a mere pretext, but passion itself" (1). By beginning with an ellipsis, they reveal that something prior has already taken place; they have made agreements before writing, and they begin by laying out their theoretical premises. The scholars who wrote about the Portuguese nun, we may recall, were obsessed with issues of authority and authorship, with discovering her identity, proving or disproving the authenticity of her letters, with giving the text a father. The three Marias share no such obsession; instead they offer an empathetic vision of the nun's sensibility, her sexuality, her society. What interests them is her passion and its exercise, her *mouvements,* her fate and feelings before and after her abandonment. They are interested, in other words, in imagining precisely those aspects of the nun's experience which J. Hillis Miller overlooks in Ariadne. Just as Rosa Coldfield affirms that there is a "*wisdom . . . a might-have-been which is more true than truth,*" the three Marias aim to reconstruct the nun's predicament and her passion, to make a "mosaic. . . . Letter by letter . . . via the volatile written word. . . . And never has love been such a fiction, and hence absolutely true" (18).

The three Marias' approach to the Portuguese nun revolves around the purposeful transgression of the boundaries of fiction and reality. By maintaining that it is immaterial whether the experience and emotion described in the nun's letters is fictive or real, the three modern women are liberated from the controversies of traditional scholarship about authorship of the original *Portuguese Letters.* They never claim that a real nun wrote authentic letters; they simply write their own

letters to her, letters that are themselves an enigmatic mixture of fiction and reality. (Indeed, one Maria ridicules the efforts of one enterprising male critic who, conjecturing about her life from her art, concludes that she must be sexually frustrated since her poetry is so erotic. Classical scholars, remember, drew similarly erroneous conclusions about Sappho.) As if to repay Barbin for completely effacing the nun in his *avis* to the reader when he published the original *Portuguese Letters,* the three Marias never mention him or Guilleragues. They see their writing as a process of restoration and recuperation: what they reinscribe is the woman in the text. *New Portuguese Letters* is thus a work of criticism as well as of fiction, one that intentionally subverts the conventions of scholarly discourse that so frequently nullify the female. The Marias' theoretical motives for writing are to transform the reader into writer-critic. The fluid roles of writer and reader create a forum for investigations of nature and culture, past and present, desire and the law, the body and language. The writing is a process of searching for the law of their own desires.[4]

They inscribe those desires in part by speaking *to* the nun rather than about her and by transforming her from victim into victor, famous in all the courts of Europe for her celebrated letters. The significance of this departure is enormous, for the popularity of the *Portuguese Letters* through the centuries was based on the conviction—one might almost say the celebration—of the nun's victimization. All of Europe wept for her, but the orgy of tears was aroused by her desolation, her disorder, her disillusionment to the point of delirium and self-destruction. The three Marias evoke this literary history while revising it: the nun, after all, does not destroy herself; instead, she writes. The same distinction, remember, distinguishes Virgil's representation of Dido as victim from Ovid's emphasis on her writing. The three Marias dramatize the nun's dedication to her desire and celebrate her final epiphany: "It was not so much you as my own passion to which I was attached." Where her letters end, theirs begin:

4. Julia Kristeva says the same thing about Roland Barthes in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1980), chap. 4. The theoretical aim and method underlying the three Marias' mode of response to the Portuguese nun can be compared to Roland Barthes's response to Werther in *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments,* trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). In the course of this chapter, I sometimes compare the ideas of the three Marias to those of Barthes simply because readers are more likely to be familiar with his texts than with theirs, but the Marias' text is not merely an "application" of Barthesian theories.

> In my heart of hearts I do not believe in love as a totally genuine feeling apart from my imperative need to invent it (in which case it is real but you are not), I nonetheless refuse to deny it, since it truly does exist in and of itself. . . .
>
> It is not false, then, if I write you:
>
> 'I know that . . . I am also losing myself because I am completely powerless to make you love me.'
>
> And so I suffer, apparently because I love you, but in reality because I am losing the motive that will sustain my passion, which most likely I am more fond of than I am of you. (2–3)

Like so many previous amorous epistolary discourses, the *New Portuguese Letters* are filled with such contradictions and paradoxes. In some fragments, the three Marias address "Sister Mariana of the five letters" directly; in fragments like the one above, however, they write from the place of the nun—a very different procedure from mere projection. It is, in fact, another facet of their theoretical project, for what critics have dismissed as mere naïve projection is actually *production,* based on the ideas that reading is a kind of writing and that the textual reader yields to language as an erotic practice. The three Marias thus enact a poetics of reading that could be called an erotics of reading. Indeed, that is what Roland Barthes does call it later, in another context: the erotic practice of language takes place "whenever the 'literary' Text (the Book) transmigrates into our life, whenever another writing (the Other's writing) succeeds in writing fragments of our own daily lives."[5] The three Marias' project is to write to the imaginary other, Mariane, interweaving their own writing and desire with hers, just as their shared names—Maria, Mariana, Mariane—connect them like the threads on a loom.

Yet the nun's past and even her personality are unsolvable enigmas for the three modern women; they invent possible answers to questions that no reader, no scholar, no critic has ever been able to answer. Why, for instance, was Mariane incarcerated in the convent in the first place? The three Marias (all convent-educated themselves), agree that "a daughter put in a convent is not loved in her house"; why was she not loved? In imagining her family and her relationship with her mother, they compare their own families and conclude that, like Mariane, they are orphans, exiled, unassimilable in the social

5. Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1976), pp. 7–8.

system around them. One Maria laments that a woman can give birth but remain stillborn herself; another grieves that a woman's entire life is "all like the act of giving birth; a solitary, painful, furtive act, hidden from the eyes of everyone in the name of modesty" (155). The legacy passed down from mothers to daughters is self-loathing and suicide, a blood curse that is the result of a mother's disappointment at having brought forth a child like herself: "From our earliest days as suckling babes in diapers we have had no mother; no one ever told us we were wanted and needed for our unique presence. And for this reason too our interchanges with each other—and all friendship between women—has a uterine air about it, the air of a slow, bloody, cruel, incomplete exchange, of an original situation being repeated all over again" (90). They are engaged in repeating a trauma and interpreting a repetition, the same process that marks all discourses of desire. One of their motives for writing is to alter this pattern, to invent the mothers and sisters they have been denied and to create a new model of exchange with women by exchanging letters. Each Maria thus serves as analyst as well as reader-critic for the other two, and all three are seeking to define the "original situation being repeated all over again." The search leads them from critiques of their childhoods to criticism of one another: "We found ourselves touched by . . . the common childhood that we *made it our task* to discover . . . going on from accusing our mothers to accusing each other to our faces, and discovering that we could tolerate this—and that is how we made each of ourselves the mother and the daughter of each of the others, and sisters determined to talk about precisely why we were orphans and suffering and destitute. A new family" (106). Theirs is a theoretical procedure, drawn from psychoanalytic models of transference and countertransference. In the language of psychoanalysis, one would say that the three Marias practice the Imaginary in full awareness that they are doing so. They purposely shift roles from analyst to analysand repeatedly, so that no single woman becomes the "authority" on the other two. Their own image for the process is an *open parabola*—a plane curve that is the locus of a moving point, equidistant from a fixed point, or focus, and a fixed straight line—the image suggests the dynamic relationship between three shifting entities, three bodies that want to remain open to experimentation, to suggestion, to analysis, to each other. Their experiment in reinventing mothers and sisters is far from sentimental, for they see how much damage has been done by the mystiques of marriage, pregnancy, and motherhood.

Each Maria, moreover, is a critic as well as a reader of the theories of the other two. They disagree about the uses and value of the women's movement; about the causes, consequences, and remedies for patriarchy; about the solutions to women's misery in the modern world. Their motives, their methods, their writing styles all differ as well: one is lyrical, emotional, erotic; another is incisive and analytic; the third is detached and ironic.

They call their process of writing, their final product, and their relationship a trialectic in order to disrupt all dichotomies, all binary oppositions that, as we have seen before, are so often exploited to define and circumscribe woman, desire, discourse. Their aim is to block the reconciliation of opposites, to resist synthesis, unity, and closure. In addition to shifting the roles of analyst and analysand, they subvert the hierarchies of authorship and mastery by not signing their letters. To write without authority is also to write without the authorization of scholars and critics; it is to write "unprotectedly." They also write without the exclusive endorsement of any one language system (Marxism, feminism, or psychoanalysis). Instead, their collaborative effort allegorizes the process of reading by which woman as critic is transformed into critic as woman writer: she leaves parents, family, and authorities behind and speaks in her own voice, but "unprotectedly," "without authority," literally without signature.[6] To describe the result in the language of transference: "The primary effect of writing is registered in the writer—one writes *for oneself* as a kind of ethical exercise."[7] With that model in mind, the three Marias return to the Portuguese nun, enabling us to see her for the first time, illuminating the significance of her final radical declaration: "I write more for myself than for you."

6. In deference to their political motives for not signing their letters, I have purposely chosen to focus on the text as a "trialectic," rather than discussing each Maria's individual contribution and identifying her separately from the collective.

7. Gregory L. Ulmer, "The Discourse of the Imaginary," *Diacritics* 10:1 (March 1980), 61–75. See also Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Anthony Wilden (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1968). Jane Gallop's *The Daughter's Seduction: Feminism and Psychoanalysis* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982) examines the relation of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to the theories of (among others), Hélène Cixous, Catherine Clément, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray. Since I refer to these women below, I must note at the outset that these French theorists by no means all share the same theoretical methods and beliefs. An analysis of their differences, however, lies outside the scope of this book, which is limited to a general demonstration of the relevance of recent French, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories to *The Three Marias* within the context of amorous epistolary discourse.

The result of the dual focus on their own oscillating impressions and on the Portuguese nun are letters that are simultaneously topical and timeless. The Marias subvert authorial mastery by simply arranging their letters chronologically, leaving them unsigned but dated at the bottom from 1 March to 25 October 1971. One of the functions of amorous narrative, we recall from the *Heroides,* is the invention of one time scheme in terms of another; the dates at the bottom of the three Marias' letters are frequently juxtaposed with opening dates ranging from 1669 to 1800 to 1940 to the present, marking significant political moments in history and personal moments in women's lives. One result of such temporal juxtaposition is that the letters are timely and polemical. One Maria notes that sexual liberation in Portugal merely means that pornography and media images of violence against women are now rampant. But the same letters are historical, for that pornography, that glorification of crimes of passion, reached its apogee during the reigns of Louis XIV and of the Philips in Spain (114–15). The invention of one time scheme in terms of another makes the *New Portuguese Letters* not just topical and historical but timeless. For woman, the personal is the political. That point is conveyed, paradoxically, by demonstrating how little her condition has changed through history, for even if man rebels against the colonizer, his personal arrangements, his rights as master of women and children are never challenged, never disturbed. In one letter, a niece of the nun's, "Dona Maria Ana, born around 1800," asks: "What woman is not a nun, sacrificed, self-sacrificing, without a life of her own, sequestered from the world? What change has there been in the life of women through the centuries? In Aunt Mariana's time women did embroidery or spun or wove or cooked, obeyed their husband's will, became pregnant, had abortions, or . . . sometimes died in childbed. . . . a king of France has been sent to the guillotine . . . the United States of America has gained its independence. . . . [but] what has changed in the life of women?" (154). Thus each letter is the site of eternal recurrence, a reiteration of Ariadne's asking not just what she is doomed to suffer but what all women are doomed to suffer. Each "new" Portuguese letter is simultaneously a testament to the personal and the political, to type and to history, to the timeless and the polemical. The same effect is achieved by giving many of the correspondents, like the niece, the name Maria Ana, or a variation of that name, or by marking the "coincidence" of the three Marias' shared bond with that name. Reading backward and forward through history, the three modern

women discover not their differences from their great-great-grandmothers but their similarities. The reliance on resemblance, on like recognizing like, is one of the distinguishing features of the discourse of the Imaginary.[8] What they record is a polyphony of female voices that had been silenced, sepulchered, and forgotten. Just as Clarissa concludes her discourse by proclaiming, "I am Nobody's," the three Marias invent an entire female genealogy that celebrates woman as disorder, as scandal, as marginal; it is

> a lineage opposed to the forgetting and the diluting, the rapid absorption of a scandal within the peace of the family circle and the reigning social order.
>
> If men create families and lineages in order to ensure that their names and property are passed along to their descendants, is it not logical for women to use their nameless, propertyless line of descent to perpetuate scandal, to pass along what is unacceptable?
>
> Like religious orders in essence. (153)

The three Marias also "perpetuate scandal" by demonstrating that discourse is what they fight to obtain and that the fight is waged in discourse; their analysis of language revolves around the issues of male domination, male narcissism, and the dichotomies of patriarchal logic. Just as Clarissa protested against being a cipher to give Lovelace significance, the three Marias condemn men for dividing themselves "into men and masters. But all men are masters of women. In the houses of masters, of men and of cavaliers, we give them their meaning, for they define themselves by their opposites" (66).

The three Marias expose the contradictions, the injustice, the repression inherent in the civil and ecclesiastical definitions of woman by including fragments from such documents as the Portuguese penal code, which gives husbands the right to murder adulterous wives for insulting their honor "with the full sanction of the law, with the agreement, the approbation of an entire society that complacently condones this crime." A wife, however, only has legal recourse if her husband's concubine lives under the same roof, and even then, she may not act in the name of her honor, but only in the name of "established morality" (276). (Ironically, these were the very grounds upon which the three Marias were prosecuted—they outraged "established morals.") The three Marias are the latest of the long line of

8. Ulmer, p. 68.

heroines of amorous discourse from the *Heroides* forward who dedicate themselves to the inscription not just of desire but of honor. It was in the name of honor, one recalls, that Heloise proclaimed her preference for being Abelard's whore over being Augustus' wife, that Clarissa wrote her will, that Jane Eyre refused Rochester's seduction, and that Mariane dedicated herself to her passion. The three Marias defiantly assert their right to action in defense of "our name or our wrath or our jealousy or our honor, the defense of which is a right granted only to the man" (276–77). That assertion marks the culmination of one dominant strain of amorous epistolary discourse which we have traced from Ovid: its relation to courts, trials, evidence, and legalities. Like Clarissa, the three Marias expose the codes responsible for the reduction of woman to "a legal fiction"; instead, they give her an individual name and a legal identity, reinscribing her in the law books and the book of life. No longer will they stand as objects of status and exchange among men, and never again will honor merely be a matter of male property rights. The reclamation of honor is thus a subversive assertion of self-possession and self-worth. Besides the penal code, the three women expose numerous other codes that have repressed women through the ages, defiantly challenging the systematic depiction of woman as evil, as disorder, and analyzing how such negative images of women have been perpetuated out of fear, loathing, and ignorance. The vastness of the compendium, which ranges from a *Dictionary of Sorcery* to the Bible, illustrates once again the extent to which woman is a cipher in patriarchal culture, the quintessential blank page, waiting to be filled by man's negative image of her as "a castrated man . . . Eve . . . the virgin-mother, a witch, the devoted, self-sacrificing mother, the vampire . . . man's plot of earth . . . Adam's rib, man making himself the mother of the woman to reorganize her very creation out of chaos" (87, 89). The three Marias repudiate these roles; each is "a woman ridding herself of the image of the woman created by men" (35). One Maria helps the other to stop being "trapped by the myth of the male" (112); another repudiates "any man who creates a false image of me" (74).

One strategy for surmounting the definitions imposed from the outside is to write from the place of the other. Just as Ovid experimented with "writing like a woman," the three Marias experiment with "brazenly stripping ourselves of our habits . . . and riding life bareback, as though we were males" (17). They thus enact what the original Portuguese nun imagined when she took everything the

chevalier did for herself.[9] It is an act of appropriation and exposure, a deliberate mimicking of the attitudes, obsessions, oppressions of the colonizer. Speaking from the place of chevaliers, husbands, and lovers through the ages, the three Marias stage the ordeal of abandonment as colonization, for the letters they invent come from men fighting in colonial wars in Europe, Angola, or Africa, addressing the women they leave behind. In one fragment, the chevalier recollects his conquest of Mariane, his victory over "the battlefield of [her] body" (105). In another, he advises her "to accept the world that has been forced upon you and mold yourself to it, inasmuch as there is no possible escape for you" (57). In others, husbands absent for twelve years write letters home, blithely describing new mistresses, new families they have engendered, while their Portuguese wives remain faithful, dressed in widow's weeds.

Just as Rosa Coldfield's narrative exposed all the shibboleths of such abstractions as virginity, one of the primary objectives of the three Marias is the "deflowering of myths." Like the loss of virginity, it is a bloody process, a necessary penetration of stereotypical clichés. In some fragments, the copybook exercises of little girls are included to show, as in *The Turn of the Screw,* how early the "necessary" job of indoctrination begins. The Marias' strategy is to defuse the cumulative power of these myths by making travesties of them, exposing them as the fictions that they have been all along: the devouring mothers, frustrated spinsters, crimes of passion, sex-as-death, woman as goddess and demon. It is a "quiet, stealthy work of undermining" (23), carried out by miming the dominant images the culture disseminates.

Despite substantive differences between Mexico and Portugal, Oc-

9. Curiously, a collection of tales by Joyce Carol Oates that appeared about the same time as the Marias' text is another example of writing from the place of the other. *The Poisoned Kiss and Other Stories from the Portuguese* begins with the assertion: "The tales in this collection are translated from an imaginary work, *Azulejos,* by an imaginary author, Fernandes de Briao. To the best of my knowledge he has no existence and has never existed, though without his very real guidance I would not have had access to the mystical "Portugal" of the stories—nor would I have been compelled to recognize the authority of a world-view quite antithetical to my own." Oates signs the collection, "Fernandes/Joyce Carol Oates." Her strategy thus reverses the procedure of Claude Barbin in *Lettres portugaises;* where he effaces the nun to authenticate his "translation," Oates invents a male author to give her text authenticity and to dramatize that antithetical perspectives are the result not just of national boundaries but of literary inventions of gender. See Fernandes/Joyce Carol Oates, *The Poisoned Kiss and Other Stories from the Portuguese* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett, 1971), p. 10.

tavio Paz's analysis of the Mexican man's view of woman validates the view that the Marias condemn in Portuguese men: woman, Paz writes, is "an instrument, sometimes of masculine desires, sometimes of the ends assigned to her by morality, society and the law . . . as a 'repository' for certain values. . . . In a world made in man's image, woman is only a reflection of masculine will and desire. . . . Womanhood, unlike manhood, is never an end in itself. . . . [Woman] has no will of her own. Her body is asleep and only comes really alive when someone awakens her. She is an answer rather than a question, a vibrant and easily worked material that is shaped by the imagination and sensuality of the male."[10] Woman is thus the conquest even of those who are themselves colonized, whether in Mexico or in Portugal. Men in love seek not a face but a mirror; it is that narcissism, that mystification and manipulation that the Marias set about to dismantle.

One of their methods is to speak of the silence that enshrouds women. Writes one Maria, "Let no one tell me that silence gives consent, because whoever is silent dissents" (291). All three writers describe the experience of colonization as being stripped of language, of positive self-images, and systematically deprived of a viable cultural community in which to create those images. Even the smallest communal effort of women is perceived as a potent threat, as the reactions of men to the trio's project reveals: one tells them it "might be the death of us"; another says, "What monsters you three are!"; a third accuses them of lesbianism. They receive vicious letters and death threats in the mail. Yet they persevere, coming through the process of writing to understand how literally "the law itself is at stake" in preventing transgressions of roles, prohibiting the subversion of cultural myths, and fostering division and competition among women. They note that, although even "a black extremist is now respectable . . . a feminist is slandered; she is someone raising the frightening specter of what has never been put into words, a trouble-maker, a ridiculous creature" (90–91). For the three Marias, the revolt lies in the telling, putting into words "what terrifies us . . . just as we must combat all the frightening, monstrous, confusing charges that others will levy against us" (90). The government's reaction after the book was published demonstrates just how potent any group of women, however

10. Octavio Paz, *The Labyrinth of Solitude: Life and Thought in Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 37.

small, is perceived to be, for Monique Wittig suggests that one woman writer would not have been treated so harshly, but that three women united to denounce the condition of women constitutes a veritable organization, a "menace to the established order."[11]

They dedicate themselves not just to imagining a different future but to making it a reality by raising a new generation to respond differently to women. They speak frankly of their rage as they watch their sons become "little tyrants" when they discover how society diminishes the importance of mothers, sisters, and all women. As mothers, they vow to break the chains of tradition by treating their sons as "people and not phalluses of our males" (70). They vow never to live through their sons; sons "will never be our way of asserting ourselves or our only work in the world: we shall refuse to allow them to be the bridges of our longings or our dissension" (83).

Masks and Veils, Miming and Mimesis

Instead, the bridge is writing. As in previous amorous epistolary discourses, the effect the Marias are striving for is *aleatory*; they want the text to be a fluid interplay that, rather than fortifying a fixed social and sexual identity, dissolves it. The text also dissolves the hierarchies of active writer and passive reader, which is why the verb *exercício* recurs in a variety of contexts. The reflexive form connotes drilling, training; *exercício* also means to influence, to wield power, to exercise, as in gymnastics. The text is thus an active exertion, an acrobatic exercise, a performance that involves many postures of passion. *Exercício* thus parallels Barthes's *figures*: "The word is to be understood, not in its rhetorical sense, but rather in its gymnastic or choreographic acceptation . . . the body's gesture caught in action and not contemplated in repose: the body of athletes, orators, statues . . . the lover at grips with his figures . . . struggles in a kind of lunatic sport . . . 'phrases,' like an orator . . . is caught, stuffed into a role, like a statue. The figure is the lover at work."[12] The three Marias similarly perform dazzling feats while "exercising." Like the original Portuguese nun, they discover ingenious ways to arouse desire by writing letters and to arouse letters by rehearsing the literature of

11. Wittig and Le Garrec, p. 8.
12. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 3–4.

desire. They mime the roles women have been stuffed into, discarding one mask after another and imagining new roles with dizzying speed. Their postures pose a challenge to the values of unity, consistency, and clarity. What they posit as an alternative is simultaneously a renewal and an elusive revision of the Ovidian rhetorical ideal of the decentered self—capricious and changeable, equivocal and equivocating, full of masks and poses, playfully subverting the hierarchies of high seriousness and mimesis. Their theories of the relation of the body to knowledge, to self, to style lead directly back to the Ovidian strategies of doubleness, duplicity, and dissimulation.

Octavio Paz helps us see the political implications, for in analyzing the Mexican's reaction to successive invasions, he describes dissimulation and mimicry as strategies of rebellion against colonization by noting that

> dissimulation . . . is almost habitual with us. It does not increase our passivity; on the contrary, it demands an active inventiveness and must reshape itself from one moment to another. We tell lies for the mere pleasure of it, like all imaginative peoples, but we also tell lies to hide ourselves and to protect ourselves from intruders. . . . The dissembler pretends to be someone he is not. His role requires constant improvisation, a steady forward progress across shifting sands. Every moment he must remake, re-create, modify the personage he is playing. . . . In its most radical forms dissimulation becomes mimicry. . . . Mimicry is a change of appearance rather than of nature.[13]

In earlier amorous discourses, the kinds of strategies the Marias use were consciously rhetorical; here they are political and theoretical as well, based on an attempt to overcome the "repression of the feminine" in language by acting it out, performing a "playful rehearsal," in the words of Luce Irigaray. By mimicking the roles the culture assigns them, they expose the underlying absurdity of the roles. That their identification with the Portuguese nun involves more than mere projection can perhaps best be demonstrated by seeing how they exploit mimesis to expose its limitations. As Luce Irigaray explains:

> To play with mimesis, is, therefore, for a woman, to attempt to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without letting herself be simply reduced to it. It is to resubmit herself . . . to "ideas," notably about her, elaborated on/by masculine logic, but in order to make "visible," by an effect of playful repetition, what should have remained

13. Paz, pp. 40, 43–44.

> hidden: the recovery of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It is also to "unveil" [*dévoiler*] the fact that, if women mime so well, they do not simply reabsorb themselves in this function. They also remain elsewhere.[14]

Implicit in every discourse of desire in this book is the same impulse to make the hidden visible, to recover something that has been repressed. Clarissa's purpose in substituting feminine pronouns in the Book of Job certainly involves the recovery of the feminine in language. Indeed, from Heloise to Rosa Coldfield, each heroine initially seems to submit to the tyranny of masculine logic, yet she recovers her own place in the process of writing and redefines herself. Each, moreover, in some sense remains elsewhere: Heloise refuses to be circumscribed by Abelard's tyranny; Clarissa's crypt overflows its bounds; Rosa affirms that nothing is ever settled, that there is no all, no finish.

The three Marias do not, however, merely celebrate "the feminine mystique"; nor do they endorse the "essentialist" theories of some of their French feminist contemporaries about woman's nature. Instead, they parody the stereotypes of woman, ironically miming masculine logic, unveiling all the habits by which culture cloisters them. They deflower the myths that have kept women virginal, childish, frozen in time, forgotten in history. Like woman, love itself has been relegated to the margins, blighted by myths of inevitable separation, unfulfillment, and death. One Maria laments, "Abelard is castrated, and Tristan is forever separated from Isolde, and all the myths of love describe this relation as something forbidden and unfulfilled, and all love stories are stories of suicides" (86).

Like previous amorous discourses, this one offers the alternative of another logic, one that is an affirmation of surrender without destruction and domination, of loving as a way of knowing. Having unveiled the causes, the consequences, and the pervasiveness of their colonization, each Maria discovers that until she finds a means of self-possession she will never surmount the self-loathing that the culture engenders. Before they can love others, they must learn self-love; this

14. Luce Irigaray, *Ce sex qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), p. 25, cited and trans. in Mary Jacobus, "The Question of Language: Men of Maxims and *The Mill on the Floss*," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Winter 1981), 207–22. Just as the three Marias are familiar with Lacanian psychoanalysis and the theories of French women, French feminists demonstrated their enthusiasm for *The Three Marias* with a reading for their legal defense fund in Paris on 25 Oct. 1973. The three Marias had sent *New Portuguese Letters* to Christiane Rochefort in March 1973 because they admired her work.

is what the trialectic enables them to attempt. In forging a new family, they recombine in novel ways the fundamental characteristics of amorous discourse, for their emotions toward one another run the gamut from love to hate, passion to compassion. One wants to leave the group because love is too demanding; another is wounded by the hostility of the third; in short, the same motifs of rivalry, jealousy, fear, possessiveness that mark other discourses mark their letters, too. Yet the act of writing becomes a fluid, volatile process of continual metamorphosis—of ideas, forms, modes, styles, passions.

The trialectic method allows for continual exploration and immediate response, for the exploration in writing of woman's role, in Hélène Cixous' words, as the

> outcast [who] has never ceased to hear the resonance of fore-language. She lets the other language speak—the language of 1,000 tongues which knows neither enclosure nor death. To life she refuses nothing. Her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible. When id is ambiguously uttered—the wonder of being several—she doesn't defend herself against these unknown women whom she's surprised at becoming, but derives pleasure from this gift of alterability. I am spacious, singing flesh, on which is grafted no one knows which I, more or less human, but alive because of transformation.[15]

The three Marias put all these elements into practice, exploring the women that they are becoming through the process of writing, celebrating the human gift of metamorphosis that has been such a marked characteristic of amorous discourse since Ovid. Recalling the sensuousness of Sappho's lyrics, the flesh itself seems to sing, and the idea of grafting rather than fathering once again subverts the notion of a primary source engendered in a father-text. The last line is particularly telling, for transformation is not mere play but a necessary strategy of survival; alterability is what keeps one alive. The three Marias draw on the same recurrent images that mark previous amorous discourses: links in a chain, threads spun, webs woven; the multiple images of interdependence, indeed, recall Judith Sutpen's loom: "All this linked in a chain, each of us intermingling and trying on

15. Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1:4 (Summer 1976), 875–93, rpr. in *New French Feminisms*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), p. 260.

forms of the others. . . . Passion threatening to become the same thing in another form (that is the nature of passion): that is how the pact was sealed. . . . The time of discipline began. Each of us the pupil of whichever one of us could best teach what each of us needed to learn" (106–7). They thus combine the educational strain of the epistolary genre with the erotic strain, for each Maria becomes mentor and pupil in a constantly shifting relation that suspends all hierarchies and metamorphoses continuously, like passion itself. They "play with mimesis" through laughter too; one laughs while sending her lover a sex manual; the second composes a Beckettian dialogue in capital letters, the third composes games, puzzles, anagrams. The trace of Ovidian stylistics remains intact, for the three Marias delight in doubleness and dissimulation, in parodic laughter, and in sexual and textual transgressions. They indeed race back and forth (*dis-cursus*: to run to and fro) from sexual pleasures to textual ones, recalling how in their "comradeship . . . we did not weave on anyone else's loom, certainly not on that of any male, since we are fond of men (very fond, in fact), but never in secret, and only if they are not expert horsemen . . . and in the end we laughed. Oh, sisters, how we laughed!" (332). This laughter demonstrates that discourses of desire are not mere exercises in sorrow, a ceaseless counting of beads on the rosary of grief and loss. Instead, desire is celebrated with gusto, irreverence, and joy. Laughter is also a theoretical and political strategy; it demystifies the male, demolishing the distance of time and space that his myths and epics have engendered. The three Marias explicitly make the epic pretensions of national glory, Portuguese machismo, a heroic past of omnipotent patriarchs the butt of their laughter. In contrast to the reverential distance of epic, the women subject these pretensions—and men—to a minute scrutiny. In some fragments, this is a loving scrutiny, as when one Maria sketches the body of a naked man sleeping. At other times, however, particularly when man views his body as a weapon, a source of power and intimidation, the three Marias defuse the threat. The process of demystification reveals that most men are ordinary; many, mediocre. (The original Portuguese nun, remember, concludes her letters by revealing all the chevalier's *méchantes qualités*; in one of *The Three Marias*' fragments, the women imagine a man confronting his own mediocrity.) The laughter is sometimes cheerful, sometimes annihilating; the aim is a comical operation of dismemberment of the phallus as signifier ("a pocket sig-

nifier," says Hélène Cixous in an essay appropriately entitled, "The Laugh of the Medusa").[16] The three Marias laugh at male posturing—their bull fights, their automobile races, their wrestling matches: "O my Portugal of males concealing their impotence, copulators, stallions at stud, such bad lovers, in such a tearing hurry in bed, their attention entirely devoted to demonstrating their virility" (84). Laughter is thus an integral part of their poetics and their politics. They have grafted onto the original *Portuguese Letters* their own pressing preoccupations, confronting political and ideological conflicts in a polyphonic female chorus. This polyphony demonstrates once more that the enterprise is far more complex than mere projection of their desires onto the Portuguese nun; the text is a multifaceted production of ambitious proportions. They mimic, they "play with mimesis" by assimilating numerous genres and styles in their letters, parodying "higher" genres that take these *ficciones* seriously. All these characteristics—the love of miming, the refusal to glorify, the irreverence towards national heroes, the exposure of epic as fraud, the valorization of the present over the past, the personal over the public, the individual over the state—lead directly back to Ovid. Julia Kristeva has placed these traits in a tradition older than Ovid; following Bakhtin, she relates them to Menippean satire, which she describes as

> a festival of cruelty, but also a political act. It transmits no fixed message except that itself should be "the eternal joy of becoming," and it exhausts itself in the act and in the present. . . . the dialogism of Menippean and carnivalesque discourses, translating a logic of relations and analogy rather than of substance and inference, stands against Aristotelian logic. From within the very interior of formal logic, even while skirting it, Menippean dialogism contradicts it and points it towards other forms of thought. Menippean discourse develops in times of opposition against Aristotelianism, and writers of polyphonic novels seem to disapprove of the very structures of offical thought founded on formal logic.[17]

In amorous epistolary discourse, one finds the same disapproval in Ovid's resistance to Virgil, in Heloise's resistance to Abelard, in Rosa Coldfield's "alien" discourse. Kristeva's description further illuminates the theoretical foundations of the three Marias' experiment. The intertextual dynamics between the original letters and the *New Portuguese Letters* depends on a logic of relations and analogy. The

16. Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," p. 261.
17. Kristeva, *Desire in Language,* pp. 84–85.

strategy allegorizes reading into partial illuminations, fragmentary insights, open-ended discoveries about writing and desire, about honor and "established morals," about the colonizing and cloistering of woman. The dynamics of the three women themselves similarly rely on a logic of relations and analogy. They explore commonalities without glossing over substantive differences, without resorting to some generalized, "politically correct" attitude about feminism or femininity. Indeed, they subscribe to no predetermined theory of the feminine any more than of the masculine; they would, I think, reject theories of the French feminists who valorize woman's feminine "essence," for they would see such essentialist arguments as another repression, another mystique that mythicizes woman, confining her to the very roles that they have set out to expose through parody. Their masks and poses create critiques of genre, gender, and class, for they even go so far as to critique their own privileged class status, drawing attention to the vast differences in women on various parts of the globe and to the enormity of the suffering of most women all over the world. That global perspective also mitigates against any formulation of a "universal feminine." What is effaced when one argues that women are universally alike are all the distinguishing differences that make their suffering profound. For example, while celebrating the "universal" experience of motherhood, one can too easily ignore the substantive differences in prenatal care and infant mortality rates that distinguish the so-called "feminine condition" of middle-class American and European women from that of poor women in Ethiopia. Says one Maria: "I consider it an urgent task to dismantle the mystique of pregnancy . . . Let our dialectic of women-born-and-raised-in-the-urban-middle-class-of-this-society-whose-values-we-are-all-too-familiar-with-and-hence-sympathize-with-all-exploited-classes-and-groups-with-the-heart-felt-feeling-of-belonging-to-the-exploited-group-'women' come out in print then" (316).

What is erased, in short, by erasing differences among women is history, injustice, and politics. This Maria explicitly exposes the class biases that underlie the essentialist theories of the feminine. She sees how easy it is to use language to co-opt any political action, and she protests against the ways in which even the project in which she is engaged can be defused by reducing each writer to the category of middle-class woman. She addresses the traps that make language a refuge from political realities and action when she protests that aesthetic style can be a refuge, yet she simultaneously criticizes her own

tendency to be pedantic. In this manner, the trialectic method prevents any one of the three Marias from taking over the project; all points of view, all "isms" and "ologies" are continually being decentered, whether they involve the feminine or feminism.

Disjointed Letters, Long Farewells

Every act of protest is also an affirmation—of an alternative, of another logic, of an *elsewhere.* The three Marias reveal in their final letters more than anywhere else just how committed they are to open-endedness as an artistic and ideological orientation, for they reject resolution and closure. Despite the tensions that the collaborative experiment produced, despite many disappointments and frustrations with writing, they write one farewell letter after another. One Maria commences her "first final letter . . . probably very long and disjointed" by confessing: "This is good-bye, my dear ones, I've been trying to tell you so for two letters now, writing you without having any news from you, yet a further proof of the spitefulness and arrogance involved in the act of writing" (320). In farewell after farewell, they illuminate the "mourning that is language."[18] It unites their solitary lives momentarily but does not alleviate either their loneliness or their longing. Therefore, every single discourse of desire resists closure. The heroine continues to try to record "the *might-have-been* that is more true than truth"; she always envisions another letter that will express another facet of her desire. Just as the Portuguese nun anticipates writing another letter to follow her fifth (and final) one, the three Marias describe in their final letters all the others they had in mind. One meaning of this volubility is certainly the "eternal joy of becoming."

One of the Marias envisions the *topos* of utopia when she imagines writing a love letter to the man of the future,

> the man who will eventually come to be. . . . It is necessary to cure the man; to tell him both that his body is not sterile and that it is not only his phallus that is creative; to tell him that it is not always necessary to erect things in order to create, and that creating first and then building and

18. See Sharon Cameron, *Lyric Time: Dickinson and the Limits of Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1979), chap. 4.

raising can cease to be a woman's privilege alone. He must be told many things, but *there is no way to say them yet that I know of.* (313, my italics)[19]

And this indeed is the crucial discovery of every single discourse of desire: there is no way to articulate desire, for it is prior to language. The yearning to articulate it, in speech or in writing, is the desire to express the inexpressible. ("It seems to me," says the Portuguese nun, "that I am doing the greatest possible wrong to the feelings of my heart in trying to make them clear in writing to you. How happy I should be if you could guess them by the violence of your own!" [353].) All language is self-reflexive; it always contains the seeds of its own critique; it is the site of struggle. What makes the language of amorous discourse distinctive, however, is that in every discourse of desire a lament like the Portuguese nun's is inscribed; every single heroine is engaged in the act of writing, but paradoxically, what she writes, in one guise or another, is, "Words fail me." Because desire lies between the needs to which the body responds and the demands that speech articulates, it is always a gap in language that cannot be filled, and consequently, every discourse of desire is a critique of language: it cannot encapsulate, enclose, sum up desire—much less satisfy it. Nostalgia and revenge, expiation and exorcism must be obsessively reiterated in amorous discourse because they reveal the heroine's longing and frustration not just toward the absent lover but toward language. In the absence of the beloved's touch of recognition, "revenge cannot compensate nor love assuage." This paradox illuminates the profound ambivalence toward language in every discourse of desire, an ambivalence, moreover, that is as decentered ideologically as it is emotionally. Since dialogism implies a radical decentering of the belief systems language institutionalizes, the result is a decentering that is simultaneously political and psychic. Dialogism gives amorous discourses their characteristic duplicity, dubiousness, and despair about the efficacy of language. Ovid, in looking back at Sappho, is simultaneously looking away from Virgil, from Rome, from Latin, just as the three Marias, in looking back at Mariane, are looking away from Portugal, from Portuguese, addressing their mothers with

19. The idea of curing man of destructiveness and sterility and teaching him that all power does not reside in the phallus, recalls the image of the Civil War in *Absalom, Absalom!* as the fever that cured the sickness of slavery, upon which man's sense of potency depended. See page 266 above.

the vengeful words, "All of my imaginings have been cast in a language that is not my mother tongue and far from maternal (and thus I reject you, I free myself from you)" (53).

But while the heroine mourns its limitations, she acknowledges that language is the only medium she has. Writing, moreover, may not succeed in expressing, much less fulfilling, desire, but it does augment desire: "My passion increases with every moment," writes the Portuguese nun—meaning, of course, every moment of writing. What is more, other texts can be sources of consolation by reinforcing, repeating, signifying desire. Other texts, in fact, arouse desire: the *Portuguese Letters* are a fictional discourse inspired both by the *Heroides* and by the authentic letters of Heloise; *The Turn of the Screw* renews and revises Jane Eyre's desire for the master; the three Marias transcribe the desire of the Portuguese nun. Desire circulates, and therefore there is no exit from language. Nor is there any entrance, origin, original text of desire, for as we have seen, behind Heloise stands Ovid, behind Ovid stands Sappho, and Sapphic lyrics are testaments of infinite transcribability. No better example, indeed, can be found of the process by which later readers must supplement, embroider, embellish; they must, in other words, fill in the blanks in the worn papyrus. Perhaps it is precisely because the worn papyrus is so enigmatic, so fragmentary that it arouses such passionate speculation. (One thinks again of cryptograms that only take on their full dimensions when they are in a lost language, and of the obsessive embroidering on exhumed letters that resemble Chocktaw or Sanskrit in *Absalom, Absalom!*) Sapphic lyrics are the opposite of a totality, a symbolic unity that conveys univocal meaning through the ages; they survive instead as fragmentary testaments to the impulse to narrate, to supplement, to fill in the blanks.

Paradoxically, amorous discourse may arouse the writer and seduce subsequent readers, but the lover to whom it is addressed is never persuaded to return. Despite its futility, it is nonetheless an affirmation. The three Marias explore this paradox by alternately asking "What can words do?" and "What can love do?" It is precisely the *correspondence* between the two, between a mode of loving and a mode of writing, that they address in their long, disjointed, and disruptive farewell letters:

> one of us ever ventured beyond the edge of many things, and above imply hovered at the edge of this wild and solitary thing that love- g is, which is not a thing that depends merely on circumstances, a

> thing that can be done only if and when the relations between men, the relations between men and women, the social-ethical-economic circumstances that determine them change, but a thing involving art, a thing involving a way of responding by asking questions—love in short, a permanent proof by the absurd that it is possible to say *yes*. (320–21)

The letter enacts its own affirmation, for it is itself a response to the preoccupations of one of the other two Marias with the social and political implications of the relations between men and women. Each woman responds to the other two by asking questions, anticipating responses, and altering her own responses accordingly. The text is a methodological field that exposes its tensions and contradictions and invites deconstruction in the process of reconstructing the original nun's desire. One thinks again of the *Heroides*, for by unweaving by night what she weaves by day, the heroine disrupts resolutions, defers both pleasure and death, and keeps the circuit of desire open. Just as Mariane encourages her lover at the end of one letter to continue to make her suffer, the three Marias disrupt closure in their concluding letters by disowning all that went before. One "disruptively break[s] away; to hell with the whole thing; I'm fed up" (317); yet that is not her final word. Another mourns the death of writer friends, and of "talent and capabilities [that] will die before your eyes, as this book is dying. Different and separated. Unless we have loved and hated more passionately than is indicated by what we have written and done, much more, each one awaiting the other two, isn't that true, sisters? Isn't that true, brother writers and readers?" (323). The question reminds us once again of the fluid boundaries between the readers within the text and readers of the text, for the three Marias invite, incite, arouse the reader to embroider on their text, as readers embroidered Heloise's letters, as Lady Bradshaigh collaborated on *Clarissa*, as they themselves revise the *Portuguese Letters* and reenvision Mariane. With each other and with the nun, their method involves a way of reading and responding by asking questions.

To evoke a response, after all, is one aim of all amorous epistolary discourse. One asks the beloved questions in the implicit hope and faith that the beloved will answer, not just once but again and again. But whether answers are forthcoming or not, to respond by asking questions is a strategy that makes all discourses of desire allegories of reading, for the questions preclude closure, finality, resolution. So Heloise addresses question after question about food, wine, the

bodies of nuns to Abelard, and the Portuguese nun, knowing that she takes pleasure in doing so, asks if she is obliged to describe all her diverse desires. One may view the allusion to the things the three Marias never ventured beyond as a confession of failure, but it is also a celebration of the things that remain unsettled, unassimilated; love is permanent proof of sorts, but only of the absurd, of the possible. It is thus an affirmation of all that is paradoxically indelible and most transitory: the trace of the body's touch, memory, desire. Desire, discourse, and woman herself are relegated to the margins, subjected to extreme solitude, exiled; the three Marias see their experiment as an exercise that resembles

> rivers [that] must drain if the sea is to be cleansed for us women who are polluted by the flow of time and words, driven out of so many places, or left behind by men. . . .
>
> Let us hope that our hands will not be crippled or our bodies shattered . . . that those who love us for what we are and do will not divide themselves by dividing us. This is what is meant by poverty and chastity. (44–45)

The production of writing, then, is what makes the three Marias come to comprehend the meaning of a nun's vocation; its essential solitude, sacrifice, sacredness. Something that is affirmed but not seen, believed by thousands, but forsaken in modern times—what is theirs but a confession of faith, like Heloise's faith in Abelard? That faith may not be completely communicable in language, but language is all one has. To describe the indescribable, to describe passion (passion-as-suffering as well as passionate love), despite its relegation to the margins of the conceptual universe—isn't it this impulse that unites saints, mystics, nuns?[20]

From Heloise to Mariane, from the passion-as-suffering of Clarissa to the devious, intricate weaving of Rosa Coldfield, amorous discourses are affirmations of faith in a might-have-been, an elsewhere, a possible, a yes. Discourses of desire are thus always a *tissu de greffes,* a fabric of grafts, in which something is always added on, borrowed from something else, embroidered.[21] From Sappho's Eros as weaver of tales to Belfour's embroidering on the text of *Clarissa,* amorous heroines take pleasure, as the three Marias say, in interweaving desire

20. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse,* pp. 231–34.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination,* trans. and introd. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 355–58.

in writing. Punning on *abandon, habit,* and *distaff,* they celebrate their "voracious hungers . . . at last . . . unveiled. . . . we are stitching ourselves other garments for our happiness and abandon. For abandon is another supposed habit, or a right traditionally granted us, a distaff for spinning the threads of our pleasure . . . letter by letter" (18).

The duplicitous meaning of *abandoned* as "left behind" or (sexually) "let loose," as wanting or wanton, is one of the many multilingual puns—like habit, distaff, pleasure—that make language such a fertile source of pleasure for the three Marias. Their shared sense of exile, their defiance of both the authorities and the authorized languages that have abandoned them commit the three women to the dream of a common language that they are in the process of inventing. Significantly, they call the original Portuguese nun a philosopher; it was indeed as a philosophy that her letters were discussed in the literary salons of seventeenth-century Paris. The formula of *Questions of Love* was a favorite method for analyzing the passions in the salons frequented by La Rochefoucauld, Racine, Guilleragues, Mme de Sévigné, Mme de Lafayette, and Bussy-Rabutin. (It was Bussy-Rabutin, remember, whose *tissu de greffes* made his translated paraphrase of Heloise's letters resemble the *Lettres portugaises* so closely.)[22] One might go so far as to say that the *Questions of Love* provided the theory, *Lettres portugaises* the practice. The first text, for example, asks if it is better to love or to avoid embracing love at all costs, to which the Portuguese nun responds by asking: "What would I do if my heart were not filled with so much hate and so much love? Could I possibly survive all my incessant obsessions that occupy me so completely merely to live a tranquil and tedious life again? That abyss, that emptiness, that insensibility can never come again to me."[23] The three Marias respond once again by asking the same questions: "Will love ever find any other way save this: love that uses or is used? Love that devours or is devoured; that pretends to be devoured only to devour in its turn?" (34). "Can there possibly be any reason for a woman to still believe in love? . . . How to invent a love that will recognize all the abysses" (41). By asking such questions, the three Marias evoke a language and a philosophy that has long been lost in modern times; they thus draw attention to the erasure and the trace of such a language and they ponder its uses in politics and history. "Will," they ask,

22. See Frédéric Deloffre and J. Rougeot, "Analyse d'un chef-d'oeuvre," in *Lettres portugaises, Valentins, et autres oeuvres de Guilleragues* (Paris: Garnier, 1962), pp. 14–20.

23. *Lettres portugaises,* p. 54, my translation.

"the threads running from me to you, from us to the others, be woven together in silence, in meek gestures, in delicate vibrations beneath the surface, or in action?" (315).

Again and again the three Marias ask one another, "What can words do?" What is literature worth? What is the relation of language to action, to politics, to economics? From the *Heroides* forward, we have seen how amorous discourse is simultaneously a lament and a legal challenge; in this light Derrida's speculations about the relation of genre and gender to the law take on new meaning. Throughout amorous discourse, moreover—from the bargains struck in the *Heroides* to the narrative transactions in the prologue of *The Turn of the Screw*—every narrative involves not only the circulation of desire but some kind of contract or exchange. Barthes echoes Derrida's analogy when he presents his own version of what is at stake in narrative. Narrative, Barthes writes, is "subject to contract, economic stakes, . . . which . . . can turn into haggling . . . but [these stakes are] represented, *en abyme,* in the narrative. . . . This is the question raised, perhaps by every narrative. . . . *What is the narrative 'worth'*? . . . by a dizzying device, narrative becomes the representation of the contract upon which it is based: . . . narrating is the (economic) theory of narration."[24] We saw earlier how Faulkner's text involves multiple representations of lack; *New Portuguese Letters* involves multiple representations of contracts. There are many other things to notice here. Just as the three Marias try to negotiate a settlement by inventing a love that recognizes the abysses, Barthes sees negotiation framed *en abyme* in every narrative. Barthes's observation is particularly provocative when one considers the impulse that makes the heroine put pen to paper. She simultaneously confronts the beloved for breaking their vows and uses the letter to negotiate a new contract (Heloise's procedure with Abelard is a good example). The letter itself is highly seductive; the heroine explicitly states time and again that it should be exchanged for her body, as when Mariane laments that her letter will be held in her lover's hands and adds, "How I wish I were in its place" (341). Amorous discourses are thus "representations of the contract upon which they are based," and complaints about the transgression of that contract. They are sites that take the place of courts of law, as

24. Barthes, *S/Z: An Essay,* trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 88–89.

when Clarissa, having been prosecuted *in absentia* by her family, serves as witness for her own prosecution and "executes" her will.

The Critical Reception

The three Marias ask each other whether the words that join them to one another and to others will be woven in meek silence and gestures, in "delicate vibrations beneath the surface, or in action." Julia Kristeva asks the same question when she contrasts women who "valorize phallic dominance" and "identify with power" to women who shun power, flee from everything phallic, and valorize the "silent underwater body, thus abdicating any entry into history."[25] In my view, the three Marias manage to avoid celebrating phallic dominance without shunning power or abdicating history. Their laughter deprives the phallus of its power as signifier, but they simultaneously take pains to bring the silent, underwater woman to the surface. They painstakingly elucidate women's perpetual colonization historically, from Louis XIV to Angola.

I turn now briefly to consider the critical reception of this experimental text, because it sheds light on certain kinds of unconscious critical assumptions—assumptions about mimesis, about calculation and spontaneity, about language, about the relation of politics to art, about the formation of a canon. What the responses to *New Portuguese Letters* demonstrated was the lack in 1971 of a vocabulary that could encompass the anticanonical, theoretical, and transgressive strategies of this particular text. There was, moreover, no tradition like the one I am tracing that could provide a context for critical consideration; the sole example of an attempt—and the most intelligent review—places *The Three Marias* in a long tradition of Portuguese feminism, showing its similarities to the cycles of stories in which an older woman has a dialogue with a younger woman about love.[26] (The dialogism here is once again worth noting.) In some regards, critics continued to make the same mistakes that classical scholars of Sappho made in later antiquity: they assumed that one can deduce the life from the art. As a

25. Julia Kristeva, "Oscillation du 'pouvoir' au 'refus,'" an interview by Xavière Gauthier, *Tel Quel* 58 (Summer 1974), rpr. as "Oscillation between Power and Denial," trans. Marilyn A. August, in *New French Feminisms*, pp. 165–67.

26. See H. M. Macedo, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Dec. 1975, p. 1484.

result, they were not a little puzzled by (among other things) the sexuality of the three Marias. One critic described them as "proud prisoners of sex."[27] Another criticized their "adolescent, groping, overheated displays of narcissism, fantasies that are often dull."[28] What such reviews overlook is that within the text itself, such criticisms recur: one Maria critiques the writing of another, asking, "Which of us did not gorge herself on your obsessive, narcissistic description . . . [of your] furious desire for your own self" (313). Yet this very criticism is immediately displaced by the recognition that the Maria who was the most obsessed with sex was also the "one who exposed herself the most." The writers' aims, in other words, were to let stand all the vacillating impulses without endorsing one perspective—political, sexual, emotional, aesthetic—over another. But the critical reception had just the opposite effect; disparate elements were isolated, then criticized, as if they were the central message, and the conscious attempt of the authors to decenter the text was ignored. Reviewers attacked form and content alike. One criticized its "formless approach to the genuine problems that face the world's women now."[29] In other words, it was not enough of a political tract to suit some critics, but others found it excessively polemical.

In my view, the three Marias oscillate between power and denial.[30] Their strategy is to combine incitements to political action with the gestures and codes of love. *New Portuguese Letters,* however, far from being perceived either as an avant-garde experiment or as a condensation of history and myth or as a theoretical text whose very fragmentation is a political posture, was instead attacked by those who misunderstood the ways in which the project combined poetics and politics. In fact, all the vituperative criticisms that we have traced since Sappho have been directed at this single text. The three women are accused of lesbianism, man-hating, narcissism, sexual hysteria, wantonness, frigidity, unnaturalness. The opposite charge is leveled by other critics; the writing is too spontaneous, too natural, too formless, "born out of experience, not introspection,"[31] consisting of "amorphous . . . epistolary oddments."[32] Even the *ad feminam* attacks that

27. Jane Kramer, review, *New York Times Book Review,* 2 Feb. 1975, pp. 1–2.
28. Doris Grumbach, review, *New Republic,* 15 Feb. 1975, pp. 32–33.
29. Ibid., p. 33.
30. The term is Julia Kristeva's; see "Oscillation between Power and Denial," rpr. *New French Feminisms,* p. 165.
31. Christopher Hitchens, review, *New Statesman,* 7 Nov. 1975, p. 580.
32. Hofstadter, review, p. 19.

we traced from Sappho's to Charlotte Brontë's critics recur here, for rather than accept the motives for not signing the letters, one reviewer accuses the three Marias of purposeful provocation, of forcing the reader to focus on each woman's identity, to "read for clues, as if the book were one of those thinly disguised pulp novels about Jacqueline Onassis or Frank Sinatra."[33] Even the subsequent lack of unanimity between the three authors in recent times is cited as evidence of the text's failure.[34]

The Three Marias thus demonstrates one of the central ideas that I have been tracing in amorous epistolary discourses from Ovid onward: there is no language-system that has historically encompassed antimimetic stances toward art, politics, sexuality, and love. As if to demonstrate the force of the oppression and repulsion of love in modern systems of discourse, one recurrent strain of criticism—like eternity in a grain of sand, perhaps more revealing than all the others—finds that the book is antiquated, outmoded, sentimental. The Marias' view of love, says one reviewer, is out of date: "they are positively Stendhalian . . . or at least . . . early 19th century."[35] Another calls it "a strangely outmoded way of looking at love, or better, of looking at women's role in love. There are no sexual politics here, only rhapsodies and lavish displays of passion, erotic passages that are easy targets for parody. . . . it precedes feminist developments of the last ten years."[36] In my view, the text comes not too late but too early. No one thought to place *New Portuguese Letters* in the context of either structural, linguistic, or poststructural theories, despite the allusions of the authors themselves.[37] Such a context, as I have shown, elucidates their aleatory "music in letters"; their acrobatic exercises, their polyphonic innovations.

Julia Kristeva's comments on the strategies of the avant-garde help to illuminate the three Marias' project (albeit retrospectively, since her speculations appeared several years after *New Portuguese Letters*). The avant-garde, she notes,

33. Kramer, review, p. 1.
34. Antonio de Figueiredo, review, *Listener*, 2 Oct. 1975, pp. 451–52.
35. Kramer, review, p. 1.
36. Grumbach, review, p. 32.
37. The three Marias allude specifically to Freud, Lévi-Strauss, the Imaginary, deciphering signs and texts, to linguistics, psychoanalysis, anthropology, Marxism, semiology, and to a range of feminist theorists, from Shulamith Firestone to Simone de Beauvoir. For their familiarity with French feminism and psychoanalysis, see note 14 above.

> has been introducing ruptures, blank spaces, and holes into language. It is what Mallarmé called "the music in letters" . . . multiplied condensation of myths, philosophy, history, and verbal experience. . . . All of these modifications in the linguistic fabric are the sign of a force that has not been grasped by the linguistic or ideological system. . . .
>
> However, in a culture where the speaking subjects are conceived of as masters of their speech, they have what is called a "phallic" position. The fragmentation of language in a text calls into question the very posture of this mastery. The writing . . . confronts this phallic position either to traverse it or to deny it.[38]

Traversal and transgression are precisely what the three Marias achieve. Rather than being "easy targets for parody," they parody themselves and each other. Rather than avoid politics and history, they explore the relations between writing and revolution, between their feminist poetics and global politics. *Novas Cartas portuguesas* signifies more than mere identification with the original *Portuguese Letters*. It is a point of departure, for *cartas* is not just a letter but a map and a charter. Like the Magna Carta, *Novas Cartas* is a charter of human rights, a weaving of women's voices that enables one to read back and forth in history. The final letter, indeed, inscribes the relation between writing and revolution, for after describing the "madness and vertigo" of love-making that defies time, this Maria ends as she began, with an avowal that woman must be free or she will die. Yet, as we have seen from the *Heroides* onward, the very act of imagining, threatening, lamenting, describing death is a deferral, a detour that lets the narrative—and desire—linger a little longer.

One question remains: can one reevaluate love without being hopelessly sentimental? Can one discuss desire without being hopelessly self-indulgent, given the atrocities in history that mark the modern age? Are love and history, in other words, irreconcilable, as Roland Barthes suggests when he describes a "historical reversal: it is no longer the sexual which is indecent, it is the *sentimental*—censured in the name of what is in fact only *another morality*. . . . The lover's sentiment is old-fashioned, but this antiquation cannot even be recuperated as a spectacle: love falls outside of *interesting* time; no historical, polemical meaning can be given to it; it is in this that it is obscene."[39] Barthes's title for this fragment, "Love's Obscenity," opens yet another "way of responding by asking questions," for the

38. Kristeva, "Oscillation between Power and Denial," p. 165.
39. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 177–78.

question inevitably arises: was it the sex that led *The Three Marias* to be banned as obscene, or did its obscenity lie closer to the grounds on which its reviewers attacked it as sentimental, outmoded, antiquated, as "uninteresting, unhistorical, unpolemical"? The three Marias demonstrate that "the lover's sentiment" *can* "be recuperated as spectacle," for they "recuperate" the Portuguese nun. They dramatize the exercise of passion as spectacle in love letters that crisscross from the plains of Portugal to the salons of Paris, celebrating that grand passion in fiction and in history. They further demonstrate the dialogic dynamism of amorous epistolary discourse by interweaving so many other reinventions of the *Portuguese Letters* with their own. The subsequent literary history of Mariane's letters, indeed, is part of the spectacle they stage, for by writers from Aphra Behn to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, from Rousseau to Rilke, the nun's letters have been rewritten, reinvented, reaccentuated in all ages and in many countries.[40] By creating correspondences first with one another, then with other women and men, the three Marias reenvision love, restoring it to time and history, exploring the dynamic dialogism of discourse, the myriad mediations of desire.

40. The most recent reaccentuation prior to *New Portuguese Letters* was Madeleine L'Engle's *The Love Letters* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), which counterpoints the story of a modern American woman with a reinvention of the Portuguese nun.