

INTRODUCTION

The Letters in the Story

William Jones observed in 1780 that “compositions are like machines, where one part depends upon another: the art is to use method as builders do a *scaffold*, which is to be taken away when the work is finished; or as good workmen, who conceal the *joints* in their work, so it may look smooth and pleasant to the eye, as if it were all made of one piece.”¹ As he noted, relations between parts of a composition are not necessarily obvious because, in good writing, the method of construction is artfully concealed. The same may be said of the contemporary thinking on which a method of construction draws and upon which it rests. This chapter therefore offers an overview of the scaffolding. It addresses the formal conventions and the ideas that good narrative-epistolary builders used their joints to connect during the period book-ended by Trollope and Behn, and concludes by discussing some key continuities and changes during this extended period in writers’ treatment of history, narrative, and letters.

Some Characteristics of Narrative-Epistolary Fictions

Writers constructed their formal narrative-epistolary scaffolding from two basic, and unexpectedly versatile, conventions: narrative framing of embedded letters and juxtaposition of narrative and epistolary accounts of the same characters and events.

The first convention consisted of framing each inset and fully transcribed letter with a narrative describing its writing and reception.² The prefatory narrative to each letter described the occasion its author-character had for writing it. In its fullest form, this included the circumstances requiring the letter, the circumstances in which it was written, the writer’s reason(s) or motives for writing, the writer’s designs in crafting the letter as s/he did, any process of drafting, rereading, reflecting and rewriting involved, and how the letter was

sent, transmitted, or delivered. The reception narrative following each transcribed letter addressed the occasion or occasions upon which it was read. In its fullest form, this included the circumstances of the letter's reception, the effect(s) of its material appearance, the way or ways in which it was understood by one or more reader-characters, their immediate intellectual and emotional reactions, any reflections, conversations or debates the letter produced, what was done with the letter subsequent to its first reading, any actions taken as a result of reading it, and how the letter was reinterpreted as characters discussed, or reread and reflected upon it, at different times. This might be characterized as the Enlightenment's more intricate and pragmatic version of Jakobson's idealized communications model.³

This convention's basic tri-partite structure – prefatory narrative, transcribed letter, reception narrative – presented letters as an “occasional genre,” a genre which, like the Elizabethan sonnet or the occasional poem, arose from and was produced for a particular occasion, usually with a specific person or audience in view. Letters too are commonly written in response to a particular situation, in accordance with generic and social conventions, on a particular date, by a particular person in particular circumstances, who is purposefully addressing a particular person or particular people in particular circumstances of their own. As the instantiation of an occasional genre that was shaped by the factors actually or potentially included in the framing narrative, a letter's real meaning(s) and actual effects depended less on *what* it said or how it said it, than on its occasion, reception and circulation, on transitory circumstances and unforeseen accidents, and on how a complex series of temporal and local, social and psychological transactions between letter-writer and letter-reader(s) happened to play out.⁴

Framing fully transcribed letters with a narrative of their writing and reading presented letters as a relational and dialogical, as well as a pragmatic, occasional, genre. It reflected the early modern view that correspondence was only “written conversation” – the “silent speech” of each letter addressed others, at once anticipating and inviting a reply.⁵ Like polite speech whose rules had devolved from the conventions of Jacobean courtiers, the silent speech of eighteenth-century letters obeyed conventions descending from their courtly, scribal and mercantile past. Along with injunctions to “write as you would speak,” the Enlightenment inherited a formal taxonomy of letter “kinds” corresponding to different speech acts, each with its own commonplaces and proper forms. There were, for instance, letters of thanks, of condolence, of congratulation and

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of invitation; letters of compliment, of exhortation, of petition, of business and of reproach; letters of news or intelligence, and “mixed” letters combining two or more of the other kinds.⁶ As polite speech became more informal and supposedly more “sincere” in the nineteenth century, there was a shift in balance or proportion: letter-writers were more apt to follow the injunction to “write as you would speak” in their private correspondence, while the number of distinct letter-kinds in active use contracted but did not disappear. Even now, there are proper forms for certain kinds of letter: we don’t write a business letter, a letter of condolence, a letter of application and a wedding invitation in the same way; and we know, or take the trouble to find out, the sorts of things each should say and how they should be phrased.

Like speech acts too, each letter’s content, style, language, and use of extant conventions had to be shaped by the character, interests, and concerns of its addressee(s); by the relationship in which the writer stood to them; by the level of familiarity or intimacy between them as set against power, status, and gender differentials in what was still a hierarchical society; and especially during the eighteenth century, by the inhibiting likelihood that, even when not intercepted at the post office, a letter sent to one person would be shared with or read aloud to others in domestic and/or social situations and become a subject of conversation in its turn. As a relational, dialogical, and transactional genre, then, letters bore witness to the character, quality, and state of *relationships*, as well as to efforts to establish, preserve, manage, understand, alter, or terminate them.

Letters bore witness to relationships; but for participants to a correspondence, the immediate problem was to correctly gauge their correspondent’s character, purpose(s), and meaning, in order to know how to answer or act upon the letter they received. Like modern critics who view letters as a means of characterization, contemporaries agreed with Locke that “the Writing of Letters has so much to do in all the occurrences of Humane Life that no Gentleman can avoid shewing himself in this kind of writing.” But Locke expected a gentleman’s letters to show his “Breeding, Sense and Abilities,” not his true character or essential nature.⁷ And eighteenth-century narrative-epistolary fictions demonstrated why discovering who a man truly is from his letters was less straightforward than we now assume. Early novelists, such as Aphra Behn and Eliza Haywood, often used their narrative frames to inculcate an Enlightenment hermeneutics of suspicion – for instance, by describing a letter-writer’s conflicted or dishonest motives in the prefatory frame, for writing what appeared from its transcription to be a perfectly innocent letter and demonstrating how and why a too

credulous reader-character foolishly took it at face value. Contrary to what we used to think, neither real nor fictional letters in this period were designed or expected to be transparent “windows into the bosom.” As Aphra Behn told a lover: “You bid me not dissemble . . . Nor doe I follow all my Inclination neither, nor tell all the little Secrets of my Soul.”⁸ Johnson observed that “There is, indeed, no transaction which offers stronger temptations to fallacy and sophistication than epistolary discourse.”⁹ Or as Hugh Blair put it in 1783: in letters, we “please ourselves with beholding the writer in a situation which allows him to be at his ease, and to give vent occasionally to the overflowings of his heart;” but “it is childish indeed, to expect that in Letters we are to find the whole heart of the Author unveiled. Concealment and disguise take place, more or less, in all human intercourse.”¹⁰

To add to the difficulty, readers were themselves thought to be subject to impediments that might conceal the meaning or import of a letter from their understanding. Indicating in the reception narrative that a reader-character lacked information provided to us, the novel’s readers, by the prefatory frame enabled eighteenth-century novelists to show how misreadings arose from reader-characters’ misprision of key facts about the writer, occasion, or relationship, from their ignorance of epistolary or rhetorical conventions, from their own passions, desires, prejudices, or illusions, or from any of the other bars to understanding that Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke or Isaac Watts listed and described.¹¹ In Victorian novels, conscious “concealment and disguise” became signifiers of villainy – only wicked or criminal characters now weaponized their letters by consciously concealing their malice, greed, self-interest, or ambition behind manipulative, affable, and altruistic-sounding prose. And reader-characters’ bar to seeing such letters for what they are, was more likely to derive from unsuspecting innocence, from lack of self-knowledge or from the assumption that, like language in Victorian linguistic theory, letters are normally expressive, transparent, and sincere.

Ideally, polite conversation and its written double, correspondence, both resembled a graceful and harmonious minuet, where the successive movements of partners to the dance mirror one another perfectly and without apparent effort. The meanings encoded by the speaker or writer and the meanings decoded by reader(s) or hearers correspond with well-bred ease; and the readers’ or hearers’ written or verbal responses effortlessly “answer” the writer’s meaning, expectations, and concerns. But as novelistic pairing of written and oral conversation showed, mirroring correspondences between the parties were far harder to achieve in written

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than in oral exchanges. Janet Altman observed that “in epistolary works, acts of communication (confession, silence, persuasion, and so on) constitute important events” that are “enacted rather than reported in discourse.”¹² By contrast, narrative-epistolary fictions used “reports in discourse” to subject “enactments” of epistolary communication to critical re-examination. As we will see in Chapter 1, they used “enactments” to display and narrative to comment upon causes of disjunctions and misunderstandings in a writing where communication depended on rhetorical proficiency and on successfully penetrating cultural norms of politeness, while negotiating writers’ and readers’ different assumptions, expectations, or emotions under conditions of imperfect knowledge. Their “reports in discourse” highlighted the folly of taking letters at face value as true, obvious, or complete expressions of what their writers had really thought, felt, wished, or done.

The second basic scaffolding convention consisted of juxtaposing narrative and epistolary representations of the same characters or events, and of measuring the truth of one against the other. The default mode used the narrative’s representation of characters and events to establish what counts as empirical reality in the novel’s fictional world as well as the chronology pertaining within it, and explicitly compared this to a letter’s account of the same characters and events. This enabled novelists to present narrative-epistolary fiction as a self-conscious, fact- and document-based, historical genre, and to address epistemological questions bearing on letters’ relations to reality, which were relevant to a reading public that was increasingly relying on letters in their everyday personal, social, commercial, and bureaucratic interactions, and central to other fact- and document-based genres. These genres included “true histories,” whose information about the past often depended on surviving letters, epistolary dispatches, and epistolary reports; biographies, whose narrative representations of their subjects’ lives were based on surviving “papers;” trials in which judges and juries weighed the credibility of epistolary evidence and narrative accounts; and investigations employing letters to discover a secret, resolve a mystery, or detect a crime. Narrative-epistolary novels explored issues that these others often preferred to ignore. As we will see in Chapter 2, testing the truth of letters against evidence from the narrative’s empirical world, or the narrative’s empirical world against the evidence of letters enabled narrative-epistolary fictions to portray mental processes of induction and inference by which characters reached true or false conclusions about the evidentiary character of missives and/or actions. It also enabled them to problematize empirical evidence by demonstrating where there

were obstacles in reality itself to timely discovery of necessary or relevant facts. Narrative-epistolary writers showed that, in practice, the relevant empirical evidence was sometimes obscure, sometimes misinterpreted, sometimes overlooked, sometimes absent, sometimes understood only in retrospect, and sometimes something that presented itself, by chance, only at a much a later date. Some even put in question the proposition that the empirical reality people need to verify epistolary or narrative constructions, is a reality that plainly exists.

Novels, as opposed to romances, are still widely associated by modern critics with “the culture of fact” and thus with the more or less naively “formal,” “circumstantial,” or documentary realism that Virginia Woolf characterized as the realism of the earthenware pot.¹³ Assuming like Ian Watt that “the credo of an empiricist age is that knowledge of the world starts with [sensuous] particulars” and “concrete facts,” has led to the assumption that novels were realistic to the extent that they reflected the lives of particular individuals in a particular time and place with all the factual specificity and concrete detail of common life.¹⁴ But for Enlightenment scientists and empiricist philosophers, empiricism did not start from sensuous particulars or concrete facts. It started from questions about what particulars our senses are capable of perceiving, how our minds apprehend and process what we perceive, and how we ought to “conduct our understanding” to obtain true empirical knowledge of whatever our minds are looking at. Bacon had insisted that “before we can reach the remote and more hidden parts of Nature, it is necessary that a more perfect use and application of the human mind and intellect be introduced.”¹⁵ Newton had prefaced the second edition of his *Principia* with thirteen Rules for Reasoning. Enlightenment and Victorian empiricist philosophers likewise began with essays on human understanding, treatises on human nature, or analyses of the human mind, which inquired into the impact of language, memory, imagination, and the passions on our perceptions and reasoning; argued the influence on our thinking of education and extant cultural archetypes; and debated whether operations of the mind they described or devised enable us to think as coldly, rationally, and impartially as the human and natural sciences now required.¹⁶

Empiricists assumed, in other words, that empiricism is a *relationship* between the mind and its objects – that what one sees depends on how one looks, and what one understands or discovers about real phenomena, on how one thinks. Narrative-epistolary novelists were empiricists in this sense. They participated in a series of empiricist debates about relations between the mind and its objects; and from the 1680s on made “realist

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fiction . . . a narrative mode premised on questions of knowledge and the representation of truth.”¹⁷ Narrative-epistolary fictions described how characters reached true or false conclusions by applying or misapplying rules of evidence common to law, history, and science, while critically examining changing convictions in these fields about the credibility of personal testimony, the reliability of circumstantial evidence, the validity of probability-based expectations in predicting the future, and the role of conjecture in constructing a chain of evidence and reconstructing the course of past events. One might say that, with regard to relations between empirical facts and fictions, narrative-epistolary novels made the prose texts of completely transcribed letters stand in for all writing and all text. The word “letters” meant missives or epistles; but it did not escape contemporaries that “letters” also meant written texts in general and the learning acquired through them (as in “man of letters”), and the arbitrary written or printed alphabetical signs or “letters” on which “letters” (epistles) and “letters” (texts) depend.

Juxtaposing letters and narratives enabled narrative-epistolary writers to impugn self-serving historicist treatments of letters as fixed repositories of facts, by highlighting letters’ dynamic and often unanticipated impact on the real. At a time when letters were the only means of distance communication at home and abroad, narrative-epistolary novelists emphasized the agency of letters in everyday life, from their most trivial instrumentality (for instance, in arranging a meeting) to their transmission of information, expectations, and implicit or explicit narratives that reshaped or distorted empirical phenomena, and thus altered how their addressees would think and act. Like modern narratologists who regard letters as instruments of the plot, they understood that letters could affect, drive, or alter the course of events. But they gave letters a more multifaceted and pluri-temporal relation to the action than we generally notice or expect. Expanding the narrative frame to relate a letter to events earlier or much later on the chronological line, or reintroducing the same letter several times at later points in the chronological sequence, belied historians’ assumption that a letter enters time and (hi)story only once – at the moment of its initial writing and transmission. Expanding or doubling the prefatory frame to include prior temporal moments showed how earlier events or encounters shaped the writing or reading of a letter; or how a letter might induce reader-characters to re-view and change their earlier understanding of the past. And complicating the temporalities within what I will call “encapsulating letters” to encompass futurity as well as the present and the past made it possible to consider how

cultural, economic, and/or personal expectations shaped the elements of reality that characters noticed and conveyed in their letters, and to compare the often unexpected way things turn out in the future to plans or assumptions based on experience in the past. As we will see in Chapter 3, use of such devices enabled narrative-epistolary novelists to question how – and indeed, whether – it was reasonable for people to use cultural norms and injunctions as guides to future action, wise for the young to rely on guardians or mentors for direction, and possible for readers then or later to correctly reconstruct interactions and chains of events in which letters did not so much attest to what had or would occur, as directly intervene in the action by playing their own dynamic, formative, and unpredictable parts.

Dropping fully transcribed and narratively framed letters irregularly into a narrative's temporal sequence highlighted another, complementary facet of letters as an instrumental, occasional genre: that letters are *read* as well as written *in medias res*, while lives, events, and conversations are moving on. For narrative-epistolary novelists, letters were not only “written to the moment” while the meaning and outcome of events were still uncertain and hidden in the womb of time, as Samuel Richardson would later claim; they were also *read to the moment*, and by character-readers and novel-readers for whom the same conditions of ignorance and uncertainty prevailed. While underlining the durability of writing in contradistinction to speech, reintroduction of the same letter at several points in the narrative's chronological sequence showed how its unperceived meanings and intended or unintended empirical consequences emerged or unfolded over time as circumstances changed; how a letter might be belied or overtaken by events; or more disturbingly, how even false, willfully deceptive or unconsciously self-deceptive letters could impact and radically alter the course of events. When the circumstances of their writing and the history of their reading were fully understood, letters supplied evidence of the peculiar mixes of blindness and insight, hope and fear, knowledge and ignorance, confident interpretation and unintended misinterpretation, demonstrated by writer and readers at different past and present times. Rather than treating letters as fixed repositories from which historians, biographers, judges and later, detectives could confidently extract whatever information they needed to construct narratives of their own devising, narrative-epistolary novelists displayed letters' dubious time-bound knowledge of unfolding events, as well as the likelihood that they would be read and acted upon in questionable time-bound ways.

Some novelists in each period liked to bring this home to novel-readers by exposing our reading of embedded letters to some of the same ignorance

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and uncertainty that cause reader-characters to blunder. A narrative that was silent on key facts or omitted essential information about the letter-writer's character, purposes or motives from a letter's narrative frame or that neglected to alert novel-readers to a letter's false, manipulative or lying character, placed novel-readers in the same situation as reader-characters, and made them liable to the same mistakes. Novel-readers who failed to notice omissions in the frame or to suspend judgment until missing information emerges later on the narrative timeline, could experience on their own pulses how readily we too mistakenly assume that we know enough about characters and a story to interpret letters correctly and see how they fit in. The same effect could be achieved by quietly omitting explicit comparisons between the narrative reality and its epistolary representation(s) and leaving novel-readers to compare epistolary to narrative accounts for themselves. Here, novel-readers who overlook discrepancies between narrative realities and epistolary representations may discover at story's end or upon a more careful review of the text, that they have completely misread the story or mistaken its tendency and moral. In Victorian novels, the hermeneutics of suspicion and the imperative earlier incumbent on all letter-readers to detect falsehoods and willful epistolary deceptions often passed to a new, specialized class of characters –amateur and professional detectives who scanned letters for “clues” to what had “really” transpired in the past. This device made it possible to demonstrate the difficulties of historical reconstruction and the shortcomings of empirical methods of detection, while reassuring the public that, in the end, truth would come out, so that present evils rooted in the past could be suppressed and disempowered, or corrected and reversed. As we will see in Chapters 3 and 5, nineteenth-century novelists such as Walter Scott, Wilkie Collins, and Anthony Trollope continued to put novel-readers in play to confront them with the inconvenient possibility that the whole truth about “reality,” personal identity, and past events might never be known. But by asking readers to piece together a patchwork of subjective and discontinuous letter-narratives and narrative-epistolary reports that leave some curious aspect of the story mysteriously inexplicable and unexplained, they also explored the limitations both of empirical knowledge and of narrative-epistolary forms. This could either undermine or augment the authority of the narrator as indisputable story-teller and prime raiser of questions about lives and texts.

Combining letters and narrative not only enabled novelists to inquire into the documentary truth of letters and into the credibility of their self-representations, but also to control the pace of the story better than

epistolary novelists generally could. Novelists soon found that all the letters in a story did not have to be fully transcribed and set off on the page. Some could be rapidly summarized by the narrator. Others could be partly summarized and partly transcribed, to highlight the section that mattered most to the story and ensure that novel-readers did not get distracted by something else. The language and contents of some letters could be partly or wholly rendered in free indirect discourse and focalized through a character's mind, as s/he wrote, read, or subsequently reflected upon it. The substance of a letter could also be allowed to emerge from a character's reflections or from conversations with other characters. Alternatively, the narrative could treat the letter as a material object to portray a character's agonies when an awaited letter failed to appear or, passing over its contents in silence, describe a letter's observable but now unaccountable effects on its addressee. The narrative could present a character's telling speculations about what an unseen letter might contain; show a character exercised by whether other characters were corresponding; or highlight the significance of epistolary silences, refusals to correspond, or efforts to prevent letters from being written or read. There were endless possibilities for variation.

Letters themselves were an exceptionally capacious, versatile, and flexible form.¹⁸ They could not only emulate and reproduce a wide variety of everyday speech acts, but also accommodate a wide variety of other literary forms. Letters could contain stories, narratives about characters and events, descriptions and observations, anecdotes, reported dialogue, commentary, introspective analyses, passionate sentimental effusions, and arguments or reflections. Letters were also used in Enlightenment print and manuscript cultures as the preferred platform for a range of other genres. Letters delivered political, philosophical or theological argument, thematic essays, commercial or administrative reports, military or diplomatic dispatches, autobiographical memoirs, legal documents, scientific reports, historical narratives, conduct-book chapters, public addresses and petitions, and travel writing that complied with contemporary scientific, historical, or ethnographic investigative and discursive norms.¹⁹ Eighteenth-century narrative-epistolary novelists were able to capitalize on this range of options to deploy a far wider variety of kinds of letter and to do so in a far wider variety of ways than epistolary novelists could, burdened as the latter were by the requirement that letters between intimates who enjoy each other's confidence perform the whole work of narration and characterization.

The framing narrative proved equally versatile. Bald statements of the relevant facts about a letter's production, transmission, and reception