

Correspondence

Brigitte Diaz

Sam Ferguson (trad.)

It might seem paradoxical to associate correspondence with autobiography. While letters attempt to establish a transitive communication between two or more correspondents, autobiography is a self-reflexive genre, practised alone, face-to-face with oneself, a process to which the other is invited only as a remote spectator. Correspondence is traditionally viewed as a tool of sociability, and can be defined as a written and deferred exchanged between two or more correspondents, extended over a relatively long time, and manifested in a collection of letters that answer one another. It is motivated by a desire for communication, which is both its origin and its horizon. It is a dialogical genre, deserving of its definition as a "conversation between absent parties", which has become a commonplace of criticism of correspondence over the centuries. Seneca already claimed this dialogical model for his letter-writing : I would wish for my letters to be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together – "spontaneous and easy" (Ad Lucilium, 75.1). In 1689, in one of the epistolary guides that proliferated at the time, Ortigue de Vaumorière defined the letter as "a piece of writing sent to an absent person to let him know what we would tell him if we were able to talk to him". Just as correspondence and autobiography differ in their forms and their dynamics of communication, they also have different histories. Correspondence has a long history, going back to an ancient practice in Western culture, as evidenced by the existence of large ancient corpora that have been held up as canons of epistolary writing, including the letters of Cicero, the letters from Seneca to Lucilius… Autobiography has a shorter history, which names Rousseau's founding gesture on its birth certificate. Before bridges could be established between correspondence and autobiography, it was first necessary for the wide range of autobiographical writings to constitute a recognised genre, and also for epistolary writing to take on an "intimate"

character in order to give voice to a subjectivity that for a long time had been excluded from correspondence. However, the boundaries between these forms of personal expression are porous. There are autobiographies written "like a letter to a friend" – this is the model adopted by Stendhal in *La Vie d'Henry Brulard* [*The Life of Henry Brulard*] – and there are letters addressed to others but intended for oneself, as George Sand suggests (herself both a letter writer and autobiographer) : "conversation is an exchange whereas a letter is a monologue, in which, despite oneself, one is revealed to a frightening extent" (letter to Hetzel, 17 October 1847). If it were necessary to identify the moment when the trajectories of these two forms of personal writing intersected, we would suggest the symbolic date of 1762 : it is the year of the four letters that Rousseau wrote to Malesherbes in which he provides a short account of his life and defines the specifications of the autobiography to come. To understand the revolution in intimate writings that would make the letter, at the turn of the nineteenth century, into one of the privileged forms of personal writing, we must start from the observation that correspondence has not always been the most favourable place in which to "write about oneself", as its history makes clear.

Having been codified in the Middle Ages by the strict rhetoric of the *ars dictaminis*, in the Renaissance the letter became the secular rival of sacred eloquence : it then featured alongside the sermon as a great prose genre. In the Classicism of the seventeenth century, the letter took on a more literary eloquence, and epistolary writing became a "style", and moreover, an "art", of which a writer such as Guez de Balzac could become a grand master. In a letter conceived in this way, there was no trace of subjectivity, which was firmly kept at a respectable distance. Barbey d'Aurevilly, a great connoisseur of correspondence, suggested the cause for this : the seventeenth century, he said, "had other things to do before looking into one's soul" and "telling one's story in the first person". However, it was also in the seventeenth century that correspondence would become more worldly and gradually lose its academic style. A new aesthetic then became established that made conversational lightness the new norm. Letter-writers were now encouraged to write their letters "without any other ornament or artifice than would be found in ordinary speech", as Paul Jacob advised in his 1646 guide to letter writing, *Le Parfait Secrétaire* [*The Perfect Secretary*]. This "natural" aesthetic presupposes a letter-writer freed from rhetorical models, letting his pen run on at the whim of his imagination and his mood. This was a precursor to the emergence of the individual in correspondence, in this space that had previously been highly policed, and by the end of the seventeenth century the letter claimed to be the "mirror of the soul", according to a metaphor that gradually became a matter of consensus.

Whether it was a cause or effect of this increasing "intimacy" of the letter, the epistolary genre gradually became a feminine genre. Because women were considered beings

of the present moment and of emotion, entirely in thrall to a capricious sensibility, they found in the letter a privileged form of expression, a short form demanding neither effort of thought nor rhetorical skill. The words of Jean Baptiste Suard in 1778 illustrate the doxa that conceded to women superiority in epistolary style : "It is easy to see that women who have intelligence and education must be better at writing letters even than those men who are best at writing. Nature has granted them a more mobile imagination, a more delicate organisation : their mind, being less cultivated by reflection, has more vivacity and more of its own initial impulse ; it is a more 'impulsive mind', as Montaigne would say". This judgement would become a stereotype, which Flaubert inscribed in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçue* [*Dictionary of Received Ideas*] at the end of the following century. It remains true, however, that many women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would discover in the practice of letter-writing a medium that favoured writing the self, and would find the letter to be an invitation, or even an initiation, towards the autobiographical act : this was the case for Manon Phlipon, the future Madame Roland, whose correspondence with the Cannet sisters in her youth resembled a personal diary in both its form and its subject matter.

As its history demonstrates, the letter, which oscillates between the private and the public, the familiar and the literary, the intimate and the wordly, is a complex textual object. It involves a social practice governed by norms and codes, but as a private writing practice it allows for original self-expression. One or the other of these two aspects of correspondence has become more prevalent at certain points in its history, but the beginning of the nineteenth century saw a turning point in epistolary practice. The letter then took on a self-reflexive function, which had already been perceptible in some private correspondence from the middle of the eighteenth century, such as in the letters of Julie de Lespinasse, for example. Significantly, the collections of private correspondence that began to be published in large quantities in the early nineteenth century were received as intimate writings that would reveal the idiosyncrasy of a personality better than any other document : "No other genre of writing can contribute more to our knowledge of a person", wrote Madame de Staël at the start of the century in her preface to the *Lettres et pensées du Prince de Ligne* [*Letters and Thoughts of the Prince de Ligne*]. From this point on, a degree of authenticity and sincerity was attributed *a priori* to correspondence, on the grounds that, unlike literary writings, they are not written for publication. Sainte-Beuve's strong praise for the lively letters of M^{lle} de Lespinasse clearly illustrates the sensibility of this new reception of correspondence : "The inestimable virtue of the letters of M^{lle} de Lespinasse is that we do not find there what we find in books and novels ; they contain pure drama in its natural state, as it is revealed here and there by a few gifted beings : the surface of life suddenly breaks, and we read it in its nakedness." At the end of the century, Gustave Lanson, commenting on the correspondence of women

letter-writers from the seventeenth century, still subscribed to this Romantic conception of the letter : "What is a letter, if not a series of movements of a soul, some moments of a life, grasped by the same subject and fixed on paper ?" The letter is thus refocused on the self, which must be staged, expressed, explored. The letter is then devoted to a self-reflexive intention, which is more concerned to seize existential fragments of life than to reconstitute a film of that life.

Correspondence offers everyone the opportunity for a practice of self-writing which passes via the other, who is enrolled as an active witness in the introspective adventure. The examples provided by writers who were simultaneously letter-writers, diarists, and autobiographers, show how much correspondence has often constituted an accommodating support for gathering a rich material pertaining to the self, which can contribute to the self-history that looms on the horizon of epistolary practice. Stendhal implied as much when he asked his sister to keep his letters because, he said, they would later provide him with "the history of his mind". Intimate correspondence therefore appears to be a preliminary to the exercise of autobiography, from which it willingly adapts the functions of exploration, knowledge, and formation of identity. Although this interaction between correspondence and autobiography is manifest throughout the nineteenth century, it is less evident in the twentieth century and even less in the twenty-first century, in which the very principle of handwritten correspondence as a regular practice of self-expression has become obsolete, displaced by other media and other forms of self-communication : social networks, emails, blogs. The conjunction between correspondence and autobiography is a historical cultural fact, which literary models have certainly helped to reinforce. Their close relationship reveals how much the dynamics of address are at the heart of self-writing.

Bibliography

Barbey d'Aurevilly Jules, *Littérature épistolaire*, Paris, Alphonse Lemerre, 1893.

Dauphin Cécile, *Prête-moi ta plume : Les manuels épistolaires au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Éditions Kimé, 2000.

Diaz Brigitte (ed.), *Elseneur, n^o 22 : L'Autobiographique hors l'autobiographie*, sans lieu, Presses universitaires de Caen, 2008, vol. 22.

Diaz Brigitte, *L' épistolaire ou la pensée nomade : Formes et fonctions de la correspondance dans quelques parcours d'écrivains au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 2002.

Diaz Brigitte and Françoise Simonet-Tenant (eds.), *Epistolaire, Revue de l'Aire , n^o 32 : Lettre et journal personnel*, sans lieu, 2006.

Diaz José-Luis (ed.), *Romantisme, n^o 90 : J'ai toujours aimé les correspondances…*, sans

lieu, 1995.

Haroche-Bouzinac Geneviève, *L'épistolaire*, Paris, Hachette, 1995.

Kaufmann Vincent, *L'équivoque épistolaire*, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990.

Madelénat Daniel, *L'Intimisme*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1989.

Simonet-Tenant Françoise, *Journal personnel et correspondance (1785-1939) ou les affinités electives*, Louvain-la-Neuve, Academia-Bruylant, 2010.

Pour citer cet article :

Brigitte Diaz, « Correspondence », trad. Sam Ferguson de l'article « Correspondance » (*Dictionnaire de l'autobiographie*, dir. F. Simonet-Tenant avec la collab. de M. Braud, J.-L. Jeannelle, P. Lejeune et V. Montémont, Paris, Champion, 2017, p. 222-225), dans *EcriSoi*, « Dictionnaire en ligne », 2021, URL : https://ecrisoi.univ-rouen.fr/bibliotheques/dictionnaires/668d1e40499d390012456892, page consultée le 2 novembre 2026.