

'My Other Conscience':

Epistolary Selves in Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné*

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In a letter to Milena Jesenská, a woman with whom his relationship was almost entirely in letters, Franz Kafka imagines the period in history when epistolary correspondence became widespread for the first time:

. . . a terrible dislocation of souls in the world. It is truly a communication with spectres, not only with the spectre of the addressee but also with one's own phantom, which evolves underneath one's own hand in the very letter one is writing.¹

That period of the proliferation of letter writing – largely the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Britain – also witnessed the proliferation and development of the epistolary novel.² By the time Henry Mackenzie published *Julia de Roubigné* in the late 1770s, the territory of letters both real and fictional was already well preoccupied by the kinds of spectres Kafka describes. Mackenzie's principal narrators are increasingly haunted by the apparent unreality of the selves created in their letters. The novel demonstrates that the very process of letter writing can push this kind of self-consciousness to a crisis, and this presents a serious challenge to epistolary writing as a whole while opening the way for a re-evaluation of the genre's foundations.

Questions of the "real" and "unreal" and were a defining preoccupation of the literature of the period. British epistolary novels fed off and fed into a reading culture that approached the fictional with moral suspicion, and this suspicion had fostered a convention of creative writing presenting itself as genuine personal manuscripts. Along with travelogues, diaries and confessions, letters were enormously popular as the framework for a novel. Letter novels had negotiated readers' preferences all the more effectively

because they gratified a relatively recent and voracious appetite for narratives of the “inner” life to which epistolary writing was promoted as having privileged access.³ Samuel Johnson’s comment is typical:

A man’s letters [are] the mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives.⁴

A moral code informed by Puritanism, as well as the general exhortation that literature be edifying, also influenced the form’s development.⁵ Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740),⁶ the British epistolary novel’s giant and still-living elder, notably began life as a kind of conduct book of exemplary letters. Anxieties of moral reliability pervaded the actual content of epistolary writing, to the point of having become one of its primary themes. The real twelfth-century letters of Abelard and Héloïse,⁷ Richardson’s *Pamela*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, or The New Héloïse* (1761)⁸ are almost obsessively concerned with questions of sincerity, moral purity and consistency of character. Julie’s lover Saint-Preux, for instance, begins the novel trying to ‘reconcile prudence with courtesy’, repeatedly insisting in one wording or another that his ‘ardour and its object will together preserve an inalterable purity’.⁹ Letters in these novels are upheld in this way as occasions for contemplating and revealing one’s own character; indeed, the sincerity and insightfulness of those contemplations and revelations become measures of character in themselves. The generic influence of all three texts was enormous, while Rousseau’s heroine specifically was a likely namesake for Mackenzie’s.¹⁰ From these origins, the genre inherited a preoccupation with the real versus the fictional, as well as an expectation of intimate communication with the inner life, and a concern for moral consistency of character. These inheritances haunt and give spirit to all epistolary fiction to some degree.¹¹

These and related features of the genre are not purely cultural or historical; they can also be understood as arising from the form itself. Effectively by definition of the fact that the characters in this kind of novel are regularly recounting their lives to a correspondent, two preconditions of an epistolary narrator prevail: first, that they have a narrative view of themselves, and secondly that they believe their personal narrative can be communicated with writing. Belief in the meaningful, narrable continuity of their own existence is a practical necessity for characters who are continually “telling their story.” As Janet Altman puts it in her excellent study of what she calls ‘epistolarity’:

To write a letter is to map one’s coordinates – temporal, spatial, emotional, intellectual – in order to tell someone else where one is located at a particular time and how far one has traveled since the last writing.¹²

Making an ongoing account of themselves in this way, particularly in a context of moral self-consciousness, the epistolary characters’ narrative self-perception typically entails a remarkably explicit sense of themselves *as* a character. Of course this is not to say that they suspect themselves of being in a novel. Yet, in the process of self-narration, the personal sense of character becomes especially overt. In *Julia de Roubigné*, narrating characters refer to themselves in the third person to a striking extent. Julia in her own letters is able to lament “poor Julia’s plight” to “her bosom friend” Maria.¹³ Her plight itself is further incentive for self-characterisation: like so many epistolary novels, the premise is one of a newly dislocated heroine (Julia’s family has lost its fortune and moved to unfamiliar country) who feels the need to remind herself of her own identity. Narrating oneself to a beloved and familiar friend is an obvious means of accomplishing this. Julia describes her letters to Maria as the occasion ‘to settle accounts with myself’.¹⁴ Montauban, the other principal letter writer and likewise newly relocated, addresses his letters to a fellow soldier, Segarva, and dedicates

frequent portions of them to speculating on his own ‘soldier’s character, which must ever be out of the reach of question’.¹⁵

For both narrators, this bolstering of their own characters explicitly invokes the friend who receives the letter. Julia nominates Maria as ‘my best monitor’,¹⁶ while Montauban writes to Segarva: ‘In the intricacies of my fate, or of my conduct, I have long been accustomed to consider you my support and my judge . . . my other conscience’.¹⁷ The idea of moral character as something externally observed had great currency, especially under the influence of Calvinist Christianity to which Mackenzie had particular exposure.¹⁸ The consciousness by which character was observed could be a person’s own vigilant conscience, as much as some actually external other. However, in a relationship where the addressee is repeatedly conjured as a second self, then addressee and conscience are readily merged into one. Unanimity between correspondents, and the capacity of letters to mediate that unanimity, is invoked from Julia’s earliest sentences:

I will speak to you on paper when my heart is full, and you will answer me from the sympathy of yours. . . . Put down every thing, so it be what you feel at the time, and tell every incident that can make me present with you.¹⁹

The overwhelming tendency of epistolary narrators conceptually to erase the distance between each other is widely identified by critics,²⁰ and abundantly manifest in this novel. ‘[Y]ou have been the friend, the brother of my soul, and with yours it mingles as with a part of itself’,²¹ professes one narrator. As Altman points out, the correspondent is ‘represented – made present again’²² in this kind of epistolary affirmation. The value of sameness also extends, as Paul Ricoeur argues, to the less conscious but profound association of selfhood with sameness over time.²³ In Plato and Aristotle, as well as in the ontological discussions of Locke and Hume more directly influential on this period,²⁴ questions of the stability of the self were heavily engaged with ‘values of consistency, clarity, and unity’.²⁵ Ricoeur identifies

two kinds of permanence of character: on the one hand, staying the same, and on the other, keeping one's word.²⁶ As similar as these might seem, he argues that they are in fact mutually opposed, since keeping one's word would be redundant if the self were not a changeable thing. The self's changeability will take on increasing significance over the course of Mackenzie's novel, while keeping one's word is especially applicable in the epistolary context, where the letter writers' ongoing self-narration renders them literally "accountable" to their correspondents.

Narrative accountability can be simple and delightful enough for a narrator with a relatively unthreatened conscience who also sees his or her unthreatening reflection in the addressee. As Ricoeur identifies in Aristotle, 'it is to the stability of the best part of oneself that we owe the beautiful expression that holds the friend to be "another self"'.²⁷ But as Ricoeur also suggests, this kind of conflation 'could well be taken to be a refined form of egotism . . . sheltering the self . . . [and] may seem to us to be far removed from the fragility and vulnerability'²⁸ of lived experience. The experiences of letter writers in *Julia de Roubigné*, as will become apparent, strongly reinforce this suspicion. Altman incisively points out the epistolary conditions simultaneously fostering and undermining the idea of being accountable to a second self:

The act of picking up the pen to write even a leisurely letter becomes an almost magical ritual whereby one evokes the presence of the addressee. For this reason, what we might call "interior dialogue" or "pseudodialogue" is a fundamental occurrence in epistolary discourse. . . Interior dialogue is haunted by an air of falseness. When the partner's words are imagined, the letter writer is addressing a manipulated pseudopresence; when they are quoted, the dialogue borders on artifice. Interior dialogue is an attempt to approximate a conversation of the here and now, which both grows out of and is doomed by the epistolary situation.²⁹

Not until some frame or mechanism of thinking about ourselves or the world has been disturbed, argues Heidegger, do its structure and workings

become explicit.³⁰ The explicit self-narration practised by epistolary characters is itself already a disturbance to the less conscious narrative self-perception they might otherwise hold. Narrative psychology maintains that the typical personality more or less implicitly understands itself in narrative terms. Michele Crossley, in her overview of the field, asserts that at

any particular point in time it is in relation to my consideration of the continuity or discontinuity between [my various self-images] that I can engage in dialogue about the kinds of actions I will perform and, relatedly, the kind of person I have been in the past and want to become in the future'.³¹

It is not this essay's agenda to argue the universal truth of the psychology, but the concepts clearly apply to characters who, as discussed, are already explicitly occupied with viewing and representing themselves via narrative. There is also the more abstract but persuasive philosophical argument that it would be difficult to imagine a subject forming, let alone communicating, a moral idea of itself without the process of narrative; that is, without the subject identifying some accountable continuity across its past and present which is also capable of being projected into its future.³²

This kind of narrative reading, and indeed writing, of self is exactly what the narrators of *Julia de Roubigné* practise. Julia's and Montauban's self-characterisations constantly look back to past virtues and forward to the fruition of hopes and undertakings. Julia's letters to Maria, for example, begin by quoting 'the words with which you sealed that attachment we had formed in the blissful period of infancy'.³³ In his letters to Segarva, Montauban invests much of his discussion in predictions of his marriage to Julia. Julia, in turn, begins reacting against his coercive ardour, with her own written evocations of a simpler childhood and a troubled future. In both cases, the letter writers' tendency is conspicuously towards maintaining and strengthening a personal sense of character and story. Montauban, despite ironically being barely able to communicate with Julia herself, is particularly

attached to his narrative and indeed to his sense of being its author. He has a repugnance for the idea that circumstances or emotions could, as he puts it, 'degrade us to machines, which are blindly actuated by some uncontrollable power'.³⁴ The narrative and authorial self that he enacts in his letters is an emphatic gesture against discontinuity, uncertainty and lack of agency. Mikhail Bakhtin suggests that the novel as form came into its own with the breakdown of epic timelessness, and with the relocation of storytelling to the personal present.³⁵ As narrative psychology and Ricoeur's narrative ontology also argue, the burden of creating a personal narrative therefore falls on the present. For epistolary characters – who are always explicitly narrating themselves from the present, with an unknown future – this burden of narrative is in their hands. And it is a burden: at the base of it, not even the present moment is unproblematically available to the letter writer, since what is being narrated is always slipping away before pen can commit it to paper. The '*now* is unseizable,' as Altman points out, 'and its unseizability haunts epistolary language'.³⁶

In the very explicitness of the characters' narrative self-conceptions, it is already apparent that this burden of narration threatens their confidence in precisely those narrative self-conceptions. Gerard Genette points out that, in instances of narration such as these, 'the narrator is at one and the same time still [his or her own protagonist] and already someone else'.³⁷ Interestingly, one of the clearest demonstrations that narrative self-perception exists, according to narrative psychology, is that perception's breakdown in the wake of trauma. When something apparently inadmissible to a person's internal narrative intrudes upon that person's self-consciousness, the fact that an internal narrative was ever present is proven by that same narrative's subsequent painful disintegration.³⁸ In the context of the ideals which Julia and Montauban insist upon in their letter writing – their own narrable continuity, unbroken unity with their addressees, and personal moral consistency – any threat to those ideals is effectively inadmissible to

their narratives of self. This plays out to some extent on almost every page of the novel, and particularly clearly in the following. Julia represses her misgivings and submits to becoming Montauban's wife, so as to keep with her character as a daughter. In her letters, she repeatedly insists upon the rightness of this decision to herself and to Maria, effectively coercing Maria, as her 'best monitor',³⁹ to ratify it. Montauban, then, has successfully authored his marriage. But inadmissible to his own narrative is whatever he cannot author; namely, Julia's affections. In fact, Julia's affections are outside the control of both characters. As she finds herself pining for the man she genuinely loves (lost to a far-off sugar plantation) – and as Montauban discovers that being in love with himself via the idea of a woman is increasingly difficult, when the actual woman is visibly not in love with him – the letters to their respective bosom friends become sparse and uninformative. Suddenly Julia, who began with insisrences of writing everything that was in her heart, is confessing, with erratic punctuation, 'but there is an intricacy in my feelings on this change of situation, which . . . I cannot manage on paper', and, 'Ask me not, why I cannot answer. . . . Be satisfied when I tell you, that I ought to be happy. –'.⁴⁰ As for Montauban:

I sit down to write to Segarva, with the idea of his presence at the time, and the idea was wont to be a pleasant one; it is now mixed with a sort of uneasiness, like that which a man feels, who has offended, and would ask to be forgiven.⁴¹

The 'other conscience' has begun to haunt the writer who invoked it, and it is eroding the writing itself. For the first time, we see the narrative literally undone, as Julia calls herself a '~~victim~~',⁴² immediately crossing out the word and begging Maria not to hold her accountable. Neither Maria nor Segarva has necessarily had the chance to be reproachful, and yet, as the chosen surrogates for the letter writers' consciences, they are implicated in the narratives' disintegration as coercively as they were invoked in the construction. Where narrative of self was so insistently founded on a sense

of communion with the correspondent and on a sense of a consistent moral character, the loss of these is effectively a loss of narrative. And where the narrative of self was essentially tantamount to self-perception, its disintegration is an outright loss of a sense of self.

Julia and Montauban both vacillate in their letters between internal chaos and renewed resolve. But their lunges at narrative self-retrieval become increasingly desperate and unstable. Julia, in the turmoil of discovering that her true love has come back to France, hands more and more agency over to Maria, while also trying to resuscitate her own sanctioned roles:

‘Hide me from myself, Maria! hide me from myself! Am I not the wife of Montauban? Yes, and I know that character which . . . I have to support: . . . [t]he daughter of Roubigné, the wife of Montauban!’⁴³

Montauban, for his part, resurrects a sense of solidity and purpose via the conviction that Julia is being unfaithful. ‘The truth rises upon me,’ he insists, ‘and every succeeding circumstance points to one conclusion’.⁴⁴ His revenge narrative, planned and raged over on paper with Segarva as his sounding board, now occupies all his letters. Both writers, increasingly unwilling to describe their present selves at all in their writing, defer to more and more abstract frames of reference in their projections. Julia foresees death and heavenly resolution, while Montauban looks forward to murder and the restoration of justice. With such drastic or grandiose prophecies, it is as if they are reaching for Bakhtin’s lost epic timelessness. As it turns out, Julia does die, at her husband’s hands, with her voice fading out mid-sentence. Montauban, for his part, is subsequently besieged by the entire army of his conflicting self-images. Clinging to the remains of a sense of epistolary communion born in more self-confident times, he writes,

Support me, my friend, support me with the thoughts of that vengeance that I owe to my honour – Pardon me, my Segarva; methinks I

Speak to you, when I scrawl upon this paper. I wish for somebody to speak to; to answer, to comfort, to guide me! . . . Let me recollect myself – a man, a soldier, a friend of Segarva!⁴⁵

In the midst of trying to resurrect his preferred self, Montauban sees a murderer with a knife behind him and wheels around to discover that it is his reflection. Self has become not only deranged but deadly; which it is quite literally, in his subsequent suicide. The protagonists' letters, and both protagonists themselves, have been terminated. Psychologist Arthur Frank's term 'narrative wreckage',⁴⁶ from his study *The Wounded Storyteller*, would amply apply here. Within this epistolary context it has been precisely the explicit construction of a narrative self – with the untenable ideas of consistency and communion on which it was based – that has precipitated the wreckage, and wounded the storyteller.

So, Henry Mackenzie's *Julia de Roubigné* is an epistolary novel that presents a multiple narrative breakdown brought on by the very self-narration that is inherent to the form, at the hands of characters who, with best intentions, prove to be spectacularly unqualified to give accounts of themselves that even they can trust. On the surface, this a far cry from the premised ideals of trustworthy revelations of the inner self between correspondents in perfect communion. The contrast is especially stark, considering that the disintegration of the letters was driven by the two principal narrators' subscription to exactly those ideals. This has severe implications for the genre since by definition an epistolary novel relies on its narrators to keep writing. If this is a genre characteristically invested in representing inner workings and natural processes – as the likes of Johnson gladly insisted – then, in light of this novel, those inner workings and natural processes would seem to oblige epistolary fiction to abort itself. Novel writing's turn away from epistolary form towards more or less omniscient third person narration, not long after this period, could well be

seen as partly a reaction against this limitation, unreliability and abortiveness of epistolary self-narration.

This raises the possibility of rejecting the narrative self-representation central to epistolary form, as inherently untenable. But if novels like *Julia de Roubigné* imply anything, it is that the unreliability and limitedness of all narrative and representation – that is, not of epistolary novels alone – are inevitable. Nor does this entail some kind of transcendence or rejection of representational writing in general. In discussing the phenomenon of a divided speaker disturbed by his or her idea of the addressee, Julia Kristeva argues that texts which destabilise notions of narrative as transparently communicative, or of character as consistent, are ‘writings which go beyond the barrier of representation’.⁴⁷ Mackenzie’s novel demonstrates that attempts at narrative representation are fraught, certainly. But it would be out of place to conclude that the representational element is therefore defunct or somehow superseded. To make that conclusion would presume that self-representation and genuine communication are left behind as soon as they become consciously problematic or interrupted. That is exactly the kind of purism that precipitates the disintegration of letter writing for the protagonists of *Julia de Roubigné*. While such a mentality might be profoundly characteristic of many epistolary narrators, from the perspective of genre it misses the point. To base a letter novel on a process of being confronted (even completely demoralised) by the complexities and instabilities of self-representation: this is still, after all, representing that process. Mackenzie does not presume to have discovered a radically new kind of writing. The novel’s subtitle is *A Tale*, and everything that plays out on its pages shows a profound awareness of the spectres of fictiveness inherent to representation and communication. Mackenzie’s engagement with these complexities in an epistolary novel is conscious and insightful in ways that the form is especially able to facilitate. The facility exists because the characters in this genre continually bear the narrative under a

heightened sense of accountability, and in increasing confrontation with their own condition as self-narrators. This confrontation in *Julia de Roubigné* demonstrates that narrating and narrative selves will always be partial – in both senses – and it argues the unsustainable misguidedness of valuing these selves as stable or fully expressive wholes.

Further, breaches in the consistency or unanimity of selves are not only capable of being accommodated by a letter novel, they are conditions which enable epistolary exchanges in the first place. If the self were an unproblematically known and consistent thing, and if perfect correspondence did exist between spirits so kindred that they could be called ‘second selves’, none of the narratives which ostensibly invoke those ideals would have been written as they were. Among the first *Héloïse*, Richardson’s *Pamela*, Rousseau’s *Julie* and their respective correspondents, the narrators’ motivating desires to grasp their own and each other’s identities would be fundamentally simplified and reduced, if not eliminated altogether. The gaps between a letter writer’s written and otherwise lived selves, between the self of one day’s letter and another, and between correspondents, are effectively what invite and perpetuate the acts of self-narration central to an epistolary novel. And as discussed above, even when narrators become haunted by a consciousness of those gaps to the point of their letters’ disintegration, the haunting and disintegration themselves become the narrative within the novel. *Julia de Roubigné* consciously participates in this complexly self-conscious genre, engaging with the cultural and structural tensions that haunt it by incorporating them into the narrative itself. The same formal concerns would be taken up and interrogated to new and fertile extremes in the likes of Viktor Shklovsky’s *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love, or The Third Héloïse*⁴⁸ a century and a half later. Far from dooming the epistolary novel to the status of a ghost genre, Mackenzie vividly illuminated reasons for its ongoing reincarnation.

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- ¹ Quoted in Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1982), 2.
- ² Laura Visconti, "The beginnings of the epistolary novel in England", in *Contexts of Pre-Novel Narrative: The European Tradition*, Roy Eriksen, ed. (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994), 294.
- ³ Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), 8-10.
- ⁴ Quoted in Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1957), 191.
- ⁵ Altman, 194
- ⁶ Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740), edited with notes by Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely, Introduction by Thomas Keymer (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
- ⁷ Peter Abelard and Héloïse, *Abelard and Heloise: The Story of His Misfortunes and The Personal Letters*, translated with an Introduction and notes by Betty Radice, wood-engravings by Raymond Hawthorn (London: The Folio Society, 1977).
- ⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *La Nouvelle Héloïse (Julie, or The New Eloise: Letters of two lovers, inhabitants of a small town at the foot of the alps)* (1761), translated and abridged by Judith H. McDowell (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1987).
- ⁹ Rousseau, 25; 35.
- ¹⁰ Susan Manning, "Introduction", in *Henry Mackenzie, Julia de Roubigné*, edited with an Introduction by Susan Manning (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1999), xi.
- ¹¹ This applies even to works in which most of the narrating characters are actively deceiving one another. This essay, however, concentrates on cases in which the characters have a conscious expectation of honesty.
- ¹² Altman, 119.
- ¹³ Henry Mackenzie, *Julia de Roubigné*, edited with an Introduction by Susan Manning (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1999), 55.
- ¹⁴ Mackenzie, 8.
- ¹⁵ Mackenzie, 36.
- ¹⁶ Mackenzie, 77.
- ¹⁷ Mackenzie, 37.
- ¹⁸ Susan Manning, "Notes", in *Henry Mackenzie, Julia de Roubigné*, edited with an Introduction by Susan Manning (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1999), 147.
- ¹⁹ Mackenzie, 9; 20.
- ²⁰ For example, Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 36-37.
- ²¹ Mackenzie, 86.
- ²² Altman, 138.
- ²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (1990), translated by Kathleen Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 32.
- ²⁴ Ricoeur, 121-127.
- ²⁵ Kauffman, 52.
- ²⁶ Ricoeur, 32.
- ²⁷ Ricoeur, 185.
- ²⁸ Ricoeur, 182-185.
- ²⁹ Altman, 140.
- ³⁰ Discussed in Olav Bryant Smith, *Myths of the Self: Narrative Identity and Postmodern Metaphysics* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2004), 58.
- ³¹ Michele L. Crossley, *Introducing Narrative Psychology: Self, Trauma and the Construction of Meaning* (Buckingham; Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 12.
- ³² See, for example, Ricoeur, 158.
- ³³ Mackenzie, 7.

³⁴ Mackenzie, 70.

³⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 30.

³⁶ Altman, 129.

³⁷ Quoted in Bray, 20.

³⁸ Crossley, 56-57.

³⁹ Mackenzie, 15.

⁴⁰ Mackenzie, 76.

⁴¹ Mackenzie, 35.

⁴² Mackenzie, 68.

⁴³ Mackenzie, 131.

⁴⁴ Mackenzie, 137.

⁴⁵ Mackenzie, 156.

⁴⁶ Crossley, 56.

⁴⁷ Julia Kristeva, "The ruin of a poetics", translated by Vivienne Mylne, in *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation*, Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt, eds. (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press; London: distributed by Chatto and Windus, 1973), 115.

⁴⁸ Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* (1923), translated and edited by Richard Sheldon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).