THE APPEARANCE OF LETTERS ON STAGES AND VASES

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I. INTRODUCTION*

In 1970, in an issue of the journal *Yale French Studies*, the semiotician Tzvetan Todorov explored the use of letters in Choderlos de Laclos’ eighteenth-century epistolary novel *Dangerous Liaisons*. Todorov claimed that:

> epistolary messages have a double meaning. On the one hand, they mean what the sentences that constitute them mean, and each letter says something different from the other. On the other hand, they possess a connotation, identical in the mind of all, which is that of the “letter” as a social phenomenon, and this connotation is in addition, or even in opposition, to the literal message of each letter.

Todorov then identified three specific connotations of letters as social phenomena in Laclos’ novel: first, a letter signifies news; second, a letter implies that one is on intimate terms with the person with whom one corresponds; and third, a letter is based on an assumption of authenticity, or, in other words, as opposed to a message that is delivered orally, the letter asserts a sure proof.

While scholarship on epistolary narrative has come a long way since 1970, Todorov’s observations on the multiple meanings of epistolary messages remain a useful starting point for discussion. Many of the essays in Ruth Morello and Andrew Morrison’s anthology *Ancient Letters* (2007), for example, focus on letters precisely as social phenomena. My study will develop a slightly different angle on Todorov’s categorization: I am interested in the letter not just as a social phenomenon, but also as a physical phenomenon.

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1 Todorov 1970: 113–126; quotation from p. 115.
As another scholar working on Laclos puts it, “that the letter is can be far more weighty than what it means”. Or, to return to more familiar classical material, William Fitzgerald argues eloquently in Morello and Morrison’s volume that, “as pignus, the letter acquires a materiality that takes it one step beyond the speech act it performs”. Fitzgerald refers specifically to Pliny’s correspondence, dividing letters into what they report (content) and what they convey (connotation). Pliny’s friend Ferox writes that he has no time for his studies; that cannot be, replies Pliny, since his letter is clearly the work of a man who is studious (Pliny Ep. 7.13). Fitzgerald points out that, “as the product of studium, Ferox’s letter is the thing itself, and cancels its own statement”. The letter is not just proof of the writer’s studiousness, but the actual equivalent of making time for studies. So what the letter is—i.e. intellectual work—cancels out what it says—that its author has no time for educating himself. Here Pliny seems to value the letter’s testimony above the writer’s. Through its connotations, the letter actually testifies against its author’s words: the connotations of this letter are in opposition to its contents.

Ferox’s letter gained weight, as it were, once it was opened and read by its addressee, Pliny. But a letter can also testify to something before it is opened: a sealed letter has power even in silence, as a physical object. It can function in its narrative without needing to be read. In Laclos’ Dangerous Liaisons, the nobleman Valmont sends the same letter four times to the woman he is trying to seduce. He predicts correctly that his victim, the virtuous Présidente de Tourvel, will return his letters unopened and unread, and he boasts that he saves both time and energy by leaving the letter undated and simply slipping it into a new envelope each time. He repeatedly resends the same letter because what is critical to his success at this initial level of seduction is that the Présidente accept the letter, not that she read it. Valmont’s persistence pays off when the Présidente finally accepts his letter in order to avoid further scandal—or so she tells herself. Her acceptance of that letter, of course, is the first step in her eventual downfall. As in the case of Fitzgerald’s Pliny, the Présidente’s response can be understood to reveal something different from what it actually says: she writes back to Valmont that he must stop sending letters; but the very act of writing back reveals

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