

Bodies of Correspondence in Contemporary Québec: from Gabrielle Roy to *le vrai* Gab  
Roy

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## The Legacy of Letters in Québec

*Pendant longtemps, des textes qui ailleurs appartiendraient aux marges de l'histoire littéraire en forment ici l'armature.*

-Michel Biron et al., *Histoire de la littérature québécoise*

The celebrated book *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* traces nearly half a millennium of Québec's literary production, from 1534 (the year Jacques Cartier “discovered” Canada and composed the first of three travel accounts) to 2005. Produced by Michel Biron, François Dumont and Elisabeth Nardout-Lafarge in collaboration with Martine-Emmanuelle Lapointe, *Histoire de la littérature québécoise* was published by Les Éditions du Boréal in 2007 and again in 2010, and continues to serve as a definitive reference guide on the literature of Québec for students and specialists alike. The brief excerpt from the volume quoted above affirms that Québec's foundational texts are writings that in other places, and “pendant longtemps,” would be relegated to the margins of literary history. The surrounding passage clarifies the types of texts in question:

Pour beaucoup de commentateurs, y compris nous-mêmes, le meilleur de la littérature québécoise se trouve à certaines époques du côté de genres non canoniques, comme la chronique ou la correspondance, et non du côté du roman ou de la poésie. Le mot “littéraire” a donc une acception particulièrement large au Québec. Pendant longtemps, des textes qui ailleurs appartiendraient aux marges de l'histoire littéraire en forment ici l'armature (12).

In this excerpt, the trio of scholars not only justifies the inclusion of ‘non canonical’ texts in their collection, but claims chronicles and correspondence among “the best” of Québec’s literary production. Biron et al. do not overtly specify what constitutes the “certaines époques” when such texts reign supreme, but immediately prior to the passage cited here they allude to the period of “la Nouvelle-France” (1534-1763) as well as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is presumably these epochs when non-canonical genres enjoy the privileged status the authors describe.<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, these centuries are associated with an abundance of epistolary texts. From the years between the arrival of Cartier in Canada (1534) and the Conquest by the British military (1760), a total of around fifty French-Canadian texts have been preserved and praised for their historic and literary worth. Correspondence penned by legendary figures like Marie de l’Incarnation,<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Bégon<sup>3</sup> and Jesuits Paul le Jeune and Jean

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the volume’s two opening sections (“Les écrits de la Nouvelle-France (1534-1763)” and “Écrire pour la nation (1763-1895)”) include the largest number of letters and chronicles. While these genres are not entirely absent from later sections of the book, poetry, novels and theatre represent the vast majority of the works cited therein.

<sup>2</sup> Marie de l’Incarnation, née Marie Guyard (spelled “Guyart” in some scholarship), is widely heralded as early Québec’s most celebrated correspondent. An Ursuline from Tours, the earliest letters of *Lettres de la révérende mère*, penned in 1632, predate her departure for the new world. These letters express Marie’s “extrême désir d’aller en Canada” (36) and document her repeated requests to be stationed there following a powerful mystic vision. Marie became Mother Superior of the first convent in Québec in the early 17<sup>th</sup>-century and a prolific letter writer to her family back in France (particularly her son, Claude Martin) and to her religious community. Hundreds of her letters (filling many hundreds of pages) are available in manuscripts at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa as well as in widely-available published collections in print and online. Many of Marie’s letters informed the annual reports sent to superiors in Europe from her contemporary Jesuit missionaries also stationed in the region. Caroline M. Woidat carefully traces the citations of Marie ‘Guyart’’s writings across six distinct volumes of the Jesuit Relations, where her words are included “with and without crediting her as author” (14).

<sup>3</sup> Born in Québec in 1696, Élisabeth Bégon is the author of nine distinct “cahiers” of letters intended for her son-in-law, who moved between France and Louisiana. Bégon filled her notebooks without always knowing where to send them and without much confidence that they contained material of interest to their addressee. The missives act as a source of consolation to

de Brébeuf<sup>4</sup> represents a substantial portion of these extant writings. Well before a literary institution was established in the “New World,” letters moved between France and its nascent colony in Canada, documenting the experience and developing the imaginary of life in *la Nouvelle France*. Critical volumes and anthologies of Québec’s literary history consistently highlight correspondence of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and to a somewhat lesser extent that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as well,<sup>5</sup> as major works. *Histoire de la littérature québécoise*, *La Vie littéraire au Québec*, *Le Québec, un pays, une culture* and *Histoire de la littérature canadienne-française* all affirm the important, even foundational, place of letters in Québec’s early literature.

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the widow who mourns the separation from one of her few remaining kin (much of the language of the letters conveys more than maternal affection, suggesting Bégon harbored a thinly-veiled illicit love for her late daughter’s husband), as well as a daily documentation of life between 1748 and 1753, in some of the last years of the French régime in Canada before English control. Bégon’s letters fell into obscurity for centuries, but were rediscovered in 1932 and later published as *Lettres au cher fils*. Despite Bégon’s own doubts as to their worth, her missives have proven to be of great interest to 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>-century scholars as they represent the only collection of writings by a French-Canadian lay woman of her time (See the article by Marie-France Silver and Marie-Laure Girou-Swidorski).

<sup>4</sup> The *Jesuit Relations* composed between 1632 and 1672 represent the most extensive and illustrative writings of early Québec and Canada. Though they are rarely thought of as epistolary texts, historian Allan Greer reminds us that the *Relations* are compilations of letters: “It began with detailed letters from priests in the field, the most important usually being the one brought down by the summer canoe brigade from the Huron Country. The superior at Québec would compile and edit these letters, paraphrasing some parts, copying others verbatim, and forwarding the whole package to France” (14). Father Paul Le Jeune was the first superior at Québec, and as such he compiled and composed the annual *Relation* from 1632 until 1639. In fact, Le Jeune continued to write and influence the Jesuit Relations from New France well beyond 1639, for he was succeeded by Vimont, a Superior far less fond of writing the *Relations* than his predecessor, so Le Jeune continued to write until 1642. He returned to France in 1649 and assumed the position of procurator of the Canadian missions; in this capacity he continued to oversee, edit, and in some cases contribute to the *Relations*. A major contributor to the Relations under Le Jeune’s leadership was Jean de Brébeuf, whose correspondence on the Huron people highlights the ethnographic interest of these early epistolary texts.

<sup>5</sup> Celebrated correspondence of the 19<sup>th</sup> century includes that of the couple Papineau (wife Julie Bruneau and husband Louis-Joseph) and Octave Crémazie and Henri-Raymond Casgrain (the subsequent section of the present chapter will briefly treat Crémazie and Casgrain’s correspondence).

However, critical scholarship has yet to supply comparable inventories and analyses of Québec's more recent epistolary expression. The "Pendant longtemps" that opens the epigraphical citation, and affirms the well-established embrace of non-canonical forms like correspondence in Québec, can therefore also be understood to signal that this acceptance and acclaim are in and of the past.<sup>6</sup> Though letters are largely lauded for their undeniable and rich historic literary role, they are rarely recognized or researched as a persistent, and even defining form of contemporary Québécois literature.

The nearest exceptions to this general deficiency have been produced by Benoît Melançon, an epistolary specialist with the *Université de Montréal* and the *Association interdisciplinaire de recherche sur l'épistolaire*. In his works *Écrire au pape et au Père Noël* (2011) and "Épistol@rités, d'aujourd'hui à hier" (2013), Melançon draws heavily upon a Québécois corpus as he signals the diversity and interest of contemporary epistolary expression. However, his research pursues an epistolary imaginary that is "global" (2011, 154), that is "à chercher partout" (156), and his expansive corpus includes letter texts from England, Germany, France, Québec, the United States and other locations. To date, expressions of a collective and contemporary epistolary imaginary have yet to be sought out and situated in a specifically Québécois context.

The present study attempts to address this gap with an examination of the place and imaginary of Québec's epistolary expression from approximately 1945 to 2015, a

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<sup>6</sup> "Depuis longtemps" would signify an ongoing action or state; "pendant longtemps" makes epistolary excellence a historic phenomenon. While one might also understand the phrase as indicating (and thus limiting) the time that such texts were marginalized in other places, the continued debates in epistolary criticism about letters and/as/versus literature defy this interpretation. (See the section "Bodies of Correspondence" later in this chapter).

period in which the privileged status correspondence enjoyed in centuries prior has diminished, though letters remain abundant and integral to Québec's literary production. My intervention does not offer an inventory of the recent epistolary production of Québec;<sup>7</sup> the corpus I consider is partial rather than exhaustive and offers close readings of a relatively small, but decidedly diverse collection of Québec's correspondence. The epistolary and critical texts I have selected allow me to pursue queries about and through bodies of correspondence that can be brought to bear on contemporary epistolary expression that does not figure in the present study.

I use the word "correspondence" to encapsulate diverse expressions of epistolary writing that include correspondence via personal lettermail, letter fiction and digital forms of exchange. In much epistolary scholarship, the epistolary is used synonymously with the letter, but where letters can be reduced to the singular and read in isolation, correspondence indexes the plural and the collaborative, situating texts in relationship to other texts, including those that circulate outside of the post or of publishing houses. Correspondence can exist in unexpected and unintended places, and my engagement with correspondence involves reading beyond a one-to-one, back-and-forth dialogue and extends to less immediate but more suggestive comparative analyses. Indeed, the correspondence I consider goes *across* more often than *between*: across genres, across media, across theories and across time, rather than strictly between two writing individuals.

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<sup>7</sup> The two texts by Melançon cited above collectively offer a vast epistolary inventory that illustrates the breadth, abundance and interest of both classical and contemporary letters from Québec and elsewhere. My bibliography is greatly indebted to his.

I also employ the term “correspondence” to refer to my objects of study because of the French “*corps*” that can be heard at the start of the word, and that I emphasize with the formulation “bodies of correspondence.” My project interrogates “bodies” of correspondence in two senses: the first concerns the way epistolary expression is commonly categorized into distinct textual corpuses that scholarship treats separately; the second examines corporeality, or the material, bodily imaginary that closely accompanies epistolary production and criticism.

I ascribe the correspondence I consider to “Contemporary Québec.” There is no universally-agreed on period or movement that “contemporary” designates; for the purposes of my project, I intend it to mean the mid-twentieth century through the present, and the adjective might be applied to “bodies of correspondence” as much as to “Québec.” Though the temporal scope of my inquiry into “contemporary” writings differs from that of Pierre Nepveu in his book *L'Ecologie du reel: Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine*, like Nepveu, I am interested in keeping my “contemporary” corpus loosed from overly facile or entrenched critical readings. For Nepveu, writing at the close of the 1980s, the word “contemporary” allowed him to distinguish his approach from familiar nationalist interpretations of Québécois literature and culture (“repenser le mode d’être de la littérature et de la culture québécoises, moins en tant que littérature ou culture nationales, qu’en tant que contemporaines” (10)). My intervention emerges from the premise that epistolary expression today, though born out of an extremely rich epistolary heritage, requires evolving rules of reading that move correspondence beyond nostalgic notions of an enduring temporality of the ‘before’ and

toward new epistolary imaginings. It is my hope that the term “contemporary” may serve as shorthand for my appraisal of correspondence as a living and evolving means of expression that enters into multidirectional exchange with preceding, contemporaneous and future forms of epistolarity.

In the pages that follow, I will present the historic status of the epistolary in Québec as articulated by one of the most influential critics of early Québécois literature, Henri-Raymond Casgrain. Casgrain’s assessment of correspondence points to one of the fundamental and unresolved questions of epistolary scholarship, that of the relationship between letters and literature and the loaded choice of preposition or prepositional phrase: can or should one speak of letters *as* literature? of letters *before* or *beneath* literature? of letters *in the margins* of literature? After considering Casgrain’s placement of the letter and the ‘physiognomy’ he ascribes to it, I will trace discourse of an epistolary *genre* as a means of delineating distinct bodies of correspondence, and then point to philosophies that underpin an equation of letters with physical bodies. Following this historical and critical overview, I will outline the generic and temporal scope of my epistolary intervention and present a brief summary of the remaining chapters of “Bodies of Correspondence in Contemporary Québec: from Gabrielle Roy to *le vrai* Gab Roy.”

## Letters in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Québec: “une physionomie trop européenne”

If the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries represent a sort of ‘golden age of letters’<sup>8</sup> in Québec, where correspondence is hailed as furnishing some of the finest specimens of French-Canadian literature, we have already intimated that the privileged place of letters starts to slip in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though correspondence remains a primary mode of communication throughout the 1800s, and the century sees the emergence of French letter fiction in Canada,<sup>9</sup> the increasing production of poetry, novels and other ‘canonical’ genres of literature begins to eclipse the prominence of correspondence in French-Canada’s literary history. The burgeoning literary criticism that also develops in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially through the work of Henri-Raymond Casgrain, offers insight into the status of the epistolary in and as literature during this period.

Henri-Raymond Casgrain was an abbot, historian and author who has been called the father of French-Canadian literature - a title he envisioned and assumed for himself during his lifetime as he promoted the development of a national literature and literary institution. Though Casgrain authored numerous folktales, poems and biographies, his

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<sup>8</sup> The ‘golden age of letters’ is frequently used to describe the early modern period of France and the broader Atlantic world that experienced a marked increase in literacy, women writers, the circulation of private and public correspondence, letter-writing manuals and epistolary novels around the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> Québec’s earliest foray into letter fiction was produced in English by a near-contemporary of Elisabeth Bégon, a British-born Anglophone named Frances Brooke. An established writer and translator in England, Brooke moved to Québec for a number of years during post-*Conquête* English rule, where she drafted Québec’s (some say North America’s) first novel: *The History of Emily Montague*, published (in London) in 1769. The letters that make up Brooke’s epistolary novel are exchanged among recently-arrived English colonists in Québec City and with their family members and friends remaining in Europe. Though the central intrigue of the novel is a love story, the religion, mores and women of French and First Nation societies are subjects of sustained interest, and Brooke’s book, despite its fictional status, is commonly read as an accurate documentation of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Canadian culture and politics.

most enduring legacy is due to his critical work in a budding literary sphere. He spent much of his career working with writers and publishing houses, coaching, critiquing, and censoring with his conservative literary agenda. Casgrain was also quite a prolific correspondent, and his writings in and on the epistolary illustrate and shape the place of letters in literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the fourth volume of *La vie littéraire au Québec*, the section entitled “Les correspondances inédites et éditées” recounts that it is during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that private letters begin to be published for public consumption in Québec. The first example the anthology provides of such published correspondence is that of Octave Crémazie. Crémazie was one of the great romantic poets of Québec, though his poetry is considered at times to be secondary to his important work as one of Québec’s early literary critics. Crémazie co-owned a bookstore with his brother in Québec City, and the back room of the store served as a meeting space for some of Québec’s most prominent literary intellectuals of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Crémazie was later forced to flee Québec because of his outstanding debts and associated judicial pursuits. He lived out the rest of his life in exile in France, but he maintained contact with certain members of Québec’s literary circle, notably l’Abbé Casgrain, through letters.

Casgrain published Crémazie’s correspondence as a part of the poet’s posthumous *Œuvres complètes*. In his biographical remarks on *Octave Crémazie*, the abbot raises possible points of protestation for the letters’ (which are addressed to Casgrain) inclusion in the collection, but he ultimately justifies his choice to publish these personal missives

by quoting an unnamed “friend,” whom he identifies only as “un écrivain dont le nom fait autorité” (5). Casgrain attributes the friend with saying of Crémazie’s letters, “elles renferment des aperçus littéraires, des jugements sur nos hommes de lettres, des coups d’œil sur la situation intellectuelle du pays qui sont d’autant plus intéressants qu’ils datent déjà d’une quinzaine d’années. Ils serviront à mesurer la marche des esprits et le mouvement des lettres pendant cette période” (6). Interestingly, the term “lettres” appears twice in this passage about Crémazie’s correspondence without referencing the letters themselves. The “hommes de lettres” and “mouvement des lettres” do not concern fellow correspondents or the movement of missives, but literary men (writers) and the development of literary culture or of literature proper. “Lettres” here designates literature or *belles-lettres*, and Crémazie’s *lettres* do not qualify as “*lettres*.” His letters provide insight into literature with their “aperçus,” “jugements” and “coups d’œil,” but they themselves are not counted in that literature.

The “mouvement des lettres” that Crémazie’s correspondence measures is in fact a “mouvement littéraire.” This is precisely what Casgrain writes of in his oft-cited essay of 1866, “le Mouvement littéraire en Canada,” where the abbot identifies what he deems to be the essential qualities of Canadian literature. The “littérature nationale,” according to Casgrain, would be “grave, méditative, spiritualiste, religieuse, évangélisatrice comme nos missionnaires, généreuse comme nos martyrs, énergique et persévérante comme nos pionniers d’autrefois ; [...] Mais surtout elle sera essentiellement croyante et religieuse” (quoted in Biron et al., 98). Casgrain calls for a literature at once patriotic and moralizing that manifests the qualities of the country’s French-speaking colonizers: the missionaries,

the martyrs, the pioneers. Such figures recall the celebrated letter writers of the preceding centuries, and accordingly, Casgrain draws upon 17<sup>th</sup>-century letters to inform his own literary contributions. For example, he penned *Histoire de la mère Marie de l'Incarnation, première supérieure des ursulines de la Nouvelle France* based upon the biological and spiritual revelations available in the Reverend Mother's extensive correspondence.

Casgrain's uses of Crémazie's and Marie de l'Incarnation's letters together exhibit a common and enduring assessment of the relationship of correspondence to literature: letters may inform or illuminate literature, but they remain outside of its ranks. In this model, correspondence runs parallel to literature or precedes it, and Casgrain seems to foreshadow part of a 20th-century turn in criticism where "La norme littéraire est prise en France. Du coup on considère que les écrits de la Nouvelle-France sont tout au plus de la pré-littérature et qui plus est, à part Madame Bégon, un corpus qui appartient aux Français puisqu'écrit par des Français" (Thérien 6). Though Casgrain does not attribute writings of New France to the French, the notion of a "pre-literature" does seem to preoccupy his apprehension of the epistolary in relation to the teleology of literature he sets forth.<sup>10</sup> Crémazie's letters are seen to be more valuable because they represent an otherwise irretrievable past ("ils datent déjà d'une quinzaine d'années"); Marie's letters are material to be made into literature through Casgrain's biography. Correspondence is esteemed to have literary worth when it is *about* literature or *about to become* literature.

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<sup>10</sup> If he is the 'father of French-Canadian literature,' then writings that precede him would not earn the designation of "French-Canadian literature."

Though Casgrain funnels letters toward literature, when confronted with letters *in* literature, as in the novel *Angéline de Montbrun*, he derides the epistolary. Reading Casgrain's "Étude sur *Angéline de Montbrun*" against Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun* allows us to more fully appreciate how Casgrain advocates for a monologic and authoritative national literature that is at odds with the multi-directionality and inter(-)textuality of correspondence.

Penned by author Félicité Angers under the pseudonym Laure Conan and published for the first time in 1882, *Angéline de Montbrun* offers one of the earliest examples of letter fiction in French-Canada.<sup>11</sup> The novel is not exclusively epistolary, but letters penned by characters Maurice and Mina Darville, Angéline and Charles de Montbrun, Emma S., and Véronique Désileux occupy more than half of the book. The remaining pages are composed of a series of journal entries written by Angéline and include a very limited amount of omniscient narration. The polyphonic nature of the text departs from other Canadian literary production of its day, as does its expression of emotion and passion that earn it the designation of the first 'psychological novel' of Québec.

Mary Jean Matthews Green writes of *Angéline de Montbrun*, "The novel violated the existing canons of literary discourse in many ways, yet far from being censured or ignored, it was hailed by the literary establishment of the day, in the person of Henri-Raymond Casgrain" (21). Casgrain's "Étude sur *Angéline de Montbrun*" served as a preface to the work in early publications, and while it is largely laudatory, it includes

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<sup>11</sup> As well as the first full-length novel to be published by a woman in Québec

considerable criticism as well. His critiques begin with the statement, “avec toutes ces qualités, le roman d’*Angéline de Montbrun* n’est pas sans défauts: il y a un trop grand nombre de citations, de réminiscences [...] On aimerait à [écouter l’auteur] plus souvent seule” (10). He continues, “Laure Conan, j’y insiste, se souvient plus qu’il ne faut de ses lectures. Son esprit est encore trop chez les autres, elle n’est pas assez elle-même” (10-11). Casgrain considers the book’s citations of and allusions to other works and writers a weakness. His use of terms like “seule” and “elle-même” emphasizes his advocacy for a strong authorial voice and minimal intertextuality.

Michael Holquist elucidates two forms of inter(-)textuality in his book *Dialogism*. “Novels,” he writes, “are overwhelmingly intertextual, constantly referring, within themselves, to other works outside them.” This is the intertextuality Casgrain initially condemns in Conan’s novel. Holquist continues, “But in addition, [novels] simultaneously manifest inter-textuality in their display of the enormous variety of discourses used in different historical periods and by disparate social classes” (88). The inter-textual nature of *Angéline de Montbrun* might be understood, in part, as stemming from historically and socially diverse discourses, but I find the term more useful to articulate the co-existence and internal circulation of texts within *Angéline de Montbrun* in the form of letters by its sundry characters. The novel is intertextual in its engagement with texts circulating outside its pages, and inter-textual in the multiplicity and diversity of texts circulating within it.

Laure Conan’s use of inter-textuality is also subject to Casgrain’s disapproval. He states, “Le plus grave inconvénient de sa manière actuelle, c’est qu’elle donne à son livre

une physionomie trop européenne” (11). Casgrain’s accusation of “une physionomie trop européenne” in Conan’s writing is immediately followed by references to the Seine and to two French authors, and French women in particular. The abbott’s use of ‘European’ therefore quickly becomes synonymous with ‘French.’ In his estimation, the young novelist draws too much inspiration from France; her work resembles France and its writers too closely.

Casgrain likens Laure Conan to Eugénie de Guérin, a French woman writer whose *Journal* and *Lettres* predate *Angéline de Montbrun* by about twenty years. In calling Conan a ‘sister’ of Guérin (12), Casgrain brings to the fore the epistolary nature of *Angéline de Montbrun*. The abbot somewhat condescendingly grants that “cette parenté et ce voisinage” with Guérin “sont charmants,” but hastens to add, “cependant n'oublions pas que ces lettres qui forment le livre *d'Angéline de Montbrun* sont des prémices: c'est un bel oranger, chargé de fleurs; laissons mûrir les pommes d'Hespérides [...] En attendant d'autres révélations de son talent, jouissons de ce [que Laure Conan] nous donne aujourd'hui” (12). With this declaration, Casgrain suggests that the epistolary form of Conan’s writing is attributable to the author’s immaturity. The letters are but the very beginnings of a literary career, a tree that has flowered but has yet to bear fruit. With this infantilizing language, Casgrain again situates the epistolary as a sort of “pre-literature,” a form that is not fully realized or ‘ripened.’

As he goes on to praise the merits of Conan’s present book, Casgrain effectively reduces the novel to a single speaker. His analysis focuses exclusively on Angéline: the lengthy citations he includes in his study are solely her words, and he presents the

protagonist's fate in a linear fashion completely contrary to Conan's style. By privileging Angéline's story and journal - while ignoring the letters that fill the early pages of the novel and remain interspersed throughout Angéline's journal entries later in the book - Casgrain reduces the multi-voicedness, multi-directionality and inter-textuality of Conan's book to the single voice and fate of Angéline, and makes it abundantly clear that the "physionomie trop européenne" that he condemns as the novel's greatest defect resides precisely in its epistolarity.

To my reading, the assertion that Angéline de Montbrun has "une physionomie trop européenne" at once 1) situates letters elsewhere – in a place (France) and a time (before) outside of the literature of Québec - while foreclosing correspondence with their epistolary predecessors, and 2) places the epistolary in conversation with a corporeal imaginary that has implications for who writes letters and how they are read.

The word "physionomie" has strong associations with the face and with facial features; when he writes of "une physionomie trop européenne," Casgrain selects a term with bodily overtones, and this is a common thread in discussions of the epistolary. French scholar Michel Foucault writes of correspondence as a form of baring the face and writing the self in a short text entitled "L'écriture de soi." Foucault writes:

Écrire, c'est donc 'se montrer,' se faire voir, faire apparaître son propre visage auprès de l'autre. Et, par là, il faut comprendre que la lettre est à la fois un regard qu'on porte sur le destinataire (par la missive qu'il reçoit, il se sent regardé) et une manière de se donner à son regard par ce qu'on lui dit de soi-même. La lettre aménage d'une certaine manière un face-à-face. (16-17)

For Foucault, an epistolary *écriture de soi* both relies upon an embodied addressee and emphasizes the bodily presence of the letter writer. His suggestion of an epistolary “face-à-face” stages an almost physical encounter between the writing and reading correspondents, and he frames this physicality as “presence” or being “present”: “La lettre rend le scripteur ‘présent’ à celui auquel il l'adresse.” Foucault goes on to specify that the writer is not simply present through the information he imparts about his life, activities, successes and failures, but that he is “présent d'une sorte de présence immédiate et quasi physique.” The presence Foucault describes is dependent upon a bridge between the letter and the body.

In the following section, we will consider the possibilities of a properly Québécois epistolary ‘physiognomy’ through discussions of the letter and the body or bodies as couched in discourse of an epistolary and a women’s *genre*.

### **Bodies of Correspondence**

Within the critical epistolary tradition, the governing logic of what letters are worthy of study, what letters can be read together, and what approach will govern their analysis often turns upon the question of *genre*. Determining *genre* involves classification, an identification of common characteristics, and the exclusion of that which is determined to be “other.” While “genre” is often spoken of in the singular – scholars write of an epistolary genre rather than epistolary genres, this genre is not all-

encompassing, and elements of epistolary expression are consistently left out of these generic contours and their rules of reading.

In 1982, Janet Gurkin Altman wrote a seminal work for the field entitled *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* in which she not only identifies essential characteristics of epistolary writing, but argues that the particular ways in which letters create meaning should inform how they are read and interpreted. Though the subtitle of her book uses the word “form” instead of “genre,” Altman expresses her “hope to be laying the ground for a more serious consideration of the epistolary form as a genre rather than merely as one type of narrative technique” (10). Altman’s exploration of genre very convincingly points to the “consistency of epistolary meaning” (190) through polarities such as portrait/mask, presence/absence, or bridge/barrier (186), but *Epistolarity* limits its scope to “letter fiction” (3) and Altman’s term “epistolary literature” applies primarily to published works that have earned the designation of “literature” through their classification first as novels. Altman’s findings on epistolarity do not extend to letters outside of fiction; however, her inclusion of the letters of Madame de Sévigné within her bibliography and analysis demonstrates how easily slippages surrounding notions of “fiction” and “literature” occur.

The extensive collection of letters by Madame de Sévigné, penned over the course of more than half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was published for the first time after her death in 1725. Her privileged addressee was her beloved daughter, Françoise, and her missives testify above all to her maternal affection, though they also speak of courtly affairs, home and family, as well as 17<sup>th</sup>-century French society. These historic letters are now

securely fixed in the French literary canon and are often cited as both model and inspiration for the wealth of epistolary fiction generated in 18<sup>th</sup>-century France. Despite their uncontested influence, Madame de Sévigné's *Lettres* have incited heated debates about what constitutes literature, what an "epistolary genre" might consist of, and how letters should be read.

Bernard Beugnot charts the "Débats autour du genre épistolaire" sparked by Madame de Sévigné's letters in an article published less than a decade before the publication of Janet Gurkin Altman's book. Beugnot recounts certain scholars' rejection of the notion of an epistolary "genre," preferring instead to speak of a "style épistolaire" where letters are kept "aux frontières de la littérature" (195). To call letters a "genre" is to acknowledge that they are "literature," and a private correspondence, without a "conscience littéraire" (198), they argue, does not constitute a literary work. Others contend that an epistolary genre indeed exists, but that Madame de Sévigné's *Lettres* defy the designation for the ways in which they depart from the conventions of the form.<sup>12</sup> These scholars distance Sévigné's letters from the epistolary genre, preferring to situate them closer to the generic model of the novel. Still others maintain that it is Madame de Sévigné who elevates the epistolary art to a literary genre.

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<sup>12</sup> Though Beugnot does not expound upon the arguments that cast Sévigné's letters as unconventional, Altman explains the exceptional nature of Sévigné's epistles in her contribution to *A New History of French Literature*. Altman associates the early 17<sup>th</sup> century with an extreme codification of epistles, where attempts to standardize the grammar and spelling of the vernacular as well as codes of courtly behavior became inscribed in letters that were highly formulaic and limited in scope. Topics concerned with domestic or governmental affairs were strictly taboo and imitation was valued over originality. The extensive collection of letters by Madame de Sévigné provides an exception to these standards in their treatment of a wide range of subjects in an extremely personal tone.

As Madame de Sévigné's letters demonstrate, "real" letters that do not figure in the pages of a work of fiction are particularly contentious in discussions of epistolary genre. The different takes on the question of genre that Beugnot sets forth make evident the easy conflation of "genre" with "literature" in an epistolary context, and introduce diverse criteria for inclusion in an epistolary genre ranging from publication, to authorial intention, literary conscience and quality of writing.

By insisting that "genre" remain in the singular, many letter scholars end up truncating the epistolary to a reduced range of expression to consider only letters of epistolary novels, or letters in other published works of fiction, or personal correspondence of exemplary quality, or the correspondence of authors better known for other, published works... As this still very partial list portrays, delineations around epistolarity refuse to hold steady, and the epistolary genre is continually shifting, expanding and seeking to draw other texts into correspondence. Anna Jaubert asks the provocative question, "faut-il ériger la pratique épistolaire en genre ?" arguing that "La pratique épistolaire peut se diversifier en autant de sous-genres que l'on imagine de types d'interactions entre des individus" (225). What Jaubert calls 'subgenres,' I call bodies of correspondence. I refer to bodies of correspondence in the plural precisely because the epistolary of Québec spills out of any given medium and spills over the Atlantic and into other traditions, exchanges and conversations.

The epistolary imaginary that I explore cannot be parsed into different subgenres or bodies of correspondence. Thomas O. Beebee, in an article on the letters by and about Susannah Minifie Gunning, throws light on "how difficult it is to extricate any single

letter from a nexus of texts that includes both natural and fictive discourses” (67) and on “how the instrument of correspondence lies at the crux of the tensions and complicities” (61-62) between public and private and fictional and genuine. Fictional letters are informed by real ones, and real letters are beholden to the same epistolary imaginary. I therefore read varying expressions of correspondence using techniques of literary analysis – close readings with attention to language, form and (hidden) meaning(s) – without the preoccupation of how these texts might illuminate literature as a separate entity or a universal epistolary genre. Instead, I am much more interested in what these letters tell us about other letters, how they engage in a correspondence around the epistolary and, more specifically, the diversity of epistolary expression of and in contemporary Québec.

Recasting the epistolary *genre* as *bodies of correspondence* also allows us to complicate “genre” in the sense of gender. The epistolary form has long been associated with women, and the perseverance of this association is evident in the titles of recent scholarly conferences and publications such as *L'épistolaire au féminin*,<sup>13</sup> *L'épistolaire, un genre féminin?*,<sup>14</sup> *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*,<sup>15</sup> and *Femmes en toutes lettres*.<sup>16</sup> Historically speaking, there have been very legitimate reasons for considering the epistolary as a privileged site of feminine expression. Much feminist epistolary

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<sup>13</sup> Diaz, Brigitte and Jürgen Siess (ed). *L'Épistolaire au féminin: Correspondances de femmes: XVIIe-XXe siècle: Colloque de Cerisy-la-Salle, 1<sup>er</sup>-5 octobre, 2003: actes*. Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> Planté, Christine (ed). *L'épistolaire, un genre féminin?* Paris: Champion, 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Goodman, Dena. *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Silver, Marie-France and Marie-Laure Girou Swiderski (ed). *Femmes en toutes lettres: Les Epistolières du XVIIIe siècle*. Oxford: The Voltaire Foundation, 2000.

scholarship begins with the important premise that (Western) women gained access to writing through epistolary exchange in increasing numbers beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that letters developed into an important genre for women writers. Maïre Cross and Caroline Bland describe the nearly universal accessibility of the epistolary form, claiming that “The letter is one of the most democratic of genres as it is accessible to the barely literate, the well-educated, men and women, young and old” (6). In particular, Cross and Bland emphasize how the accessibility of the form has been powerful and important for women since the 1700s. Brigitte Diaz, for her part, affirms that from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>, “[la lettre] met à l’épreuve une compétence d’écriture que les femmes, dans leur grande majorité, ne sauraient exercer ailleurs” (11).

In this vein, epistolary scholarship often examines how women have used epistolary practice within specific cultural and historic situations as a platform to explore their identity as women and as writers, and to negotiate, embrace or resist their position within society. Dena Goodman argues in her book *Becoming a Woman in the Age of Letters*, “For women, letter writing was not simply a form of recreation or a second-best alternative to public writing; it was a crucial step in developing a consciousness of themselves as gendered subjects in the modern world” (4). For Diaz, “Déclinée au féminin, la correspondance semble s’investir d’une dimension expérimentale: elle devient le vecteur privilégié d’une réflexion dialogique sur l’identité, les places et les postures sociales autorisées ou désirées par les femmes” (9-10). Both Diaz and Goodman see correspondence as a space of development and experimentation where the woman writer can consider herself and/in society.

Letters are not only associated with women writers but with women's writing. A prominent Québécoise feminist, Madeleine Gagnon, who has collaborated and published with Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc, has used the letter form as a privileged site to demonstrate *l'écriture féminine*. (We will read Gagnon's *La lettre infinie* in the chapter "When the 'After' is 'Already': Philosophical Fiction of the *Postal*.") In the critical work *Écrire dans la maison du père*, Patricia Smart draws upon the work of Cixous and Luce Irigaray to frame the "*différence*" of women's writing as "textured writing." Smart cites the epistolary form (and Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun* in particular) as an important example of such texture. Contrary to the traditional novel form where a single narrative voice presents a linear progression of events, Smart emphasizes that epistolary works multiply the number of voices heard, privilege the voice over the gaze, and disrupt a linear progression, not only through the multiplication of speakers, but through the very fact that not every letter must necessarily signify or work towards a cohesive end, but may simply delight in human exchange.

Texts from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup>, and from private correspondence to published epistolary fiction, have served to illustrate the justifiable association between letters and women. However, this gendered legacy of letters has also been critiqued as "the literary his-story conflating letters and women" (Simon, 8), a patriarchal construct founded on a decidedly unfeminist agenda. Let us take, for example, the statements of La Bruyère on women and letters. As early as 1688, La Bruyère famously wrote in *Les Caractères*:

Ce sexe va plus loin que le nôtre dans ce genre d'écrire. Elles trouvent sous leur plume des tours et des expressions qui souvent en nous ne sont l'effet que d'un long travail et d'une pénible recherche; elles sont heureuses dans le choix des termes, qu'elles placent si juste, que tout connus qu'ils sont, ils ont le charme de la nouveauté, semblent être faits seulement pour l'usage où elles les mettent; il n'appartient qu'à elles de faire lire dans un seul mot tout un sentiment, et de rendre délicatement une pensée qui est délicate; elles ont un enchaînement de discours inimitable, qui se suit naturellement, et qui n'est lié que par le sens. Si les femmes étaient toujours correctes, j'oserais dire que les lettres de quelques-unes d'entre elles seraient peut-être ce que nous avons dans notre langue de mieux écrit (Des ouvrages de l'esprit, 37 [IV]).

La Bruyère describes women as naturally gifted writers. In the absence of training or effort, they are able to express sentiments in a precise and moving way. This praise of women's writing is, however, limited; not only does he continually qualify his compliment with "ifs" and "perhaps" and the conditional, but by situating women's talents firmly in "*ce genre d'écriture*" (my emphasis) that is letters, he confines their expression to a marginalized and restricted *genre*. According to La Bruyère and many of his contemporaries, women excel in a particular style and form of writing, namely familiar (natural, authentic, and unpretentious; read: unpolitical and unpublished) letters. Similar sentiments regarding the superiority of women's epistolary writing were echoed in subsequent centuries by Stendhal and Barbey d'Aurévilly, among others, but for all the

praise of women as letter writers, letter scholars such as Elizabeth C. Goldsmith<sup>17</sup> remind us that women were generally discouraged from publishing their epistles, and that numerous examples of ‘feminine’ epistolary writing that are published have been produced by men assuming a pseudonym.

While epistolary criticism has quite effectively elucidated the reasons and/or pitfalls of reading letters as a women’s genre, I believe that a tacit corporeal logic that enables and underpins this association of the letter and the woman has not been efficiently explored. Marie-Claire Grassi turns the women-letters equation on its head when she writes that the letter is equated with a “sensibility considered foreign to the masculine.” Rather than seeking to either legitimate or debunk a link between the epistolary and the feminine, Grassi highlights the aversion of the masculine to the epistolary with her statement, “[La lettre] est tenue pour être non seulement l’expression d’une littérature marginale, mais surtout d’une sensibilité considérée comme étrangère au masculin. De là à allier lettre, écriture féminine et marginalité, il n’y a qu’un pas” (3). The articulation that Grassi puts forth of the letter-women’s writing-and marginality is one that I find highly useful, but wish to modify for the present study. The epistolary nexus I am interested in developing is that of the letter-woman-body.

Numerous feminist scholars have laid bare a patriarchal logic that conflates ‘the woman’ with ‘the body’ since antiquity. Evidence of this conflation is apparent in

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<sup>17</sup> Goldsmith, Elizabeth C. “Introduction.” *Writing the female voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989. vii-xiii.

Plato's writings, where the body/soul divide he establishes gives way to a thinly veiled misogyny. Elizabeth Spelman articulates:

Plato seems to want to make very firm his insistence on the destructiveness of the body to the soul. In doing so, he holds up for our ridicule and scorn those lives devoted to bodily pursuits. Over and over again, women's lives are depicted as being such lives. His misogyny, then, is part of his somatophobia: the body is seen as the source of all the undesirable traits a human being could have, and women's lives are spent manifesting those traits. (118)

Spelman uses the term "somatophobia" to describe not only Plato's "negative views about the body" (119), but the corporeal antagonism that characterizes Western philosophy more broadly by pitting the body against reason. In this somatophobic paradigm, men (that is, those men who experience particular forms of privilege) are not bound to the body or to nature, but associated with the mind, with culture, with intellectual prowess and with philosophical contributions. Women, on the other hand, along with slaves, animals and other sexually, racially and economically marginalized beings, are equated with the body, with the 'natural,' with the material and with the corporeal.

In nature/culture or body/soul dichotomies, the former terms are disadvantaged and associated with the *before*. Judith Butler draws attention to the tendency born out of "the de Beauvoirian version of feminism" that equates gender with culture and sex with nature to "[degrade] the natural as that which is 'before' intelligibility, in need of the mark, if not the mar, of the social to signify, to be known, to acquire value" (4-5). Even

when it is loosed from the question of “sex,” the notion of “nature” in the Western psyche is often associated with the ‘before.’ The “natural,” effortless sort of quality that La Bruyère gives to letters further enforces the epistolary as a sort of “pre-literature” that manifests itself in the absence of education or cultivation. Importantly, La Bruyère attributes these qualities to letters solely produced by women, and the qualities of the epistolary extend to their writers. Women, too, are the unformed and the uncultivated.

The tendency to associate the epistolary with women and with women follows the same logic of the enduring association between the letter and the body. Many letter writers and letter theorists attribute the bodiliness of the epistolary with the materiality of the letter as object - a sheet of paper carefully selected, written upon, folded and tucked into an envelope, perhaps bearing traces of the author’s tears, spritzed with perfume, or sealed with a kiss before being carried to its destination, and later tucked away for safekeeping in a box or a cabinet. Benoît Melançon, for example, has contended that the letter acts as a fetish for the physicality of its writer and/or recipient. He calls the letter,

ce signe du corps de l’autre avec lequel effacer son absence, ce signe de son propre corps remis à l’autre; il s’agissait d’offrir et de recevoir symboliquement des corps. Ces corps, ces lettres incarnées, se substituaient au présent dysphorique de la séparation: nous ne sommes pas ensemble et nous souffrons de cela, mais nous pouvons nous toucher et lutter contre les outrages du temps, nous unir *par* le papier (il faut y insister: pas seulement *sur* le papier) et rêver de retrouvailles.

In the epistolary imaginary Melançon articulates and perpetuates, bodies are (re)united through the letter, becoming themselves “letters incarnate” by the very paper on which they are inscribed and exchanged.

The letter-body connection that Melançon enunciates relies upon the letter as object, what he calls “l’objet-lettre,” and the materiality of the written page. Lyn Lloyd Irvine suggests a similar apprehension of the epistolary when he writes, in 1968, “while literature proper loses quickly its association with the pen and paper of the author, it is difficult to think of letters except as material things, placed upon inventories with the old cabinets and boxes in which they are preserved” (3). Though the letters and literature Irvine references can both be presumed to exist and circulate on paper, letters maintain a stronger link to their medium and materiality, and by extension, they are more connected to their creator. For Irvine, the letter’s paper and pen point to the writer that wielded them.

These equations between the epistolary and the body similarly serve to restrict correspondence to the ‘before.’ Melançon has used the letter-body link to argue that digital bodies of correspondence cannot be considered a part of the epistolary genre. In “Sévigné@Internet,” he argues that emails represent a radical break from traditional pen and paper letters and do not constitute a continuation of the epistolary. What manifests itself here as a desire to constrain the epistolary to a familiar form of materiality expresses itself elsewhere as an impulse to reduce epistolary writings to a single genre or a singularly gendered body.

While many valuable findings have come out of studies that focus on a select body or form of epistolary exchange, my dissertation troubles the conclusion that certain epistolary writings should be read together and others should not and challenges conventions that would keep epistolary corpuses apart or reduce them to a single genre. By placing personal correspondence in conversation with published collections of letters, with blogs and tweets, and with letters in fiction and theory, I reexamine how bodies of correspondence are constituted and how these bodies interact with human (or nonhuman) bodies.

### **From Gabrielle Roy to le vrai Gab Roy**

My project finds bookends in the epistolary writings of two Gabriel(le) Roys. My dissertation opens with a reading of the correspondence of Gabrielle Roy (1909-1983), a celebrated female author whose first novel was published in 1945, and who began a sustained series of personal correspondence shortly thereafter. My closing chapter considers the infamous male Gabriel Roy (b. 1980),<sup>18</sup> a self-proclaimed internet troll, and the notorious letter to Marilou Wolfe that he posted on his blog in October 2013. Why these writers and these works? Why this time span?

Gabrielle Roy serves as a starting point for my investigation into epistolary expression of Québec for several reasons. First and foremost, her epistolary production is distinguished, prolific and a subject of sustained scholarly and public interest. Much

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<sup>18</sup> Who has boasted the title 'le vrai Gab Roy'

important work has been born out of the author's epistolary expression; Roy's personal correspondence has greatly informed François Ricard's biography *Gabrielle Roy: Une vie*,<sup>19</sup> Sophie Marcotte's genetic readings of Roy's autobiography and autofiction,<sup>20</sup> and Lori Saint-Martin's writings on the figure of the mother in Roy's œuvre,<sup>21</sup> to cite but a few examples. In addition to the biographical, genetic, literary and thematic worth of these letters, I have chosen to open my analysis with the work of Gabrielle Roy as the author herself marks a moment of entry into "modern" literature for Québec.

Gilles Thérien ventriloquizes a commonly held belief when he writes, "La véritable littérature québécoise naît après-guerre" (6). Roy's first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, is published in the year that marks the end of the Second World War, and signals Québec's entry into modernity as an urban realist novel that breaks with the tradition of the *romans de la terre* that dominated French-Canada's literature for nearly a century prior. In a brilliant chapter entitled "Women and the Romance of the Land," Mary Jean Matthews Green examines ways that Gabrielle Roy and some of her contemporaries were able to rewrite the Québec national text by using the "familiar structures of the *roman de la terre* to inscribe a vision of women's experience that subtly altered official stereotypes" (50). Green illustrates how in both the literature and history of the Province before the War, land and blood were the privileged means of constituting

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<sup>19</sup> Montréal: Éditions du Boréal, 2000.

<sup>20</sup> For example, her article, "Gabrielle Roy's Correspondance: An Epistolary Autobiography?." *West Virginia Philological Papers* 46 (2000): 56-63.

<sup>21</sup> Including "'Au plus près possible de vous tous': deuil, distance et écriture dans la correspondance de Gabrielle Roy" in *Les femmes de lettres: écriture féminine ou spécificité générique?: actes du colloque tenu à l'Université de Montréal: le 15 avril, 1994*. Montréal: Centre universitaire de lecture sociopoétique de l'épistolaire et des correspondances (CULSEC), Université de Montréal, 1994. 117-135.

identity and belonging for French-Canadians. The tradition of passing on land from father to son, at the heart of the *terroir* genre, ignored women's voices and excluded women from the narrative of inheritance. Green proposes that through their literature, Gabrielle Roy and fellow novelist Germaine Guèvremont effectively "transformed the conventional drama of transmission of land from father to son into an anguished drama of inheritance from mother to daughter" (51).

Mother-daughter "drama" has become a privileged topic of investigation in Royan scholarship. While certain studies take on the theme through Roy's published works of fiction, others turn to her autobiography(ies) and private correspondence. In these more personal writings, Roy herself points to the interwovenness of her relationship to her mother and her literary preoccupations. As I will demonstrate in the next chapter of the present project, the mother for Roy signals not only an exit from the *romans de la terre* as Green has pointed out, but an entry into a new epistolary imaginary for the author.

At the same time that Gabrielle Roy is essential to the history (some would say inception) of Québécois literature, she defies the political interests that led to the proclamation of a distinctly "Québécois literature" in the first place. It isn't until the 1960s that the notion of "Québécois" literature is discussed, in tandem with the birth of a Québécois identity distinct from "French-Canadian." This occurs as part of the so-called "Quiet Revolution" (or *Révolution Tranquille*), which marks a political awakening and an expressive one, and literary institutions, physical and intellectual alike, grew substantially out of this transformation of the 60s and 70s. As Gilles Thérien describes it,

Au cours des années, nous nous sommes dotés d'une institution littéraire complète: elle comprend l'enseignement de la littérature à tous les niveaux avec manuels d'histoire littéraire et archives, la publication de livres, de revues et de journaux. On y retrouve une académie, des sociétés d'auteurs, des syndicats d'écrivains, des subventions multiples, des prix littéraires et des jurys, des maisons d'édition, des agences de diffusion, des librairies, — et même des librairies de livres usagés, — une critique universitaire et une critique journalistique. Congrès et colloques se penchent sur notre littérature pour en faire l'examen, cela avec une périodicité effarante. La littérature québécoise est acheminée à l'étranger quand l'étranger n'est pas acheminé ici. Les réseaux intellocratiques se sont développés avec assurance et efficacité depuis les années soixante. (3)

This increasingly robust literary infrastructure within Québec is frequently referenced as the birth and realization of “literary autonomy.” While the notion of “autonomy” is meant to signal a newfound literary independence from France (and Parisian presses in particular), it also marks an averred autonomy from larger French Canada.

In many respects, Gabrielle Roy aligned herself with “French Canada” more than with Québec. She was born and raised in Manitoba, made her home in Québec and published her books there, but politically distanced herself from a sovereign Québec in favor of a Canadian confederation.<sup>22</sup> Her categorization as a Québécois author could

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<sup>22</sup> The author’s outsider status is reinforced with the moniker commonly assigned to her by Québécois: “La Manitobaine”

therefore be contentious, but, by the same token, it makes her a more fitting representative of Québec and the hybridities and liminalities that have always been present and that increasingly characterize its varied expressions<sup>23</sup>. Gabrielle Roy represents the difficulty in classifying individuals into distinct cultural identities, and holds in view the comparable complexities of categorization of letters and of literatures.

Through the writings and the figure of Gabrielle Roy, my investigation into Québec's epistolary expression begins at a critical historical juncture, marked by the close of World War II, Québec's entry into modernity, and the rise of newly-imagined Québécois consciousness and identity. I have chosen to conclude my study around the year 2013 because of two principle epistolary events that took place near the close of the year: 1) an announcement from Canada Post regarding their new Five-point Action Plan and 2) the rise and fall of an iconic internet troll through online exchanges.

It was on December 11, 2013 that Canada Post went public with their Action Plan. As their 2015 Corporate Summary explained, "Facing its largest existential challenge in a century, in 2013, Canada Post embarked on a bold, yet realistic plan to transform its business from a mail centric model to a parcel centric business" (1). This transformation from mail delivery to parcel delivery involves five initiatives: "converting

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<sup>23</sup> Sherry Simon astutely writes in her 1991 text *Fictions de l'identitaire au Québec*, "je rencontre de nombreux étudiants et étudiantes qui hésitent quand on leur demande de spécifier leur langue maternelle ou même leur langue la plus forte. Nés de mariages mixtes ou de parents immigrants, allant tantôt à l'école anglaise, tantôt à l'école française, ils vivent une expérience de diffraction culturelle de plus en plus fréquente au Québec et ailleurs" (15). She continues, "Tout à fait identifiés au Québec, ils bénéficient de voyages, de lectures, de divertissements qui créent des références d'une grande diversité. Ces expériences ne sont plus à classer dans une aire de marginalité, loin des plénitudes culturelles de leurs concitoyens. N'expriment-elles pas plutôt [...] l'expérience générale devant le caractère mouvant des frontières culturelles? Où commence et où finit une culture?" (16).

door-to-door delivery households to community mailboxes (CMBs), restructuring the pricing model, optimizing the retail network, streamlining operations and addressing the cost of labour” (2). The plans to discontinue urban door-to-door delivery service across the nation and reduce the labor force, unsurprisingly, met with the most resistance.

Canada Post’s announcement was met with protests, open letters, unabashed nostalgia for a particular form of epistolary exchange as well as a general grappling with the diminishing frequency and role of that exchange in current society. A public debate in Québec was ignited, fueled no doubt by the imminent approach of the winter holidays and the Christmas cards and New Year’s wishes that, once the plan was fully implemented, would no longer be arriving to Canadians’ doors.

Canada Post justified its initiatives by citing decided changes in postal usage since 2006. Their summary report details, “On the one hand, ubiquitous internet is swallowing traditional Lettermail volumes at an unprecedented pace, eating over 1.3 billion pieces of mail within a short span of seven years. Yet, the same internet is creating the largest opportunity for Canada Post to deliver more packages, as an increasing number of Canadians embrace online shopping.” This statement acknowledges the role of the internet in diminishing lettermail volumes. The reigning means of correspondence is now digital, as emails, texts, online message boards and other social media supplant older forms of exchange.

For Stéphane Laporte, author of an open letter addressed to “Cher facteur” that appeared in *La Presse* on December 14, 2013, digital correspondence cannot replace the delivery of a letter by way of the post. He writes,

Recevoir un courriel est une chose banale, mais recevoir une lettre est un événement spécial. [...] Quelqu'un l'a laissée tomber dans une boîte à Rio ou à Rigaud, et des dizaines de personnes l'ont manipulée pour qu'un beau matin, elle apparaisse sur le tapis du portique, comme un génie sortant d'une bouteille. Il y a dans la chaîne humaine nous permettant de recevoir une lettre de rupture, un valentin ou une facture d'électricité, un effort collectif d'un grand romantisme.

Though Laporte addresses the postal carrier in the singular, what he mourns most of all with Canada Post's announcement is the loss of the collective effort the letter represents as the product of many hands working together to make its delivery possible. The letter for Laporte becomes so charged with 'the human chain' that handled it to bring it to one's doorstep, that it takes on a magical,<sup>24</sup> and highly romantic quality that emails lack.

What Laporte expresses shows a great similarity to with Melançon's appraisal of the letter-object. Though Laporte connects the letter with the hands of those who deliver it more than those of the author or recipient, he ascribes to the letter the same aura of the body and the same centrality of the object. This open letter demonstrates that the epistolary's associations with the physical, the tangible and the body are not restricted to letter scholars but are also espoused by the broader public.

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<sup>24</sup> Like the genie coming out of the bottle he evokes

At the same time that the public is reacting to Canada Post's action plan - insisting upon the materiality of letters that no electronic exchange can replace - there is an ongoing response, even outcry, to a vitriolic letter published on the webpage of Gabriel Roy. Though the letter itself had been published in October, its author appeared on Radio-Canada's talk show "Tout le monde en parle" in early December, reigniting the controversy and outcry around his missive just as Canada Post prepared to make its unpopular announcement.

Though it wasn't until the uproar following his letter that he became a household name, Gab Roy had already enjoyed a small degree of notoriety as a "troll."<sup>25</sup> Gab Roy experienced moderate success through his stand-up routines, blog (levraigabroy.com), occasional take-it-to-the-streets antics such as his so-called campaign for dinosaurs, and interviews with Québec media outlets, notably an interview for a Radio Canada segment called "À la chasse au "troll" sur le web" on October 16, 2012, where he was introduced as "humoriste, blogueur et troll." His infamy as Québec's best-known troll was solidified a year later with his online letter.

Addressing Québécois actress Marilou Wolfe, who was rumored to be splitting with her celebrity husband, Gab Roy wrote under the pretext of offering his "services de rebound." The letter details the non-consensual sexual exploits that Roy fantasizes with Wolfe, and the content of the letter, though deleted from his website within six hours of its original posting, would become the object of a mass public scandal and serve as an

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<sup>25</sup> "Troll" has become a common term to describe individuals online that, at their most benign, poke fun at others, ensnare the naïve in their antics, and seemingly sabotage correspondence with their irrelevant or inflammatory comments.

emblem of rape culture (“la culture de viol”) in Québec for many months to follow. I am interested in Gab Roy’s letter and the public’s response to it because of how it unmistakably affirms that the body is at play and is at stake even in digital exchange.

2013 marks a moment of crisis and of conversation for the epistolary. This is true in scholarly forums and public discourse alike, and this is particularly true in Québec, where there is a confluence of conversations around the letter, its future, its materiality and its imaginary. The period from the mid-twentieth century to the early twenty-first marks for many the decline of the letter,<sup>26</sup> and yet, in 2015, with protestations in Québec as fervent as ever<sup>27</sup> and with the federal government under new leadership, Canada Post announced that it would suspend the installation of community mail boxes and maintain household postal delivery. The end of the period my project considers is marked by a resolute affirmation of the epistolary and a renewed commitment to the postal.

The status of correspondence is certainly not static over the seventy years I study, but it is demonstrated time and again that the epistolary in contemporary Québec is neither a nostalgic form nor one restricted to fiction, but a dynamic avenue of expression that merits equally dynamic approaches to reading. Within and across chapters, I look for the letter in unexpected places – letters inserted into autobiographies, into novels that evade the designation of “epistolary,” into works of theory, into blogs or exchanged via

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<sup>26</sup> In fact, if we consult data from Canada Post, most of this era marks a period of tremendous growth for the postal system. Their 2015 Summary reports that “From 1947 to 1968, postal volumes doubled to five billion pieces per year, and the number of addresses Canada Post served doubled as well” (1), and that “Lettermail™ volumes and costs continued to grow until they peaked in 2006.” (2)

<sup>27</sup> Led by Montreal’s mayor Denis Coderre

online message boards – places where the epistolary defies conventions, survives death, and is often overlooked.

The abiding and guiding question of my project is “What is the epistolary imaginary of Québec today?” This question is tied to other related queries that I grapple with throughout my dissertation and that give shape to my project as a whole:

- How do different textual and temporal constellations of the epistolary allow us to renew our reading of the letter?
- How do fictional or digital letters inform our understanding of “real” letters and vice versa? How does a broader epistolary imaginary inform letters regardless of their milieu?
- How do real and imagined bodies manifest in missives? How do we take stock of the materiality of the letter, which is destabilized as the postal becomes post-?

While I ask questions about Québec’s epistolary imaginary in broad strokes, each subsequent chapter can be read as a distinct attempt to answer those questions in a particular set of texts, through close comparative readings. The order of the chapters is loosely chronological. As my thesis disrupts the temporality and the hierarchy of the ‘before,’ the chapters may be read in any order.

The opening chapter of my dissertation, “Post(e) Mélina: Reading After Gabrielle Roy’s Letter(s),” outlines a genetic approach to authors’ correspondence that consistently

casts the epistolary as an “avant-texte,” something that is not, or is not yet, literature, but that exists before it. I challenge the premise that archival writings are of interest to a geneticist only inasmuch as they precede a published work from which they are excluded, and I advocate for genetic and epistolary approaches that read letters ‘beyond the before.’ Through a close reading of the author Gabrielle Roy’s personal and published, fictional and “real” letters side by side, I reflect upon the place and the power of the epistolary form for Gabrielle Roy beginning with a momentous missive to her mother Mélima at the start of her career. These various epistolary examples allow me to consider a “traditional” corpus of epistolary writings in a new light and with particular attention to the body. This chapter advances that it is the body of the mother that acts as the linchpin uniting Roy’s letters and literature, and bringing them into close correspondence. It is this same body that marks the temporality of Roy’s letters as ever *after*, that can access and recount experiences in time only through the work of remembrance.

In the subsequent chapter, “When the ‘After’ is ‘Already’: Philosophical Fiction of the *Postal*,” remembrance is transformed into a re-remembering of letters through Derridean notions of the postal and of prosthesis. I read Jacques Derrida’s *La Carte postale* for its multiple deployments of the epistolary as metaphor, object of analysis, methodology and textual performance, and I give special attention to how Derrida defers an imminent end to the age of letters that he himself announces by reading the epistolary as “le postal”—that is, as open and undecidable, destined in only the most dubious sense, and always already conditioned by the after. *La Carte postale* provides a critical framework for my reading of the epistolary in Québec as it moves from the postcard and

the postman to an epistolary afterlife in philosophical letter fiction from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s, especially Madeleine Gagnon's *La lettre infinie* (The Endless Letter) and Denis Thériault's *Le facteur émotif* (The Postman's Round). I read these texts together with *La Carte postale* to consider how a mobilization of prosthesis, that is of an articulation of the body, the text and technology, re-members diverse bodies of correspondence after an "apocalypse de carte postale."

My concluding chapter, "Yetis and Trolls: The *Monstrum horrendum* of Epistolary Fetishism" seizes upon epistolary theorist Vincent Kaufmann's suggestion that the letter writer is the "yéti de la littérature" (literature's yeti), and places this fantastic formulation alongside the more recent imagining of the internet mischief-maker as "troll." The latter term is used to describe individuals who seemingly sabotage correspondence with their irrelevant or inflammatory comments online, while Kaufmann uses "yeti" precisely at the moment that author penpals seemingly fail to correspond by privileging their own writing over dialogical communication and establishing "the distance necessary to create a literary work." I analyze this recourse to monstrous, liminal figures at the outer limits of correspondence through the unsavory online writings of Gabriel Roy. This chapter holds in view the ways that bodies are at stake in digital letters, and considers how the imagined bodies of yetis and trolls mark a masculine entry into epistolary fetishism that disavows femininity, distorts corporeality and relegates the letter to a time and place 'before.'

An unexpected result of my reading of these bodies of correspondence was the realization that within and across chapters, these texts continually bump up against an inevitability that each body must face: death. Whether it is the death of the mother (as is the case for Gabrielle Roy), the death of the age of letters (as Derrida foretells) or the death of the author (evoked and mourned by Vincent Kaufmann), death lurks within each chapter. Without being able to dwell in a temporality “before” these deaths, the letters I examine lose neither their life force nor their relevance. By reaching and writing “beyond the before,” *Bodies of Correspondence in Contemporary Québec* makes a foray into the after – or even the afterlife – of the epistolary in Québec as it moves from the stage of the page to the screen.

## Post(e) Méлина: Reading *After* Gabrielle Roy's Letter(s)

*Gabrielle Roy inédite*, a volume released in the year 2000, presents the unpublished and lesser-known writings of French-Canadian author Gabrielle Roy through a sampling of scholarly articles exploring her archives. In its introduction, editors François Ricard and Jane Everett establish a clear division and hierarchy between two scriptural bodies “d’inégale valeur”: 1) Roy’s canonical *œuvre* of novels, children’s books and the beginnings of her autobiography, described with glowing acclaim (“de loin le plus visible, le plus beau et le plus riche”; “unique et irremplaçable” (8); and “splendide et autosuffisante” [19]), and 2) her ‘écriture immergée’<sup>28</sup> comprising letters, drafts, copyedits and newspaper articles whose quality and significance are continually diminished (“que l’ombre,” “une sorte d’arrière-plan fragmentaire et imparfait,” and “textes de second ordre” [19]). Ricard and Everett are quite prescriptive concerning the critical consequences of such categorizations, insisting that any investigation into Roy’s ‘submerged’ writings (the second, lesser corpus) must be done “avec d’extrêmes précautions, en ne perdant jamais de vue, et en incitant les lecteurs à ne jamais perdre de vue son caractère second, dérivé, dépendant ou marginal par rapport à l’œuvre publiée” (19). The author’s archives are deemed worthy of analysis only to the extent that they

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<sup>28</sup> Ricard and Everett adopt the notion of an “écriture immergée” from Roy’s own words. In a brief autobiographical text entitled “Le pays de Bonheur d’occasion,” the author writes, “Car il arrive parfois qu’un roman puisse faire songer à un iceberg dont on dit qu’un huitième seulement de la hauteur totale émerge de l’eau. C’est sa partie immergée, sur laquelle tout repose, et qui cependant n’a pas été dite, c’est ce vieux fond de rêve mi-obscur qui lui assure, s’il doit y parvenir, de flotter quelque temps...” (100).

shed light upon (without threatening to eclipse) “la beauté et la signification” (20) of Roy’s canonical *œuvre* <sup>29</sup>.

Counted among the author’s ‘submerged’ archival writings are Gabrielle Roy’s epistles to family members, friends, her English translator<sup>30</sup> and others working in Québec and Canada’s literary milieux.<sup>31</sup> The Library and Archives Canada houses nearly 2,000 of her letters in the *Fonds Gabrielle Roy*, and a significant number of the author’s missives are now available in published collections. Ricard and Everett praise Roy’s letters, asserting “L’ampleur, la diversité, la richesse et ce qu’il faut bien appeler la beauté de cette correspondance font apparaître Gabrielle Roy comme l’une des grandes épistolaires, peut-être, des littératures québécoise et canadienne” (15), yet the editors maintain that the merit of the author’s correspondence resides in its capacity to illuminate her canonical production.

Ricard and Everett are not alone in their insistence upon a qualitative hierarchy between letters and texts more comfortably categorized as “literature” (*Lettres, belles-lettres*, or *littérature*, in French, or to borrow the language of *Gabrielle Roy inédite*, those writings critics consider “*canoniques*”). In literary circles, letters have been and continue to be set in a class apart on multiple accounts<sup>32</sup>: the different ways they circulate (usually outside of publishing houses), the different status and objectives of those who compose

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<sup>29</sup> “l’étude de ces textes de second ordre, si elle demeure axée sur l’œuvre, peut contribuer, pensons-nous, à jeter sur cette œuvre des éclairages qui, dans le meilleur des cas, en font encore mieux apparaître la beauté et la signification” (19-20).

<sup>30</sup> Joyce Marshall

<sup>31</sup> Such as Germaine Guèvremont and Margaret Laurence

<sup>32</sup> See Beugnot for a concise example of how the epistolary has been distinguished and distanced from the literary.

them (especially in the case of women writing personal, rather than public, texts), and the different writing style(s) associated with them (commonly perceived to be more ‘natural,’ immediate and open than their contemporary published counterparts). All of these real and/or perceived differences affect the relationship of letters to literary criticism, where the literary worth of epistolary production requires frequent validation. To be sure, certain epistolary writings have been brought into the fold of literature and, by extension, literary analysis, though this is principally achieved by fictional letters or “letter fiction” that earn the designation of “literature” through their classification first and foremost as (epistolary) novels.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, “real” letters, even when penned by established authors, maintain at best an uneasy relationship with literary criticism and what it deems to be an author’s sanctioned literary *œuvre*.

To justify the study of authors’ letters, therefore, epistolary scholars often emphasize how correspondence can precede and progress into literature or into a given literary work. Vincent Kaufmann, for example, characterizes the epistolary as something like a gateway genre:<sup>34</sup> a form associated with experimentation that leads to other, more serious forms of writing by instigating creative expression and honing the author’s voice. In his influential work *L’équivoque épistolaire*, Kaufmann posits, “pour certains écrivains, la pratique épistolaire est [...] un passage obligé, un moyen privilégié d’accéder à une œuvre. Et plus généralement, lorsqu’elle ne joue pas ce rôle initiateur, elle fonctionne comme un laboratoire” (8). Kaufmann presents the missives of the authors he studies

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<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Janet Gurkin Altman, who advocates “for a more serious consideration of the epistolary form as a genre” (10), while limiting the genre to “letter fiction.”

<sup>34</sup> Not unlike a gateway drug

(including Kafka, Mallarmé, Artaud, Flaubert and many others) as passageways and precursors working before and towards other better-known texts.

Kaufmann self-identifies as a genetic critic, and his notion of the epistolary as predecessor and laboratory bears great affinity to genetic criticism's concept of the "avant-texte." The term *avant-texte* was coined by Jean Bellemin-Noël in 1972, at a time when *la critique génétique* was beginning to gain credence as a rigorous and respected literary approach in France. Though language such as "writing" and "writings" ("écriture" and "écrits") and "workshop" and "work" have since gained traction as means of articulating and investigating the relationship between the process and the product of writing at the core of the genetic endeavor, "avant-texte" remains one of the most widely used and recognizable terms specific to genetic criticism. Bellemin-Noël defined the "avant-texte" as "l'ensemble constitué par les brouillons, les manuscrits, les épreuves, les 'variantes,' vu sous l'angle de ce qui précède matériellement un ouvrage quand celui-ci est traité comme un texte, et qui peut faire système avec lui" (15). The *avant-texte* is literally the "before-text" – the body of writings that precede and give way to a work.

The correspondence of an author is generally not as tidily linked to a completed, published text as drafts and other documents more immediately identifiable as *avant-textes* may be. Nevertheless, even those epistolary critics investigating authors' correspondence who do not explicitly espouse a genetic approach seem to reiterate the paradigm of the text and the *avant-texte* through the insistent temporal placement of letters *before* literature. Benoît Melançon and Pierre Popovic, for example, in their

introduction to conference proceedings on the correspondence of various French and Québécois poets and authors, write of

l'impression, et peut-être l'illusion, de rejoindre un arrière-lieu des Lettres, c'est-à-dire un espace retiré de la feinte où le sujet se donne déjà à lire, autrement (mais ni plus ni moins authentiquement) que dans les textes figés par la publication. Il vivote là du littéraire avant la lettre, si l'on peut dire, vivant parce que nécessairement inachevé, parce qu'en attente d'une réponse (5-6).

Though Melançon and Popovic grant that letters (with a lowercase 'l') can be literary, they maintain a distance between *lettres* and *Lettres* both spatially (“un arrière-lieu,” “un espace retiré”) and temporally (“déjà,” “avant la lettre”): correspondence lies behind and comes before the “textes figés par la publication” penned by the same author. These better-known and more established “textes” find a counterpart and a complement in an epistolary *avant-texte*.

Linguist Anna Jaubert provides a historic grounding for situating letters “before” literature that dates back to classical antiquity. She writes, “On comprend qu’historiquement l’épistolaire soit apparu comme un genre de discours intermédiaire, précurseur de littérarité: aux siècles classiques, la lettre a représenté un palier entre la pratique de la conversation et celle des ‘belles-lettres’” (229). Though Jaubert calls the epistolary an “intermediate discourse,” the notion that the epistolary precedes the literary, that letters are a “precursor to literarity,” yet again frames the epistolary as an “avant-texte,” something that is not, or is not yet, literature, but that exists before it.

Though the “avant-texte” endures as a concept and object of study in genetic scholarship, it has met with some resistance in the field. Louis Hay, notably, launches a critique of the term based on its reliance upon a more or less stable ‘text’ – a dependence he reads as a restaging of the longstanding and problematic binary between *texte* and *non-texte*. Hay’s appraisal elides some of Bellemin-Noël’s more nuanced assertions, but it does effectively problematize the latter’s recourse to the notion of the ‘text.’ Tracing the concept from medieval Europe through the structuralist theories of the 1970s, Hay concludes (like Jacques Petit) that the text does not exist, or that if it does exist, it cannot be absolutely defined. He declares, “Je préfère donc changer de concept et de vocabulaire pour examiner sur nouveaux frais non plus l’opposition de l’avant-texte au texte, mais la relation de l’écriture à l’écrit” (154). Though Hay’s call to move beyond the “avant-texte” is intended to disrupt the “*texte*,” of equal interest to me is the distance it affords from the “*avant*,” that is, the too often unexamined premise that archival writings are of interest to a geneticist only inasmuch as they precede a published work from which they are excluded.

Just as the categories “avant-texte” and “texte” grow tenuous in light of Hay’s critique, Gabrielle Roy’s purportedly distinct corpuses of “canonical” and “submerged” writings prove untenable. Despite the trenchant language Ricard and Everett use to divide Roy’s writings unequivocally into these two classifications, the author’s canonical œuvre is continually expanding, even within Ricard and Everett’s description of it. First limited to those works published during Gabrielle Roy’s lifetime (“publiés de son vivant” [8]), then expanded to include those published very shortly after her death (“on peut en

ajouter trois autres” [8]), it is then *almost* extended to include two of her most extensive collections of correspondence<sup>35</sup> (“ces deux sous-ensembles peuvent pratiquement être considérés comme faisant partie de son œuvre ‘canonique’” [15-16]). Ricard and Everett’s steady expansion of Roy’s œuvre is significant, for the shifting delineations reposition (what lies in) the margins, and, according to the editors’ own logic, this shifting has clear consequences for the ways we read Roy’s works: it alters which texts can be read in their own right, which are to be read as second-class supplements, what is relegated to the before, the behind or the below, and ultimately what comparative textual constellations are possible for Roy’s work.

I propose a different set of guidelines for approaching Roy’s archival writings, and more specifically her correspondence. I resist an apprehension of Roy’s letters and literature (or submerged and canonical writings) as mutually exclusive bodies or as opposing poles on a temporal and/or literary spectrum. To suggest that the letter’s greatest value is when and where it becomes literature is to read the letter while looking past it for something else, to eclipse the specificity of the epistolary precisely when it is at its most exemplary, and to risk overlooking letters as an “inserted genre”<sup>36</sup> within other works of literature. In effect, the many letters that appear within Roy’s canonical works of fiction have gone largely unstudied, even as her personal correspondence has received

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<sup>35</sup> Because of Roy’s expressed intention for the letters to her husband, Marcel Carbotte, and her sister Bernadette to be published following her death.

<sup>36</sup> I borrow this term from Mikhail Bakhtin, who refers to letters in novels as an “inserted” or “incorporated” genre in his 1935 “Discourse in the Novel” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

considerable scholarly attention. Though Gabrielle Roy never wrote what might be properly designated an “epistolary novel,” letters do occupy an important place in much of her fiction and enjoy a broad readership relative to the author’s personal missives. Examining the letters in Roy’s published literary works for how they intersect with her private correspondence represents a heretofore unutilized means of reading Roy’s epistolary production.

Reading these bodies of letters together is neither an attempt to efface the distinct contexts in which Roy’s missives are composed and circulated, nor one to propose that all of the author’s epistolary expression can or should be reduced to a lowest common denominator. However, I do advance that by challenging a teleology and a hierarchy that consistently place Roy’s personal letters before and beneath her literature, we can recognize how the author’s extensive correspondence to her husband, sisters, and friends highlights the presence and import of the many letters that figure in the pages of her early novels, and, in turn, how the letters in Roy’s works of fiction draw attention to the act of writing in what is arguably, for Roy, its most intimate and immediate form. I contend that reading the author’s personal and published, fictional and “real” letters side by side best positions the critic to discern the overall place and power of the epistolary for Gabrielle Roy.

Letter scholar Marie-Claire Grassi provides a compelling case for reading fictional and ‘real’ letters together and according to the same rules of analysis. In her influential work *Lire l’epistolaire*, she writes:

La lettre se place dans le temps du présent fragile marqué du sceau de l'attente. Elle se situe entre le passé révolu et le futur attendu, entre la nostalgie de la présence abolie et l'anticipation anxieuse d'un retour. Mais le présent se veut négation de l'absence, abolition des distances géographiques et temporelles, et instaure donc un mode de discours fictionnel. Le lexique de la temporalité, *hier, avant, demain, bientôt*, et le style hyperbolique, *des millions de baisers*, se conjuguent étroitement avec le temps des verbes. Par l'absence, l'écriture de la lettre, dans sa réalité, est déjà une écriture de fiction (6-7).

In this passage, Grassi highlights and superimposes two apprehensions of the “present”:

- 1) an indefinite *temporal present*, suggested through deictic word choices such as “yesterday” and “tomorrow” which frequently figure in epistolary discourse; and 2) a physical or *geographic present*, which invokes the letter’s addressee as if (s)he were immediately at hand. For Grassi, these two (false) presents render the epistolary a form of fiction, for they negate the reality of the readerly ‘present’ which is necessarily distant and deferred. Grassi’s evocation of fiction does not suggest a preoccupation with the relative truth or invention of the content of the letter; rather, it affirms that epistolary discourse is fictional discourse in its relationship to (verily its negation of) absence. As a result, Grassi reads all letters as works of fiction are read: with attention to language, form and meaning, even when they are simultaneously personal and/or historical documents.

Questions of presence,<sup>37</sup> absence and time are central to my reading of the Royan epistolary. Given the breadth of Roy's writings, my investigation will focus on missives from the start of the author's career as represented in *Le temps qui m'a manqué* and her early novels,<sup>38</sup> her published correspondence in French (which includes the letters to her sister Bernadette, to her husband Marcel Carbotte, and those gathered in the collection *Femmes de lettres*) as well as the still unpublished letters to her sister Clémence.<sup>39</sup> Reading the author's two bodies of letters – the real and the fictional – in tandem and in correspondence will allow me to set forth a new model for reading the author's epistolary production not 'before' her literature, but after a particularly momentous missive to her mother, Mélina.

### **Loss and/after the letter: *Le temps qui m'a manqué***

While many of Gabrielle Roy's publications can be and have been qualified as works of auto-fiction or semi-autobiographical, it is not until the late years of her life that the author fully assumes the autobiographical project and explicitly occupies the roles of author, protagonist and narrator while writing of her life experiences.<sup>40</sup> Roy's intention had been for her autobiography to recount her life story from early adulthood into old age, covering the entirety of her literary career up to and including the composition of her

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<sup>37</sup> and/or presents

<sup>38</sup> I consider Roy's 'early novels' to be those published within the first ten years of her nearly four decade career: *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945), *La Petite Poule d'Eau* (1950), *Alexandre Chenevert* (1954) and *Rue Deschambault* (1955).

<sup>39</sup> held at the Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa

<sup>40</sup> In her earlier (pseudo-)autobiographical writings, Gabrielle Roy often recounted personal events through a character "Christine" (see *Rue Deschambault* and *La Route d'Altamont*).

autobiography. The completed life story was to be a four-part work published in a single volume under the title *La Détresse et l'enchantement*. At the time of Roy's death, however, she had finalized only the first two sections of her project. These two parts, "Le bal chez le gouverneur" and "Un oiseau tombe sur le seuil," were published as *La Détresse et l'enchantement* in 1984, a year after her passing. Thirteen years later, a second, much shorter book was published from the most recent version of three separate manuscripts all representing the beginnings of part three of the author's autobiography. This, Roy's final piece of prose, is set in the earliest stages of her writing career, and tells of the time just before the completion and publication of her first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*. These eighty-some pages of text were released under the title *Le Temps qui m'a manqué* thanks to the work of François Ricard, Dominique Fortier and Jane Everett.

Though Roy herself did not select the title, it is of her own words, or very nearly. The editors borrow the phrase, while modifying the tense, from the second paragraph of the author's manuscript – the paragraph where Roy announces to the reader the death of her mother. She writes, "Pourquoi maman serait-elle morte avant que je n'aie eu le temps de lui rapporter la raison d'être fière de moi que j'étais allée au bout du monde lui chercher au prix de tant d'efforts? Elle si patiente, comment ne m'aurait-elle pas accordé *le peu de temps qui m'avait manqué?* Si peu de temps!...si peu de temps!..." (emphasis mine, 14). Time and its insufficiency constitute major themes of the manuscript.

Time's deficiency is deeply felt at the death of Roy's mother, Mélina, and it is equally evident in – indeed, it is essentially experienced through – a fateful letter Roy composed to Mélina in the brief interim between her death and the arrival of the telegram

that would announce this news to Gabrielle. The composition, posting and destiny of the letter occupy several pages of *Le temps qui m'a manqué* and what is clearly an even larger space in the psyche of its author. Roy was living in Montreal at the time, struggling to earn a living as a writer far from her native Manitoba where her mother remained. She had enjoyed some success in journalism, earning a meager and sporadic income from individual articles picked up by various newspapers. When the *Bulletin des agriculteurs* offered Roy a salaried position for exclusive access to her articles, she triumphantly wrote to her mother announcing her success and the financial support it would allow her to bring to Méлина and to her dependent daughter (Gabrielle Roy's sister), Clémence.

Roy first describes the moment of composition and the content of this missive, writing,

Tôt le lendemain, dès le réveil, j'étais à ma petite table à écrire devant la fenêtre, à apprendre la nouvelle à maman. Enfin je pouvais mettre en mots ce que je brûlais de lui annoncer depuis des années: elle allait recevoir de moi une somme assez importante tous les mois, cinquante dollars au moins, peut-être plus parfois; mais surtout je m'engageais, elle partie, à prendre Clémence à ma charge sa vie durant (29).

Time is charged, and almost condensed, in this brief passage. Roy suggests that the letter has been years in the making as she describes herself 'burning' to share this news "depuis des années." Writing first thing in the morning, the sense of eagerness and urgency is augmented. While the letter is invested with built up and joyful anticipation of what is to

become a new routine of monthly stipends, it also, somewhat ironically, already envisages Mélina's passing ("elle partie") as Roy promises to see to the care of Clémence once her mother is gone.

Roy only later realizes that her mother had already passed at the time she was writing the good news: "Ainsi, à l'heure où je courais à la poste y déposer ma lettre, il n'était déjà plus le temps de réjouir ma mère, il n'en avait déjà plus été le temps au moment où je lui écrivais dans le chaud rayon de soleil entré par la fenêtre" (33). Roy experiences tremendous pain at this unfortunate timing, and henceforth, "A la douleur d'avoir perdu ma mère se mêlait, se mêlerait à jamais celle de m'être fait dérober le bonheur que j'aurais eu de lui en apporter une part avant qu'elle ne m'eût quittée" (33). For Roy, the mourning of Mélina's death becomes forever enmeshed with the regret of undelivered aid and of the undelivered letter.

When Roy's sad fate is explained to others, the source of grief is not described merely as the death of Roy's mother, nor as the unfortunate timing of Mélina's death just as Roy finally had the means to assist her. Rather, the text repeatedly attributes Roy's grief to the tragedy of the letter, written to announce assistance when her mother was already dead. For example, when Roy was in need of money to pay for her train ticket to Manitoba and her fellow boarders had loaned her all they could afford, her landlady had the idea of asking the owner of the corner store for the additional twenty dollars required. Roy writes that even though they rarely shopped there, Miss McLean was able to secure the loan by telling Roy's story in this way: "elle lui avait raconté que j'avais reçu la nouvelle de la mort de ma mère juste au moment où je lui écrivais que nous étions

sauvées. L'histoire émut tellement le Grec [...] qu'il ouvrit sur le coup son tiroir-caisse et en tira un billet tout neuf de vingt dollars" (37). Similarly, when Roy has boarded the train and is approached by two strangers seeking to comfort their fellow passenger whom they find in tears, Roy stammers that her mother has died. However, this statement alone cannot express the source of her grief; she continues, "Enfin je réussis à faire comprendre à mes compagnes que ma mère ne vivait déjà plus au moment où je lui écrivais qu'allait commencer pour nous le temps du bonheur" (36). In these scenes, there is an insistence upon the letter's tragic timing as augmenting or even surpassing the heartbreak of Mélina's death.

The true tragedy of the letter is not that it arrives too late, but that it *is* too late; at the moment of its composition, it is already temporally defunct. The missive never existed in the "before" (i.e. prior to Mélina's death and Roy's imminent financial assistance); Roy discovers that "C'était à une morte que j'écrivais. C'était à une morte que j'offrais mon secours qui avait trop longtemps tardé" (33). The tardiness of the letter does not render it irrelevant, however, quite the contrary. It elevates as it alters its significance. To understand this letter, therefore, we must look beyond the before and grant equal weight to what transpires to the missive as and after it is written.

In an article in *Lingua Romana*, Isabelle Daunais takes very seriously Roy's declaration that "C'était à une morte que j'écrivais" (33). Weighing the impact of Mélina's death just as Roy's literary career was about to take flight, Daunais concludes:

par cette disparition qui survient au tout début de son entreprise [...] Gabrielle Roy aurait non pas perdu la destination de son œuvre, mais l'aurait trouvée ou

mieux: l'aurait découverte. Cette destination, beaucoup plus diffuse mais aussi beaucoup plus large que la première, c'est celle que constituent les morts, c'est-à-dire à la fois la mémoire des morts et l'horizon élargi qu'ils offrent à notre conscience – la communauté même qu'ils tissent et qu'ils désignent, non pas spécifiquement (par exemple autour de tel ou tel individu auquel on a été lié), mais généralement, comme l'ensemble de ceux qui nous ont précédés (2011, 31).

Daunais proposes that when Roy wrote “à une morte,” this anomaly developed into something much more than an isolated instance: through the loss of Mélina at the inception of Roy's career, the author discovered “the dead” as the audience for her œuvre. I hesitate to fully embrace Daunais' interpretation for two reasons. First of all, Roy herself articulates her imagined audience quite differently in the retrospective essay “Le pays de *Bonheur d'occasion*.”<sup>41</sup> Second, if Daunais is quick to insist that ‘the dead’

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<sup>41</sup> In the essay, Roy claims that she wrote to a single imagined reader as she drafted her first novel: “Je m'imaginai avoir au moins un lecteur que je me représentais parfois me lisant dans la solitude de sa petite chambre comme je lui écrivais de la mienne, et cela suffisait pour me soutenir. Étrange! Je n'ai jamais cessé, je pense, de m'adresser à ce lecteur inconnu, peut-être un jeune homme fier que je ne connais ni de nom ni de visage” (87-88). Not yet an established author, Roy was motivated by the thought of having one faithful reader pouring over her work in the solitude of his room, and it appears that in many ways Marcel Carbotte, whom Roy met and married within two years of the publication of *Bonheur d'occasion*, manifested the proud, young male reader Roy imagined and addressed as she composed her early works of fiction. The author emphasizes in her early letters to Marcel how much she values his estimation and approval of her work, writing, for example, on July 14, 1947, “je voudrais tellement accomplir quelque chose dont tu pourrais être fier. Depuis que je te connais, je suis devenue plus exigeante envers moi-même” (2001, 19); or again on July 18th of the same year, “Tu ne sembles pas comprendre suffisamment, chéri, que j'attache un prix immense à ton assentiment. C'est peut-être déjà le seul qu'il m'importe de mériter” (27). Though Roy makes these statements early in her relationship with Marcel, it is arguably much later that her husband best manifests the distant, imagined reader. He ceases to send replies with the same regularity, if at all, to Roy's consistent letters, and as his role as a faithful correspondent and fellow writer fades, he more fully assumes the position of reader. Consequently, Roy's role as writer (over reader) comes more wholly to the fore, and her late missives to Marcel forego a dialogic communicative function to become like so many brief works of fiction penned for her ideal reader.

for Roy become(s) detached from the loss of a specific individual (“non pas spécifiquement (par exemple autour de tel ou tel individu auquel on a été lié)”), I would counter that Mélina maintains a privileged status among ‘the dead’ for her daughter, and cannot merely be absorbed into a larger conception of ancestors or ancestry. However, I read Daunais’ bold proposal as an astute testimony both to the tremendous impact a single letter had on all of Roy’s production (and of greatest interest to our investigation, on her epistolary production), as well as to the critical attention that Roy’s statement that she was writing “à une morte” merits.

When Roy declares “C’était à une morte que j’écrivais,” she calls attention to her letter’s altered and unintended addressee: a dead person, and even more than that, a dead body. *Le Grand Robert* offers “corps mort” or “cadavre” as denotations of “un mort” or “une morte,” and the gendered declension of the term in *Le temps qui m’a manqué* further underlines the bodily overtones of Roy’s word choice. Mélina’s reduction to ‘une morte’ represents the extreme case of a much more common conundrum: when we address somebody (some body), we find that body is altered. The body we wrote to is ‘dead’ in the sense that it is past, no longer exists as it did. This temporal tear recalls Marie-Claire Grassi’s point that the epistolary ‘present’ is always and essentially fictional; both temporally and physically (we can add here “bodily”), what was written “is” is absent or no more.

The corpse Roy addresses through the letter to her mother develops into a larger league of distant, degrading bodies. Indeed, Roy has been lauded as the author that brought the body to Québécois literature. In the genre of the *romans de la terre* that

dominated Québec's literature for nearly a century, the body was an ignored or underdeveloped theme, generally portrayed only in as much as it fulfilled traditional duties and expectations. As Gérard Bessette writes in *Une littérature en ébullition*, it wasn't until Roy's first novel, *Bonheur d'occasion*, published in 1945, that it became possible in the literature of Québec to “sentir le poids de la chair, la pesanteur du corps, l'horreur de sa dégénérescence dans notre littérature romanesque” (259). The body in *Bonheur d'occasion* is first and foremost a maternal body. Unsurprisingly, the novel is dedicated “À Mélina Roy.”

While many scholarly articles offer readings of the body in *Bonheur d'occasion*, Marie-Pierre Andron is alone in offering a book-length study (*L'imaginaire du corps amoureux*) that tracks the representation of the body over the course Roy's career. Tracing the *corps* and the corporeal in the novels *Bonheur d'occasion*, *La Petite Poule d'Eau*, *Alexandre Chenevert*, *La Montagne secrète* and *La Rivière sans repos* as well as in some unpublished writings available in the *Fonds Gabrielle Roy* (“La première femme” and *Baldur*), Andron perceives a progressive effacement of the body over the course of Roy's literary production. She remarks, “le corps semble progressivement évoluer de la présence vers l'absence, de la redondance vers l'ellipse” (8). We will return to the notion of a movement from presence to absence for its important intersections with the Royan epistolary, but first, I would like to build upon Andron's interest in the scriptural and corporeal “presence” of the body in Roy's work to consider how the author's bodies are – or are not – ‘present’ in a temporal sense.

In the scene of *Bonheur d'occasion* where Rose-Anna goes into labor, the narration calls attention to the passage of time by evoking a clock: “La pendule égrenait les minutes lentement, si lentement, qu’à chaque oscillation du battant, Rose-Anna croyait descendre dans un abîme infini, puis monter, descendre encore...” (362). The description suggests that Rose-Anna feels herself to be bound to the clock’s swinging pendulum: falling, rising and falling again with each passing second. What she perceives as an almost physical attachment to the clock is compounded by thoughts of her body’s changes over time through pregnancy, labor and delivery:

Elle savait que le corps redoutait un peu plus, chaque fois, la honte de cette nouvelle soumission à la douleur, et que l’âme, elle, se retenait plus glacée encore au bord du gouffre et voyait tout au fond des années de grossesse, plus lointaine chaque fois, sa belle jeunesse insouciante et pure, tellement loin, toujours plus loin, sa belle jeunesse, au fond, dans le passé, plus loin, chaque fois plus loin.  
(362)

There was a time (at least in Rose-Anna’s mind) when she was beautiful, young, pure and carefree, but this bygone existence is further and further in the past with each ticking of the clock, with each new child that she bears. The idyllic, irrecoverable body of ‘her beautiful youth’ is an ever more distant memory.

Even Florentine, the first-born daughter of Rose-Anna, still young at nineteen years of age, remarks the effects of time on her body. On a spring evening, months after her single sexual encounter with Jean Levesque, she is suddenly awakened to the changing of the seasons: “comme si elle s’éveillait à une transformation qui se fut

accomplie pendant qu'elle était absente et dont toutes les étapes lui eussent échappé" (247). The narration describes Florentine as though she were 'absent' as these changes were accomplished, and the agreeable signs of a new season are met with resistance, even hostility, for they call attention to the transformations that are also occurring in Florentine's body:

La fuite du temps venait donc de s'imposer à elle, sans qu'il lui fut possible de se leurrer; elle devait l'accepter. Alors, sa peur s'agita en elle comme un grelot insensé qui ne s'arrêtait plus de trembler et sonnait plus fort que toutes les cloches de la ville – sa peur qu'elle avait vue venir vers elle depuis des jours, depuis longtemps, depuis la visite de Jean à la maison peut-être. (247-48)

Time's advancement, or even encroachment ('coming towards her'), becomes palpable through the repetition of "depuis" and the evocation of a bell. That Florentine's fear of being pregnant is likened to a small, interior bell that rings even louder than all of the bells of the city once again brings the body in relationship to time. Just as Rose-Anna rises and falls with the pendulum of the clock, Florentine rings with the sounding church bells or bells of city hall that announce each passing hour.

In *Alexandre Chenevert*, Roy's third novel first published in 1954, the negative effects of time on the body are again emphasized. Alexandre is a man stricken with anxiety and insomnia, and the opening pages of the text announce to the reader, "Il avait, dans sa vie, perdu quantité de choses, et presque toujours les meilleures: la jeunesse d'abord; ensuite la santé; et maintenant le sommeil" (10). The statement is made after we learn Alexandre lost a costly umbrella, inspiring an enumeration of his physical losses:

youth, health and sleep. After an extended period of malady and malaise (the account of which covers some 150 pages of text), Alexandre consults a physician, Dr. Hudon. With no clear cause for his lack of wellbeing, the doctor poses a series of questions regarding Alexandre's habits and relationships. Finally, Alexandre declares, "Je vis ma vie, qu'est-ce que vous voulez!" (163). The doctor pursues, "Mais la vivez-vous justement votre vie? [...] Vous m'avez l'air d'un homme qui doit toujours être à la course" (163).

Although Alexandre denies this observation, insisting that he is rarely late, Dr. Hudon becomes persuaded that it is Alexandre's hurriedness, his unhealthy relationship with time, that leads to his overall ill health: "il était évident que ce pauvre homme devait faire tout de travers; manger vite, un œil sur l'horloge, au fond de quelque restaurant bruyant; puis, la dernière bouchée avalée, repartir à la course se mettre à l'ouvrage; se coucher la tête pleine de chiffres; se lever fatigué, arriver à un autre soir..." (163). Like Rose-Anna and Florentine, Alexandre's existence is bound to a clock, and his body steadily degenerates as time goes by.

As these examples reveal, in Roy's work a healthful, beautiful body is almost always of the past, something remembered more than experienced. Andron helps us situate this tendency within a broader trend in Roy's later works to suppress the body entirely: "Cette écriture tendra de plus en plus vers la sublimation de la réalité corporelle, du désir amoureux et de la pulsion sexuelle" (231). In their degrading and often denied bodies, Roy's characters (and Roy herself) struggle to know the body in the present (as Florentine who resists acknowledging her pregnancy), to experience the body in the present (as Rose-Anna, whose labor has her alternately remembering, hallucinating, and

projecting), and to reach the body in the present (as Roy, who writes to a corpse when she sought to address her mother). What Roy experienced in her own failed attempt to share with her mother the good news of her/their newfound financial security – ultimately discovering that she was writing a letter to a corpse – can be seen to develop in the author's early novels into an apprehension of the body as unrelentingly unreachable, tangled in a time that never ceases to lead characters further from themselves and from those they love. Throughout Gabrielle Roy's career, the bodies that she writes never fully *are*, but dwell in an impossible present that is temporally, if not always geographically removed.

Roy's realization that she was writing to a corpse shapes her literary representation of the body, and, as I will demonstrate in the pages that follow, this realization equally informs the author's representation of the epistolary. For when Roy wrote to a corpse, she wrote to it with a letter. Since that fateful missive to Mélina, Roy's letters, both in her personal correspondence and in her published works of fiction, inhabit an impossible epistolary present between presence and absence and present and past to become a matter of memory.

### **From presence to absence and present to past**

Though Gabrielle Roy wrote letters before she ever wrote a novel,<sup>42</sup> it isn't until after the publication of *Bonheur d'occasion* and her marriage to the doctor Marcel Carbotte that Roy develops into a truly disciplined and prolific correspondent. In a rich study interrogating Gabrielle Roy's correspondence as an epistolary autobiography, Sophie Marcotte notes that at the same time as the author began a sustained correspondence with her husband, she took up autobiography in her literary career, moving away from the social realism of *Bonheur d'occasion* to draw heavily upon her own experience as a school teacher in Manitoba to write her second novel, *La Petite Poule d'Eau*. I would add that it is also in *La Petite Poule d'Eau* that Roy grants an important place in her fiction to letters. Where *Bonheur d'occasion* makes only one explicit reference to a letter,<sup>43</sup> nearly every chapter of part one in *La Petite Poule d'Eau* makes mention of letter writing, reading and/or distribution, and it is possible to trace a migration across "L'école de la Petite Poule d'Eau" (part one) from an epistolary replete with physical and temporal presence, to one where letters are repositories for memory, absence and loss.

At the start of *La Petite Poule d'Eau*, postal deliveries are thoroughly infused with presence for protagonist Luzina Tousignant and the other inhabitants of the secluded island for which the novel is named. Nick Sluzick, the local post office employee, delivers people as often as packages to the Tousignant family. In the second chapter of

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<sup>42</sup> This is evident from *Le temps qui m'a manqué* and from early entries of *Ma chère petite sœur*, a collection of letters Gabrielle Roy wrote to her sister Bernadette.

<sup>43</sup> Jean Lévesque writes a cover letter to accompany a job application.

the novel, Luzina climbs into Nick's car alongside the sack stuffed with mail for a ride into town. She returns to the island in the same way some time later bearing post cards she has purchased for her children and what is described as "son paquet le plus précieux" (35) which is "soigneusement envelopé" (34). The post cards, hand-delivered to the children by their sender, mark their mother's return to the island, where the sense of renewed presence is augmented by the revelation that the "precious package" Luzina has brought home is a newborn baby.

The Tousignant family uses Nick's services to send letters as well. Looking at her growing family, Luzina concludes that her children need schooling, and she considers the family large enough to request that a school teacher be sent to educate them. She drafts a letter to the Manitoban government to make her request. With some stipulations, it is honored, and the exchange of letters leads to new companions in the region of the Tousignant's remote home. Though the introverted Nick Sluzick would rather restrict his distribution to envelopes and packages, his human deliveries to *la Petite Poule d'Eau* represent the most present-filled possibilities of the post; and for a time, the letters and the people that arrive in *La Petite Poule d'Eau* suggest an epistolary devoid of absence.

As the storyline of *La Petite Poule d'Eau* progresses, however, the absence and lack inherent in letters come to the fore. Despite Luzina's persistent postal inquiries, the government no longer supplies teachers for the small island school. Luzina exchanges a letter with Miss O'Rorke, a teacher who has moved on to another district and was never replaced, but this short-lived correspondence succeeds only in reminding both women of "la solitude" that they have come to know (142). As for the small school building the

Tousignants had built on their property, it begins to suffer from disuse and disrepair. The narrator remarks that “Un voyageur arrivant dans l’île et voyant une cabane de plus que n’en exigeaient les stricts besoins de la population aurait pu méditer sur le progrès et le déclin qu’elle racontait” (117). The decline that follows progress evident in the schoolhouse is reflected in a parallel and larger movement from presence to absence in the novel’s narrative arc and in its epistolary exchanges.

When we revisit earlier missives in view of what comes after, it becomes clear that absence and decline were foretold, in fact, by the very first letters Luzina exchanged with the government regarding the school. Luzina had been inspired and empowered to initiate contact with the Department of Education by the memory of her one visit to the capital of the province years before. She recalls seeing the parliamentary building in Winnipeg, whose stairwell is flanked on either side by a life-sized bronze statue of buffalo. At first, Luzina associates the bison strictly with power: the power of the animal’s size and strength, the power of progress, as well as “la puissance à laquelle elle s’était adressée” (43) in writing to the Manitoban government. She remarks that the statues “paraissaient prêts à charger” and that “le pied semblait encore gratter furieusement le sol des Prairies” (42). Yet, no matter how life-like the statues, they but “appear” or “seem” to live (*paraître* and *sembler*), and they cannot fully obscure the reality of the bison’s disappearance: “Les bisons étaient l’emblème du Manitoba [...] On les avait décimées et, maintenant, [les bêtes] symbolisaient l’audace et la croyance au progrès de la province” (42). Having been driven to near extinction, the buffalo are reduced to a symbol, one that is reproduced on each of the official envelopes sent out by

the provincial government. By featuring an endangered animal, this emblem of progress simultaneously indexes loss, and like Roy who writes “à une morte,” Luzina, in a sense, also addresses the dead. When Luzina receives a reply six weeks after mailing her request for a school and teacher, she notes, “Dans un coin de l’enveloppe il y avait un bison surmonté d’une croix, le tout gravé en relief noir sur blanc et très impressionnant” (43). The icon on the government-issued envelope betrays the relationship of letters to absence that Luzina will come to appreciate only in her future exchanges.

With the government’s repeated refusals to send new teachers, the Tousignant children begin to leave la Petite Poule d’Eau to pursue schooling elsewhere. Rather than announcing new arrivals, a letter can threaten to rob Luzina of one of the few souls that remain with her on the island. Joséphine, for example, informs her mother in a letter that “je vais me charger de l’éducation d’un des enfants [...] Tu comprends que l’on ne peut pas négliger la petite Claire-Armelle. D’ici quelques années, j’espère donc que tu pourras me l’envoyer...” (my emphasis, 151). Whereas the postal service used to allow Luzina to “deliver” her newborns and relay them safely home, at the close of “L’école de la Petite Poule d’Eau” she must face “sending” one of the last of her children off to a faraway school, and confront the ascendancy of absence on her island home.

With many of the Tousignant children off the island and unlikely to return, letters become a medium of memory for the family. “L’école de la Petite Poule d’Eau” closes with a description of the letters that Luzina sends to her daughter Joséphine and son Edmond away at school to remind them of ‘*all one must not forget to remember*’ in the way of health, good conduct and the heart’ (“Le contenu des lettres, tout ce qu’il ne fallait

pas oublier de rappeler au sujet de la santé, de la bonne conduite, du cœur” [(my emphasis, 152)]. Though Luzina writes the letters themselves, she does not address the envelope that bears them, for she lacks confidence in her writing ability and is hesitant to expose it to the eyes of postal workers or anyone other than her children.<sup>44</sup> Instead, she pencils faint lines on the envelope’s surface to guide her youngest daughter’s hand: “Dès lors, les lettres qui partaient de la Petite Poule d’Eau étaient écrites selon la pente coutumière, mais l’enveloppe portait une autre écriture. C’était une écriture extrêmement appliquée, d’une enfantine rigueur.” Though Luzina retreats behind the hand of Claire-Armelle, her children can still perceive their mother’s markings beneath their sister’s applied script: “[e]n examinant l’enveloppe de près, Edmond et Joséphine pouvaient voir, point toujours effacées, les lignes tracées au crayon par Luzina pour aider la petite fille à écrire bien droit.” Rather than a substitution of absence for presence or a progression from one to the other, here presence and absence coexist. Roy’s formulation of the lines as “point toujours effacées” juxtaposes descriptors for what is enduring (“toujours”) with what is effaced (“effacées”); the lines are erased, yet remain, their effacement does not render them invisible. The perception of these not-entirely-observed traces both reminds Edmond and Joséphine of their childhood home, and pains them for having, in a sense, risen above it.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Luzina’s self-consciousness about her writing can be traced to a letter she received years before from the first school teacher at la Petite Poule d’Eau, Mademoiselle Coté: “C’était la lettre de la maîtresse, d’une belle calligraphie absolument droite et sans ratures, qui, lui révélant la perfection que pouvait atteindre une lettre dans la forme et dans le fond, accablait Luzina” (60).

<sup>45</sup> The first section of the novel concludes with the sentence « Et les enfants instruits de Luzina avaient un instant le cœur serré, comme si leur enfance là-bas, dans l’Île de la Petite Poule d’Eau, leur eût reproché leur élévation” (153).

There is much in this passage from *La Petite Poule d'Eau* – traces, effacement, a mother and her children, memory and regret – that echoes a particularly poignant scene from *Le temps qui m'a manqué* where Gabrielle Roy and her sister Clémence first see the dead body of their mother.<sup>46</sup> The first draft of *Le temps qui m'a manqué* develops the observations and exchanges before Méлина's coffin at much greater length and in greater detail than the third (i.e. published) version. In “*Cahier I*,” Roy's sister Clémence says to Gabrielle after examining their mother's face, “Ils ont bien fait leur travail. Ils l'ont un petit peu rajeunie, mais pas trop. C'est encore elle, ne trouves-tu pas? que juste avant sa mort.” The narration continues, “Elle parut soulagée de constater que des traces de souffrance rappelait fussent effacées, comme si maintenant elle allait peut-être perdre peu à peu la mémoire” (*sic*, 24). The traces of suffering that had marked Méлина ‘were erased,’ as if the morticians had not covered, but somehow removed them from the surface of Méлина's skin. When Gabrielle Roy herself steps forward to contemplate her mother's face, she describes it [or the scene] as follows:

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<sup>46</sup> The impact and import for Roy of seeing the body of her dead mother not only are evident in the lengthy passages dedicated to describing it in the second chapter of *Le temps qui m'a manqué*, but are signaled in the very first letter of *Ma chère petite sœur*, a collection of the correspondence Roy wrote to her sister Bernadette. Dated the 15th of September, 1943 (nearly forty years before Roy would write of the same scene in her autobiography), the opening letter begins: “Chère sœur Bernadette, Je ne t'ai pas écrit depuis le jour où, nous tenant par le bras, nous regardions cette petite morte qui avait été notre mère. [...] Et si je ne t'ai pas écrit depuis, ce n'est pas parce que je ne pensais pas, tous les jours, à cela: toi et moi devant cette petite morte, tout ce que nous aimons le plus au monde” (15). The repeated “petite” that qualifies “morte” certainly does not diminish the emotional significance of this encounter; Roy writes that she thinks of ‘the little corpse that had been [their] mother’ every day, and conjugates the verb “aimer” in the present to suggest that the sisters not only *loved* their mother, but *love* the little corpse and the time spent together with it. *Le temps qui m'a manqué* also describes Bernadette and Gabrielle Roy together, hand in hand, before their mother's coffin at the funeral parlor (52-53), but Roy's first look at her mother's dead body is shared with her sister Clémence.

Car passé la surprise de voir émerger des fleurs et du satin soyeux le visage de ma mère, je ne pouvais plus ne pas voir que c'était un petit visage tout usé, tout fondu réduit aux os. [...] Je m'approchai plus près encore du visage de cire comme pour mieux voir ce qui avait été la vie de cette morte, et la revoyant par étapes, je cru voir la vie de tant d'autres femmes de sa génération. (sic, 27)

Unlike Clémence who exclaims “C’est beau malgré tout, la mort!” (2000, 50) after looking upon Méлина, Roy can “no longer not see” the wear on her mother’s face. It is a face, moreover, that she describes as one of wax (“visage de cire”). It is through a careful examination of this ‘wax face’ that Roy perceives the layered experiences of Méлина’s life inscribed ‘in stages’ over time and recognizes that such markings are shared with countless other female bodies of that generation stamped by common hardship.<sup>47</sup> If Clémence remarks that the traces of suffering have been erased, for Gabrielle Roy the lines are ‘point toujours effacées,’ and these lines in the wax allow her to see not merely what Méлина is in death, but what she was in life.

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<sup>47</sup> Most notably, these women were subject to numerous pregnancies. The narration of *Cahier I* continues, “Un nœud me serrait la gorge à m’étouffer je ne 'en pouvais plus de voir découvrir [...] à quel supplice le monde, les hommes, l’église, les prêtres, les lois avaient condamnés le corps de la femme déjà malmené par la nature si dure à son égard. J’entendais au fond de mes souvenirs des bribes de confidences entendues à la cachette entre ma mère et des voisines, quand j’étais [sic] enfant alors que l’on me pensait trop petite pour comprendre. Il était question des prêtres qui refusaient l’absolution si la femme se refusait à son mari – car alors ce serait de sa faute s’il allait ailleurs – si elle tentait la moindre échappatoire à une nouvelle grossesse. Je songeai à l’inimaginable terreur qui avait pesé sur cet esprit de ma mère comme sur celui de toute créature faite pour la liberté, l’amour, le bonheur, et combien on avait cherché à la réduire jusqu’à user sur elle la peur de l’enfer et du châtement” (27-28). Lori Saint-Martin has noted in her contribution to *Gabrielle Roy inédite* that Roy’s archival writings are often more overtly feminist than the versions of her texts that go to press. As this excerpt demonstrates, *Le temps qui m’a manqué* is no exception.

Wax has long been presented as a metaphor and mechanism for memory. In the ancient Greek tradition, *Theaetetus* 194 records Socrates' proposal that the human soul can be understood as containing a slab of wax: "We make impressions upon this of everything we wish to remember [...] Whatever is impressed upon the wax we remember and know so long as the image [...] remains in the wax; whatever is obliterated or cannot be impressed, we forget [...] and do not know" (191d, quoted in Ricœur, 9). Millennia later, Sigmund Freud resurrects the wax-memory analogy in his brief essay entitled "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad,'" where he enumerates the qualities and constituents of a child's toy in order to illustrate the process of human perception and memory formation. At the base of the mystic writing pad is a slab of wax covered with two thin sheets attached at one end, one of wax paper and the other of transparent celluloid. Freud explains that when one writes upon the tablet, it leaves a permanent trace on the wax, though the writing can be quickly and easily cleared from the two upper layers by lifting them from the wax surface below. Thus, the mystic writing pad retains a "memory" in the wax, while its upper sheets offer "an ever-ready receptive surface" (209) for new writing and memory making.

The way that Gabrielle Roy describes the body of her deceased mother in the first iteration of *Le temps qui m'a manqué* ("Cahier 1") recalls certain elements of Freud's depiction of the mystic writing pad. The traces of suffering on Mélina's face are linked to memory, both Clémence's memory ("mémoire") and arguably Mélina's ("rappelait" [read: "rappelée"]), yet the thought that Clémence might be able to forget the suffering her mother experienced in the absence of these markings is presented as a dubious one,

qualified with “peut-être” “peu” and the wishful “comme si.” For the ‘image remains in the wax’; though the traces of suffering have been erased from the surface of Mélina’s skin, Gabrielle Roy looks directly upon the wax of her mother’s “visage de cire” and sees her mother’s body inscribed with memory. Like the lines beneath Claire-Armelle’s writing in *La Petite Poule d’Eau*, the lines of Mélina’s face are erased and visible, absent and present.

Through the metaphor of impressions in wax, we can appreciate how memory and letters alike rely upon the paradox of presence in absence and vice versa. Drawing upon Socrates’ depiction of memory as markings in wax, French philosopher Paul Ricœur writes of “the relation between the absence of the thing remembered and its presence in the mode of representation” (58) or “the present representation of an absent thing” (7) that occurs in the work of recollection. Though the seal is no longer present, its impression in the wax remains, or, to borrow from Freud’s illustration, though the stylus no longer touches the mystic writing pad, the slab still bears its trace. The Socratic and Freudian formulations of memory readily translate to epistles if one considers the era where envelopes bore the imprint of their dispatcher in a wax seal, as if each epistle were marked with the memory of its sender by the emblem traced in drops of colored wax. Even without the traditional seal, epistolary theorists such as Marie-Claire Grassi, as we have already noted, and Janet Gurkin Altman situate the letter between presence and absence: while a missive’s materiality and language may speak to presence, they cannot undo the absence and distance inherent in all epistolary exchange. The fantasy of letters evacuated of absence fills the early chapters of *La Petite Poule d’Eau*, but the steady

progression from audacity to extinction, and from the company of children and teachers to memory and missives reveals how letters, like bodies, cannot undo absence, but can only hope not to forget.

### **Memory and missives**

In Gabrielle Roy's subsequent major publication, *Alexandre Chenevert*, the body, memory and the epistolary become ever more entwined. In the novel, the title character, an unwell and overworked bank employee, leaves Montreal at his physician's prompting for a vacation in the countryside. While there, his mental and physical health improves to such an extent that he feels he must write a letter to the press to share the story of his transformation and to persuade others to seek a comparable cure in nature. His desire for writing stems, in large part, from his newfound awareness of his indebtedness to others, for "il avait saisi avec tendresse et une fois pour toutes qu'il était redevable à des milliers d'hommes, et même à des morts," and with a pen and paper he aims to "s'acquitter envers les autres" (242). Alexandre recognizes his indebtedness to others and even to the dead, and his urge to write is an urge to acquit himself in their sight.

Paul Ricœur uses the notion of "the duty of memory" to articulate the work of writing and remembering the dead as well as the past more broadly. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricœur affirms, "We are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are" (89), and he asserts that this condition of indebtedness incites and obligates us to remember. In multiple passages, Ricœur references this "duty of

memory,” characterizing it “essentially [as] a duty not to forget” (30) and insisting that it is “not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintain[ing] the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others” (i.e. “those who have gone before” [89]). For Ricœur, documenting past experiences or events does not acquit one of the “duty of memory” if the writing of this history is not accompanied by a sense of indebtedness to those who have preceded the writer and their writing.

With his consciousness of being “redevable à des milliers d’hommes, et même à des morts,” Alexandre Chenevert is poised to fulfill the duty of memory, and the drafting of his letter is indeed coupled with the work of remembrance. When Alexandre sits down to write the intended letter to the press, his inner monologue suggests that he has already formulated precisely what he wants to say. Yet, “Tout cela, n’était encore que dans le cœur d’Alexandre. Sur la page blanche, il n’y avait rien” (243). Before the blank page, Alexandre struggles to retrieve what he had planned to write, and the description Roy gives of Alexandre’s attempts to recover the message he had mentally drafted is of a mind battling with forgetfulness:

Il y avait eu un moment où sa lettre lui était apparue pour ainsi dire toute faite, depuis la salutation cordiale jusqu’à “Votre tout dévoué, Alexandre Chenevert” [...] Et, maintenant, plus rien. Alexandre se frappe le front: cette boîte rebelle devait du moins lui restituer ce qu’elle avait contenu. (245)

As he frantically searches his memory after several days before the blank page, Alexandre retrieves not the words of the letter he intended to write to the press, but the

text of a much more familiar letter from his past. The mental misfiring leads his hand to retrace the uninspired note, “Nous avons le plaisir de vous remettre inclus extrait de votre compte courant arrêté au 1 novembre” (246). With mounting stress at the failure and seeming betrayal of his memory, Alexandre takes up his old vices of coffee, cigarettes, and sleepless nights and starts to slip back into his former state of ill health and unhappiness. Ultimately unable to fulfill the duty of memory and write to those to whom he is abstractly indebted, he turns to those whom he knows personally, namely his colleague Godias and his wife Eugénie, and addresses letters to them, still proudly professing his utter transformation, despite its already diminished state.

At times, Roy, too, struggling to write to a larger readership, finds that she can succeed in addressing friends and family in letters. She writes to Adrienne Choquette from Turrettes-sur-Loup on January 17, 1973, “dès qu’il pleut on n’a plus qu’à rester chez soi à lire ou écrire. Cela va pour les lettres aux amies très chères. Mais pour le reste, le cœur n’y est pas” (2005, 208). Many of the author’s private missives to dear friends evoke loved ones who have passed, and in these instances, her letters are laden with the ‘feeling of obligation’ to ‘those who have gone before’ that Paul Ricœur describes and Alexandre Chenevert exemplifies.

Roy commemorates her mother, her sisters Anna and Bernadette, her brother Rudolph (or “Rod”), and Sister Ross in her correspondence with Bernadette and Clémence and with the friends and fellow writers featured in the collection *Femmes de lettres*. It is never a question, however, of a perfunctory mention of one who has died; Roy’s writing requires and represents memory work. She pays lengthy tribute to the good

deeds and upstanding character of Sister Ross, acknowledges the faults and the strengths of her brother Rod, describes in detail the last days of Anna's life, and otherwise memorializes the loved ones who have gone before her in her correspondence. If Alexandre Chenevert feels abstractly "redevable [...] à des morts" (242), Gabrielle Roy feels deeply and personally indebted to her (late) mother, sisters, brothers, and friends, and the frequency, content, and closing salutations of Roy's many letters post-Mélina betray a desire to accomplish the duty of memory through epistolary exchange.

As we have already intimated, much ink has been spilled regarding the impact Mélina Roy's death had on the literary production of her daughter, but Lori Saint-Martin is one of the few scholars to have considered the question within Roy's personal missives, tracing Roy's mourning of her mother in the correspondence with her sister Bernadette.<sup>48</sup> The correspondence with Bernadette continues for years, though never so regularly as in the weeks leading up to her sister's death, when Gabrielle mails lengthy epistles each day and grieves the death of Bernadette even as she passes. Saint-Martin sees the two moments of mourning which open and close the collection of letters to Bernadette as being one and the same, writing, "ces lettres s'inscrivent entre deux deuils ou, [...] entre le même deuil vécu deux fois, celui de la mère" (118); however, a close consideration of Roy's letters makes clear that the death of Bernadette, and Roy's experience of this loss, differs greatly from that of losing Mélina.

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<sup>48</sup> See "'Au plus près possible de vous tous': deuil, distance et écriture dans la correspondance de Gabrielle Roy."

Nearly an entire week's worth of letters, six daily missives composed between May 19<sup>th</sup> and May 24<sup>th</sup> of 1970, never reach Bernadette. Roy made a hand-written note on the envelope of each of these returned letters that reads "Lettre arrivée trop tard et non lue à Dédette" (230-34), or, in the case of the letter from May 24<sup>th</sup>, "Lettre arrivée après la mort de Dédette" (235). The missives Gabrielle Roy wrote in the final weeks and months of Bernadette's life are unquestionably the most literary and lyrical of all of the author's letters.<sup>49</sup> Far from the "brouillon" or "premier jet" that Arrou-Vignod uses to describe letters in his essay on the epistolary, *Le Discours des Absents*, here Roy's personal epistles achieve their full literary potential and develop into "cet objet poli, égalisé, qu'est un morceau de prose romanesque" (44),<sup>50</sup> yet these unread, unreceived missives bear nothing of the tragedy of Roy's single letter to Mélina. Roy admits in an exchange with her friend Cécile Chabot:

Je n'ai pas manqué un seul jour d'écrire une lettre à ma sœur malade, cela fait donc au-delà d'une trentaine de lettres, quelques-unes assez longues et toutes m'ayant demandé un gros effort, car chaque fois, j'ai eu à réfléchir profondément: que dire en effet à un être humain qui va affronter bientôt la mort. (2005, 181)

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<sup>49</sup> One such example of the heartening and ethereal prose that characterizes these late letters can be found in the missive dated April 27, 1970: "tout ce qui vit est en mouvement pour retourner à sa source. C'est-à-dire à plus grand, à meilleur que tout ce qu'il a jamais connu. Les ruisseaux vont à la rivière, les rivières à la mer, la mer, par son évaporation, aux grands nuages qui voguent dans le ciel, et nous, créatures faites pour aimer et être aimées, à cette inépuisable tendresse enfin dont nous avons eu si grande faim tout au long de notre vie" (202-03).

<sup>50</sup> As François Ricard has noted, certain passages of these concluding missives to Bernadette reappear in her subsequent publication of short stories *Cet été qui chantait*.

Roy wrote her letters to Bernadette knowing they were subject to the impossible present of the epistolary, knowing they were destined to the dying or the dead.

If Isabelle Daunais arguably overextends the “*mémoire des morts*” as the destination of Roy’s writing as a whole, it would be difficult to overstate the place of memory – memory of the living as well as of the dead – in the author’s epistolary production. Her letters to Bernadette are a privileged site to memorialize Mélina, and in turn, her letters to Clémence underscore Roy’s remembrance of Mélina, Clémence herself, and most especially Bernadette. Unlike the letters to Bernadette, which have been quite extensively read and commented, there is virtually no existing scholarship on Roy’s letters to Clémence. This dearth can be explained in great part by the fact that, until very recently, the letters were under embargo at the Library and Archives Canada, which reflects a policy respecting a period of thirty years of confidentiality following the author’s death. While researchers can now access the collection of letters to Clémence in Ottawa, there are no current plans to publish the collection or otherwise make the letters more broadly available. For a consideration of the “*mémoire des morts*” and duty of memory in Roy’s missives, however, these letters are invaluable.

It is in the months immediately following the death of “Dédette” that Roy writes to Clémence with the greatest frequency; she explains on June 18, 1970:

J’éprouve le besoin de me tenir le plus près possible de toi malgré la distance, dans l’ennui que j’éprouve depuis la mort de notre chère Bernadette [...].  
C’est pourquoi je t’écris plus souvent, pour tâcher de te consoler en me consolant moi-même, car il m’est bienfaisant de parler d’elle.

A great number of the letters Roy sends to Clémence make mention of the loss of their sister, reiterate “the void” Gabrielle feels in Bernadette’s absence, and emphasize the insistence (even incessancy) of her memory. For example, in a missive dated June 8, 1970, Roy writes, “Je n’ai pas besoin de te dire, n’est-ce pas, combien notre Bernadette me manque. Sans cesse elle est devant mes yeux. Sans cesse je l’implore de nous venir en aide maintenant qu’elle est auprès de Dieu. Le vide est atroce cependant.” Years after Bernadette’s passing, Roy insists that she remembers Bernadette daily. On January 31, 1972, she sends word to Clémence from Québec, “Je demande à Dédette de veiller sur toi [...] Cher ange, comme elle me manque. Il n’y a pas de jour où je ne me dis pas à un moment ou à un autre: oh si seulement Dédette était là [...].”<sup>51</sup> Alongside these expressions of loss, Roy records many happy memories of Bernadette. She recalls with particular fondness the visit Bernadette and Clémence paid to her at her cottage one summer in Petite-Rivière-Saint-François. The author frequently reminisces in her letters about the summer the sisters spent together, as she does in her epistle from July 21, 1974, “Que des fois nous avons parlé ensemble [...] de la belle visite que vous nous avez faite, toi et Dédette en cet été si merveilleux qui ne peut s’effacer de notre mémoire!”<sup>52</sup> In page after page of her letters to Clémence, Roy writes her memories and her mourning.

In this way, Gabrielle Roy’s letters serve as testimonials of remembrance of those *about* whom she writes, but they also seek to fulfill the duty of memory of those *to* whom

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<sup>51</sup> With the passage of time, Roy’s evocations of the sister with whom she shared the closest bond are not described with the same pangs of sadness, but remain very frequent. Seven years after Bernadette’s death, on May 27, 1977, Roy asserts, “je ressens toujours le vide qu’a laissé notre chère Dédette.” After another year has passed, she pens, “Douce Dédette, elle me manque toujours, tant que je vivrai elle me manquera” (Québec, May 18, 1978).

<sup>52</sup> Gabrielle Roy and her friend Berthe Simard

she writes. Roy's letters are filled with declarations of remembrance and closing salutations pledging "souvenirs." Memory permeates and punctuates epistles signed off with phrases such as "je vous garde [...] mon souvenir le plus sympathique" (*Femmes de lettres* 43), "je vous prie [...] d'accepter mon souvenir amical" (72), "Avec mon meilleur souvenir" (88), and "Je vous offre [...] mes souvenirs les plus affectueux" (108). These missives assure the loved ones to whom Roy writes that she holds them in her memory.

However, as we have seen in Alexandre Chenevert's struggle to retrieve the content of his letter to the press, memory, for all its merit, is far from foolproof. The epistle Alexandre writes to his wife, Eugénie, can be seen to manifest the fallibility of memory as much as its duty. Though the missive to Eugénie is never cited in its entirety, the opening passage is quoted on three separate occasions in the novel. First, as Alexandre sits down to write it: "Ma bonne Eugénie, racontait-il, tu me reconnaîtras à peine. J'ai pris du mieux [...]" (251). Some fifteen pages later, when Eugénie first sees Alexandre after his return to their apartment in Montreal, she thinks to herself that "Il paraissait souffrir comme avant" (266) and says aloud to her husband, "Ça n'a pas l'air que ça t'a fait tant de bien, tes vacances." Upon hearing this, Alexandre decides against giving her the letter he had penned while at Lac Vert and brought along to deliver himself. With this second mention of the letter, the opening phrase is cited again, though this time in slightly different terms: "Ma bonne Eugénie, tu vas me trouver un homme changé [...]" (267). The letter is quoted for a third and final time five chapters later, when Eugénie discovers it in Alexandre's pocket as she does the ironing. Here the letter is said to open with "Ma bonne Eugénie, tu vas me trouver bien changé" (351). While the shift

from “tu me reconnaîtras à peine” to “tu vas me trouver un homme changé” to “tu vas me trouver bien changé” is a relatively subtle one, it effectively destabilizes the letter as a fixed and concrete object.

Indeed, the letter alters as Alexandre’s body undergoes alterations. In the moment of its composition, which bears the closest temporal proximity to his ephemeral well-being, the letter makes the strongest statement regarding his physical health: “J’ai pris du mieux...” As he distances himself from Lac Vert and relapses into the cityscape and his former habits, he is “un homme changé,” not better, but different. As his health continues to deteriorate, he loses all ground he has gained and becomes increasingly ill and frail. The letter now asserts that Eugénie will find him “bien changé,” very changed indeed. Each time the missive is referenced, its content experiences some alteration, some diminishment, one might say. Subjective and prone to variation, it is as if the letter is a memory itself, one that Alexandre can never fully recover.

Within her personal correspondence, Roy unambiguously articulates a certain lack of faith in the integrity of memory. In a letter to her husband from August 8th, 1963, Roy writes, “Notre mémoire reconstruit sans cesse et sans cesse nous induit en erreur” (504). Roy also calls into question the reliability of memory in several missives addressed to Clémence, expressing uncertainty in her own recollection of past events. She inquires how much time has passed since the death of Bernadette on May 27, 1977 (seven years after her sister’s passing), writing, “Voici six ans déjà n’est-ce pas que nous l’avons perdue ? Ou est-ce moins ? [...] rafraîchis-moi donc la mémoire.” She similarly questions her ability to situate the trip her two sisters made to Roy’s summer home in a

letter dated February 7 of the same year: “le fameux voyage à Petite-Rivière-Saint-François? C’était en quelle année? Il y a combien de temps de cela? Rafraîchis-moi donc la mémoire.” As evidenced by the content of her correspondence to Clémence, Roy has reflected “sans cesse” on Bernadette’s death and reminisced “sans cesse” about her sisters’ visit, yet she is wary of her memory’s reconstructions. Furthermore, despite having documented the details in question in previous letters, having mailed these missives Roy is left only with an incomplete and undependable memory of her missive.

Despite memory’s decided imperfections, Roy’s letters continually incite the reader to look back. In the final chapter of *Alexandre Chenevert*, Godias, the recipient of the first letter Alexandre completes at Lac Vert and the only one that he mails, comes to the hospital to pay his moribund colleague a visit. Godias confesses that he showed the “belle lettre” (349) to a friend. At this evocation of the epistle, Alexandre inquires, “Qu’est-ce que je disais au juste? C’était mal dit, me semble” (349). Godias is quick to assure him of the contrary, though he, too, is unable to recall precisely what the letter said: “au juste, il ne se souvenait pas ‘des termes exacts’, mais la lettre l’avait fait réfléchir, oui, certainement” (350). Godias does not remember the letter in any detail, but it was a catalyst for him to *réfléchir*. Reflection, perhaps, even more than memory, captures the purpose and the power of the Royan epistolary.

Though “réfléchir” can be understood simply as “to think” or “to deliberate” (*Le Grand Robert* suggests synonyms including “Penser; [...], consulter [...], délibérer, méditer, observer” et cetera), its primary definition is to “*Renvoyer par réflexion\** dans une direction différente ou dans la direction d’origine” (my emphasis). As much of this

chapter has explored, Roy's letters commemorate, reminisce, and otherwise remember, inviting the reader to accompany Roy in a reflection upon the people, events and bodies of the past, and particularly upon her mother, Mélina – Roy's own point of 'origine.' Moreover, I contend that this gesture of looking and sending back must also extend to the epistolary critic.

Contrary to conventional genetic wisdom according to which the letters would be read as precursors to literature, and which would direct the critic's attention and interpretation to a separate, ostensibly more evolved form of writing, Roy's letters, through reflection, "renvo[ient]," send back. Physicists use the term "reflection" ("réflexion") to describe a "Phénomène se produisant à la surface de séparation de deux milieux dans lesquels une onde électromagnétique possède des vitesses de propagation différentes (une partie de l'onde est renvoyée dans le premier milieu – *réflexion* – ; une autre pénètre dans le second milieu → Réfraction)" (*Le Grand Robert*). According to this definition, reflection occurs at the point of separation between two media or milieux when a wave changes direction and is sent back to its medium of origin. In a literary context and more specifically a Royan one, we might consider the two milieux to be 'submerged' writings and canonical writings, or letters and literature. At the interface between these bodies of writing, Roy's epistolary expression 'fait réfléchir' and sends us back to letters themselves.

To be sure, Roy's letters can serve to illuminate any number of the author's writings, but if we strictly seek the "éclairages" these letters might offer to her published works, as François Ricard and Jane Everett prescribe, we risk overlooking the light they

reflect back to the epistolary itself. The posthumous publication of Gabrielle Roy's autobiography inspired a flurry of new scholarship, reinvigorating Roy's earlier works and inciting critics to employ novel approaches to familiar texts. Similarly, *Le temps qui m'a manqué* invites a reconsideration of Roy's correspondence after and in light of the letter that reveals to Roy that "C'était à une morte que j'écrivais."

The letter to Mélina at the time of her death was written *before* Roy's canonical texts and lauded literature. The letter on its own, however, offers little insight into how we might read these later works. What transpires as and after the letter is composed forever alters its import and interpretation, where the "after" itself becomes the defining temporality of letters born from, steeped in, and manifesting memory. Since the fraught letter to Mélina's corpse, the Royan epistolary repeatedly affirms that the body cannot be apprehended or addressed in its present (temporal) state, the letter is altered as the body is altered, and neither the body nor the letter are fully taken into account except in retrospect.

Photographs of Roy's handwritten drafts of *La détresse et l'enchantement* and *Le temps qui m'a manqué* (alongside typed transcripts thereof) are available for online consultation through the virtual community HyperRoy (<http://hyperroy.nt2.uqam.ca>). Each subsequent version is riddled with crossed out words, lines, sometimes even paragraphs, as Roy experiments with different language, ideas and structures. Roy was a meticulous re-writer and a scrupulous self-editor. As many as thirty different drafts exist of some of her works. Roy's letters to family and friends, on the other hand, are produced without any evident reworking. The missives are penned in a beautifully

consistent script bearing very few instances of scratch outs or amendments, yet there is no evidence in the *Fonds Gabrielle Roy* or elsewhere of the existence of rough copies of Roy's letters. These personal letters epitomize consistency, where the author quite regularly treats the same topics using similar formulations. These patterns quite clearly suggest that it is in Roy's literary works more than anywhere else that she finds her writing laboratory. Through the laboratory of her literature, with its sundry inserted letters, Gabrielle Roy works through the place and significance of the epistolary, and reflects on both her life and her letters. The narrative of *Le temps qui m'a manqué*, in particular, lays bare the psychology and process underpinning the author's epistolary imaginary in a way that Roy's personal letters in and of themselves cannot and do not, revealing that after the letter, non-letter "literature" should not be the sole preoccupation of the critic; after the letter we must make a return to the letter to understand it anew.

If we consider the analysis of Roy's letters that we have undertaken here as a case study of authorial correspondence in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century, it is my hope that it might offer some avenues for genetic epistolary readings loosed from the logic of the *avant-texte* to go beyond the before and toward other textual and temporal comparative readings. However, as we turn our attention to epistolary texts produced in the later part of the 20th century and into the 21st – an era that many could consider to be 'after' the letter – we must ask how our Royan model of reading "after" the letter might apply or require alteration. This will be a core question in the following chapter as we examine the *after* – or even the afterlife – of the epistolary as '*postal*' in writings that interrogate the end of the age of letters.

## When the ‘After’ is ‘Already’: Philosophical Fiction of the *Postal*

*Je pense que ce sont, tu comprends, les dernières lettres que nous nous écrivons. Nous écrivons les dernières lettres [...]. Nous prenons la dernière correspondance. Bientôt il n’y en aura plus.* – Jacques Derrida, *La carte postale*

Jacques Derrida’s 1980 publication *La carte postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* is, as its title would suggest, rife with the epistolary. Beyond mere metaphor or motif, the epistolary in *La carte postale* takes multiple forms and functions: serving at times as concrete objects of analysis (as when Derrida reads Sigmund Freud’s letters to Eitingon or Wittels and Edgar Allen Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”); at times as a methodology (as when he proposes an anachronistic correspondence between the writings of Freud and Heidegger or Freud and Plato); and consistently, but most clearly in the section “Envois,” as a textual performance where the concepts Derrida develops cannot be separated from the epistolary form he adopts and explicates. Despite this pervasiveness, the word “épistolaire” is largely absent from the lexicon of *La carte postale*. In lieu of “l’épistolaire,” Derrida writes of “le postal.” While “le postal” allows Derrida to address and amend sweeping philosophical precepts that extend beyond the epistolary genre and corpus, “le postal” in *La carte postale* is, at the same time, grounded in the textual tradition of writing and sending letters and post cards.

In multiple passages of “Envois,” like the one quoted in the epigraph above, Derrida announces that the end of the age of letters has arrived, that his present epistle constitutes the final loveletter<sup>53</sup> of history. Yet, at the same time that Derrida foresees the end of the post-age<sup>54</sup>, he forestalls it by continuing to send his lover love letters or love post cards. As Linda S. Kauffman puts it in *Special Delivery*, “*The Post Card* sets a death sentence for epistolarity, but is composed of sentences that delay its execution” (90). Derrida cites technological changes in telecommunications as ushering in what Kauffman terms ‘a death sentence for epistolarity’ and what he calls at one point an “apocalypse de carte postale” (18), but throughout the “Envois,” and indeed throughout *La carte postale* as a whole, Derrida illustrates the impossibility of getting over or getting “after” the letter, all while pushing the epistolary beyond notions of “before” in a performance of *le postal*.

Some thirty years after the publication of *La carte postale*, the threat of an epistolary apocalypse has resurfaced. In 2013, Canada Post announced its decision to discontinue urban door-to-door delivery service in response to the significant decline of the letter as a means of everyday communication in Canada. Throughout Canada and in Québec, letter writers of various stripes have been questioning if this change in postal service marks the death knell of the letter. Like in the two Québécois texts we will examine in this chapter, the letter seems suspended before an imminent and inevitable death. However, in both Madeleine Gagnon’s *La lettre infinie* and Denis Thériault’s *Le*

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<sup>53</sup> “lettredamour”

<sup>54</sup> To borrow a term Gregory L. Ulmer employs in his reading of *La carte postale*

*facteur émotif*, the epistolary moves beyond the before and the postal continues after death.

In the previous chapter, a resistance to the ‘before’ that tends to dominate genetic epistolary scholarship allowed us to probe the critical possibilities of reading “after” the letters of Gabrielle Roy. In this chapter, we will bring a Derridean postal to bear on epistolary texts of Québec in order to investigate an after not outside or beyond the letter, but an ‘already’ that resides within each message and missive, resists an end to epistolarity, and is bound to repeat itself even in the face of death. In the opening section of this chapter, we will consider Derrida’s “Envois” for the qualities and consequences it sets forth of reading the epistolary as “le postal.” Subsequent sections will offer readings of Madeleine Gagnon’s *La lettre infinie* and Denis Thériault’s *Le facteur émotif*, respectively, in light of this *postal*. Produced in Québec in two decades bridging the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, these philosophical works of epistolary fiction share a postal performativity that is always already in the post, and that defers and undoes an imminent end to the age of letters.

### **Postal (R)envois**

*La carte postale* consists of four sections: “Envois,” “Spéculer – sur ‘Freud,’” “Le Facteur de la Vérité,” and “Du Tout.” Epistolary imagery offers a unifying thread across sections, but it is only in part one of *La carte postale* that the postal itself is the object of inquiry and acts as both site and subject of Derrida’s investigation. *Le postal* is largely

developed and demonstrated through “the Oxford postcard,” a card featuring an illustration of Plato and Socrates that Derrida obsessively analyzes, inscribes, and sends off. Through his analysis and engagement with this post card, the important affiliations of *le postal* with *post* cards, the *post-*, and *posting* are performed. While all of these ‘posts’ are interconnected and entangled, they each help to illuminate particular aspects of Derrida’s apprehension of the epistolary. In the pages that follow, I will treat 1) post cards (undecidability), 2) the post- (*différance*) and 3) posting (*destinerrance*) in turn, though some of the looping and layering that characterize Derrida’s presentation and performance of the postal will inevitably disrupt the more linear arrangement I attempt here.

1. *Post cards* (undecidability): “Envois” is without question the most overtly epistolary segment of *La carte postale*, but it cannot be said to adhere to conventions of epistolary<sup>55</sup>. In the opening missive of “Envois,” a truncated passage flanked by two fifty-two-spaced blanks reads, “je ne t’aurai envoyé que des cartes. Même si ce sont des lettres et si j’en mets toujours plus d’une dans la même enveloppe” (12). Letters are cast as cards and the same envelope contains several of them; it is apparent from the first “card” of “Envois” that this correspondence defies established epistolary practices.

Presented as a series of monodic and fragmentary post cards to an unnamed lover, penned

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<sup>55</sup> Neither does it conform to conventions of philosophical or scientific writing. As Gregory L. Ulmer remarks, “‘Envois’ [...] introduces a new attitude toward knowledge into academic writing: against the traditional model of research [...], Derrida proposes instead an elaboration of enigmas rendering all conclusions problematic: truth gives way to secrets, closure to indecidability. In short, he proposes a writing oriented towards thought rather than information, a pedagogical writing rather than a scientific discourse” (45).

between June 3, 1977, and August 30, 1979,<sup>56</sup> the messages of “Envois” are at once superfluous and elliptical, containing far more text than could reasonably fit on any given post card, while signaling frequent omissions<sup>57</sup> where the content – a punctuation mark, word, sentence or lengthier passage – has been ‘destroyed.’<sup>58</sup>

By the fourth ‘card,’ written one day after the first three (which are all dated June 3, 1977), the correspondence turns its attention to one post card in particular. While working in the Bodleian library, Derrida discovers the ‘Oxford post card,’ featuring a reproduction<sup>59</sup> of a 13<sup>th</sup>-century drawing of Plato and Socrates. He buys “tout un stock” (14) of the post card(s) that he fills over the course of his correspondence with a protracted, even obsessive analysis of the depiction of the philosophers.<sup>60</sup> From his reading of this medieval image blossoms a broader analysis of post cards and *le postal*.

Derrida explains the postal qualities of post cards, writing,

Ce que je préfère, dans la carte postale, c’est qu’on ne sait pas ce qui est devant ou ce qui est derrière, ici ou là, près ou loin, le Platon ou le Socrate, recto ou

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<sup>56</sup> The dates inscribed at the start of each postcard present an interesting chronology. Especially near the opening of “Envois,” multiple (often lengthy) post cards are written each day. Later postcards are not always marked with a precise date, but instead suggest a general time period such as “Décembre 1977 (entre le 9 et le 22)” (141), “Un jour de mai 1978” (154), “Sans date (probablement entre le 9 janvier et Pâques 1978)” or “Sans date (probablement la même période)” (147).

<sup>57</sup> with “*un blanc de 52 signes*” (8)

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, with little investment in persuading, invites us to imagine that we are reading what remains of a correspondence partially consumed by fire.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida insists “Regarde bien cette carte, c’est une reproduction” (13)

<sup>60</sup> The image itself is not reproduced with each of the *envois*, but appears on the cover of *La carte postale* and again with a letter dated August 23, 1979 (one week before the final *envoi*), as a “diapositive avec les couleurs” (268).

verso. Ni ce qui importe le plus, l'image ou le texte, et dans le texte, le message ou la légende, ou l'adresse. [...] et la réversibilité se déchaîne. (17-18)

The post card's physical reversibility (it can be turned over and around to the point where one doesn't know what is the front and what is the back, what is before and what is behind, nor whether the picture or the writing or the indicated address is most important) reflects an interpretative malleability where positions and priorities shift and/or dwell in the undecidable. The impossibility of deciding between dualisms like here/there and near/far demonstrates how post cards disrupt oppositions that purport mutual exclusivity to become both exposed *and* concealed: "Ce que j'aime dans la carte postale, c'est que même sous enveloppe, c'est fait pour circuler comme une lettre ouverte mais illisible" (16). The post card is open (to various readers and various interpretations), but remains illegible in its indecidability, unreadable in its unknowability.

Derrida repeats the refrain "on ne sait pas" with regard not only to the post card, but to letters broadly speaking. He writes, "Mais voilà, *on ne sait jamais*, la part d'inconscient elle-même n'est jamais proprement déterminable, et cela tient à *la structure cartepostalée de la lettre*" (my emphasis, 98-99). Letters share the "postcarded" structure of post cards (though this approximate translation of 'cartepostalée' elides the "postaled" which better holds the *postal* in view); letters, too, can be turned around in any number of ways, interpreted differently but never definitively. In "Envois," Derrida abbreviates both "correspondances privées" and "correspondances publiques" with the letters "c.p.," making these ostensibly discrete epistolary categories indistinguishable from one another and from the c.p. of "cartes postales." Post cards in *La carte postale*, then, are not a

distinct genre (epistolary or other), but a succinct illustration of the postal. For Derrida, all letters<sup>61</sup> are post(al) cards: open, undecidable and post-ed.

2. *The post- (différance)*: The medieval image of Plato and Socrates by Matthew Paris that figures on the Oxford post card indexes the important place of the “post” (in a temporal sense) in Derrida’s understanding of the postal. Through a brilliant and bizarre ekphrasis of Matthew’s illustration, which blatantly disregards artistic conventions of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Derrida concludes that, contrary to all that the Western tradition holds dear, Socrates, not Plato, writes. Rather than a radical (and radically unfounded) historical intervention, Derrida’s reversal offers a philosophical reappraisal of a particularly charged scene of writing. The traditional understanding of the relationship between Socrates and Plato establishes and exemplifies a broader apprehension of philosophical and scriptural inheritance as having a stable sequence and immovable hierarchy: Socrates comes before Plato; speech comes before writing. Derrida’s reading of Matthew Paris’ illustration reverses the ‘irreversible sequence of heritage’ from Plato to Socrates, and later in *La carte postale*, from Freud to Socrates, and from Ernst and Sophie<sup>62</sup> to Sigmund.

The reversal Derrida enacts has the effect of contaminating the “pre” (the previous, the premier, the preeminent) with the “post,” that is, with the “after.” Derrida realizes the magnitude and iconoclasm of his proposal, writing,

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<sup>61</sup> And he will even argue all literature

<sup>62</sup> Freud’s grandson and daughter, respectively

Rendez-vous compte, tout dans notre culture [...] tout est construit sur la charte protocolaire d'un axiome, qu'on pourrait démontrer, étaler sur une grande carte, une carte postale bien sûr, tant c'est simple, élémentaire, brève stéréotypie apeurée [...]. La charte fait contrat de ceci, tout bêtement, il faut bien croire :  
Socrate vient *avant* Platon. (25)

It is precisely the sacrosanct, italicized 'before' that Derrida disrupts with the post-al and the reversals it allows. However, Derrida's is not a strict reversal - he does not displace Socrates (speech) merely to replace him with Plato (writing) and reinstate a new "before"; the resituating of Plato troubles the very premise of the "pre." Therefore, the "post" is not an after in opposition to the before, but an invitation beyond the before. To better grasp the Derridean "post," we must consider the shared logic of *le postal* and *la différance*.

*Différance* is a neologism of Derrida's invention that plays on the French verb *différer* meaning both to differ and to defer. In French, the pronunciation of *différance* is identical to that of *différence*, meaning simply difference.<sup>63</sup> Derrida develops his homonym into an economy of trace, where language is understood only by placing terms in relationship to other terms, past and future. As he writes in *Margins of Philosophy*,

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<sup>63</sup> Derrida's *différance* disrupts the preeminence of speech, for as Jack Reynolds encapsulates, "what differentiates *différance* and *différence* is inaudible, and this means that distinguishing between them actually requires the written." Reynolds places *différance*'s dependence upon writing in contrast with claims of Western philosophers (namely Saussure, in this case) that speech and writing can be separated and the latter is "an almost unnecessary addition to speech." Reynolds pursues, "If the spoken word requires the written to function properly, then the spoken is itself always at a distance from any supposed clarity of consciousness. It is this originary breach that Derrida associates with the terms arche-writing and *différance*." The notion of an "originary breach" raises the question of origin in language, while refusing to situate such a beginning before (a need for) writing. (See *De la grammatologie*.)

Differance is what makes the movement of signification possible only if each so-called 'present' element, each element appearing on the scene of presence, is related to something other than itself, thereby keeping within itself the mark of a past element, and already letting itself be vitiated by the mark of its relation to the future element, this trace being related no less to what is called the future than to what is called the past, and constituting what is called the present by means of this very relation to what it is not (13).

*Différance*, then, makes the present different from itself. While acknowledging the past and its mark on a given element's meaning, *différance* perpetually anticipates the after, recognizing that the after also already shapes and suspends meaning.

Within *La carte postale*, Derrida asserts, "dès qu'il y a, il y a différence [...], et il y a agencement postal, relais, retard, anticipation, destination, dispositif télécommunicant, possibilité et donc nécessité fatale de détournement, etc." (74). As soon as there is "there is," the postal is there, alongside or as *différance*. The postal does not afford a tidy, predictable transmission (where the letter is written and then it is sent). Even as it is written, there is postponement and peripateticism. For Derrida, interceptions, relays, delays and detours are not hazards that come to menace the postal, they already necessarily belong to the very "premier' envoi" (73) - though this is not 'first,' Derrida is quick to add, in any chronological or logical sense, for even the 'first' letter would be a return, a reply, a rebuttal or a relay.

Derrida continues, "c'est pourquoi on ne peut remplacer que pour rire la formule 'au commencement était le logos' par 'au commencement était la poste'" (73). Though

he asserts that this substitution of ‘the Word’ with ‘the post’ in the opening passage of the gospel of John<sup>64</sup> can only be made in jest, he makes it, and the fact that Derrida’s ‘joke’ appears parenthetically could be seen to heighten its import.<sup>65</sup> Derrida invites us to seriously consider that the ‘Word’ is not prior to its sending; the possibility and the necessity of being sent condition the Word. The English translation of “In the beginning was the post” highlights the phrase’s ostensible absurdity, while granting it fuller meaning and weight. Since the very beginning, there has been the after. The post is in the present since the most distant past. In Derrida’s disruption of the axiom “Socrates comes before Plato,” what was *before* is placed *after*, or rather, what was *after* is revealed to be *already* – already at work where we presumed it was not yet.

3. *Posting*: A brief and cryptic presentation precedes the first post card of “Envois”; it begins with the following lines:

*Vous pourriez lire ces envois comme la préface d'un livre que je n'ai pas écrit.*  
*Il aurait traité de ce qui va des postes, des postes en tous genres, à la*  
*psychanalyse.*

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<sup>64</sup> John 1:1 “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

<sup>65</sup> Derrida gives great weight to peritexts/paratexts in his textual analyses and in his theory. As Nicholas Royle affirms, “Derrida’s work has from the very beginning been characterized by a willingness and indeed a compulsion to explore the apparently ‘minor’ elements of a writer’s work, whether in the form of texts [...] considered superfluous or supplementary to the canonical works by that author [...] or in the form of prefaces, footnotes or other seeming superfluous or supplementary elements within the so-called ‘main body’ of a writer’s work” (57).

*Moins pour tenter une psychanalyse de l'effet postal que pour renvoyer d'un singulier événement, la psychanalyse freudienne, à une histoire et à une technologie du courrier, à quelque théorie générale de l'envoi et de tout ce qui par quelque télécommunication prétend se destiner (7).*

These early lines announce an affinity between the postal and psychoanalysis<sup>66</sup> (and of Western philosophy in general) that Derrida plays with and performs throughout his “Envois,” and that he sustains in subsequent sections through his readings of Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (*Au-delà du principe du plaisir*<sup>67</sup>) and Jacques Lacan’s “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter’” (“Séminaire sur ‘la Lettre volée’”). A close reading of these opening lines demonstrates that Derrida’s logic of the ‘postal’ as inflected by *différance* is already in action; even if it has not yet been explained or elaborated, it performs its precepts by sending off (or “posting”) the introduction as and in an epistolary *envoi*.

Though these introductory sentences seem to precede the “Envois” proper, the juxtaposition of “envois” and “préface” that occurs in the first phrase is in itself an *envoi*: a sending, a reference or referral to Derrida’s writings on prefaces (a privileged subject of the book *Dissemination*). As Nicholas Royle succinctly summarizes in his own preface to the work (of) *Jacques Derrida*, “A preface, as Derrida has remarked, ‘recreates an intention-to-say after the fact’. Having written the rest of the book, I then go back and write a preface as if I haven’t yet written the book, or as if the text I have written, which

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<sup>66</sup> “Le postal” is also called “le principe postal” with a clear nod to Freud’s “principe de plaisir”

<sup>67</sup> Derrida frequently abbreviates Freud’s title to *Au-delà...*, making the last word of *La carte postale*’s subtitle (*de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*) an overt citation of Freud’s essay in addition to a gesture to all that is “beyond.”

is therefore in the past, can be presented [...] as ‘the future’” (9). To read “Envois” as a preface, per Derrida’s suggestion, is to understand it as a text where the post postures as pre-. The use of the verb “renvoyer” a couple of sentences later affirms that an *envoi* is already a *renvoi*, not only a sending, but a sending back.

At the same time, Derrida troubles the notion that we can send anyone or anything anywhere (“se destiner”). The notion of destinability has a particularly strong hold in the epistolary context, where the expected audience and itinerary is announced and addressed. Letters, more than other forms of writing, could be equated with a relatively sure trajectory and a one-to-one correspondence (sender-to-receiver). Derrida, however, insists that though one may *claim* destinability (he uses the phrase “prétend[re] se destiner”) and designate a single address/ee (even oneself), the destination is, or the destinations are, always plural. In effect, “post” in the epistolary sense is commonly employed in the singular in French – “la poste” –, but Derrida makes it “les postes” (“Il n’y a pas même la poste ou l’envoi, il y a les postes et les envois<sup>68</sup>” (74)) or “*des postes en tous genres*” (7). This pluralizing of the post(s) signals that the postal contains multiple meanings and functions on multiple levels, creating space for the *double entendre* of the epistolary and the after, while destabilizing destination and destinability. The always plural posts give way to a phenomenon Derrida calls *destinerrance*.

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<sup>68</sup> It should be noted here that Derrida’s “envois” offer a response to Heidegger’s *Geschick*, the sending/destiny of being. As Simon Critchley describes, one can perceive in Derrida’s work “an almost parodic distancing of his concerns from Heidegger’s history of being, where the univocity of the Heideggerian sending (*envoi*) of being becomes the playful plurality of the letters, billets-doux and sendings (*envois*) of *La carte postale*” (5).

*Destinerrance* is born out of Derrida's assertion that "une lettre peut toujours ne pas arriver à destination" (472). This statement is a direct retort to the concluding phrase of Jacques Lacan's "Séminaire sur 'la lettre volée'" which reads "une lettre arrive toujours à destination" (53)<sup>69</sup>. Derrida does not claim that a letter never arrives at its destination, but that the possibility of not arriving (be it through partition, multiplication, or any of the 'postal' elements enumerated previously) is built into the very structure of the letter ("Non que la lettre n'arrive jamais à destination, mais il appartient à sa structure<sup>70</sup> de pouvoir, toujours, ne pas y arriver" (472). The "destination" in this case can refer to the missive's geographical end-point, to the timeliness of its delivery, or to the named and unnamed, anticipated and unexpected, addressee(s). "Destination" as Derrida uses it is also tied to the question of how the missive is read; the intention and interpretation of the letter may very well be at odds. When a writer sends off a missive in the post(al), there's no knowing where it will end up.

In an article titled "Derrida's *Destinerrance*," scholar J. Hillis Miller nicely captures "the consequences of destinerred iterability" (900) through the example of the post card, offering insight into how they are at play within "*Envois*":

I write a postcard and send it to my beloved. The postcard means to tell her how much I love her. [...] A postcard, however, is open to all under whose eyes it

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<sup>69</sup> Numerous scholars have found issue with Derrida's critique of Lacan's Seminar. See, for example, the interventions of Andrea Hurst and Barbara Johnson. Hurst broadly rejects the pitting of Lacanians and Derrideans against one another; she distances herself from Derrida's critique of "Seminar on 'The Purloined Letter,'" and reads both Lacan and Derrida according to a "plural logic of the aporia." Barbara Johnson goes so far as to suggest that Derrida deliberately performs the sort of (mis)reading that Lacan's text is prone to produce among less careful readers.  
<sup>70</sup> The reference to structure recalls Derrida's early statement regarding the "postcarded" structure of the letter (see page 5)

happens to fall. Anyone who intercepts it and reads it can take it as addressed to him or to her. Anyone can interrupt its passage to its intended destination.

Anyone can short-circuit that passage. Anyone can make my postcard have a meaning I in no way intended. My intimate postcard can function perfectly well in all kinds of situations. My intention and the address I put on the postcard fail to limit its functioning. (900)

*Destinerrance* troubles the postcard's destination to the very core of destinability. It is *destinerrance* that allows Derrida to assert his apparently naïve reading of Matthew Paris' depiction of Plato and Socrates. 'Intercepted' and interpreted by Derrida, the illustration's meaning is transformed and deformed. The fact that Derrida's iconoclastic reading is *possible* (and, indeed, if we consider the image at face value, Derrida's conclusion that Socrates writes and Plato precedes him seems entirely plausible, even self-evident) affirms the idea of *destinerrance*. *Destinerrance* illustrates that the posting of the postal involves a sending off<sup>71</sup>, but not necessarily a sending *to*.

Though Derrida's depiction of the *postal* seems to invite a radical rethinking of the epistolary, in a typically Derridean fashion, the master reader insists that *destinerrance*, *différance* and undecidability are neither novel discoveries nor evolutions in the epistolary, but underpin the logic and economy of the *envoi* since its earliest iterations. The postal qualities that Derrida highlights in the post cards of *La carte postale* – that they are open and undecidable, destined in only the most dubious sense, and always already conditioned by the after - contribute to an enduring epistolary that

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<sup>71</sup> envoi

will survive and surpass an ‘apocalypse de carte postale.’ Derrida is not alone in this assessment; multiple writers of Québec have staged an epistolary that goes both beyond the “before,” and beyond the end of the age of letters.

### **Infinite correspondence**

In a chapter out of *Special Delivery* that reads Derrida’s *The Post Card* and Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* side by side, Linda S. Kauffman remarks, “Every missive and message is a postscript (a P.S., like the initials of Plato and Socrates) to the already written; every reading is a rereading” (95). In the case of Madeleine Gagnon’s lengthy letter that is *La lettre infinie*, Gagnon offers something of a rereading and a rewriting of Derrida’s “Envois.” Though Gagnon does not explicitly invoke Jacques Derrida or *La carte postale* in *La lettre infinie*, given her familiarity and engagement with Derrida’s work, as well as the temporal<sup>72</sup> and thematic proximity of these two publications, *La lettre infinie* can be read as a feminist response to “Envois” where *le postal* is taken up and sent off as an unending expression of *écriture féminine*.

The term *écriture féminine* was coined by Hélène Cixous<sup>73</sup> in her 1975 essay “Le rire de la Méduse.” In Anglophone scholarship, the term is frequently translated as “women’s writing,” but Cixous does not limit *écriture féminine* to women writers. Though such writing is grounded in the bodies and experiences of women, ‘feminine writing’ is accessible to all who resist the oppositional binaries and the linear logic of

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<sup>72</sup> *La lettre infinie* was published in 1984, four years after *La carte postale*

<sup>73</sup> Who separately collaborated with both Derrida and Gagnon.

phallogocentrism.<sup>74</sup> *Écriture féminine* builds on the deconstructive work of Derrida, but whether Derrida's work can be considered feminist or *féminine* remains a topic of scholarly debate, as evidenced by the response of various feminists to *La carte postale*.

"Envois" presents a one-sided correspondence where a masculine writer addresses a silent or silenced feminine reader. Scholars Shari Benstock and Alicia Borinsky have independently critiqued *La carte postale* for robbing the woman for whom the *envois* are written of a voice. Linda S. Kauffman, a feminist scholar herself, is critical of such claims, writing, "Perhaps because at many points Derrida specifically refers to the addressee by using feminine pronouns, some feminists have blithely assumed that there is a real woman in the text whose identity is suppressed" (119). While I agree with Kauffman's assessment that the addressee of "Envois" cannot be reduced to a single woman (see our previous discussion of *destinerrance*), the monodic exchange of "Envois" merits critique for the ways it enacts or perpetuates a marginalization not of a female, but of the feminine. The gendered pronouns of *La carte postale* reinscribe a male privilege where feminine voices are secondary to, if not entirely silenced by, the discourse of a masculine writer. Gagnon's *La lettre infinie* inverts this structure to offer a letter where a feminine (and feminist) writer addresses a tacit masculine reader.

*La lettre infinie* explicitly advocates for the voices and experiences of women, and more specifically, of mothers. As Karen Gould aptly puts it in *Writing in the Feminine*, "Gagnon's letter of love makes a conceptual leap of faith toward a writing and loving that will shed patriarchal constraints and open themselves up to receive the

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<sup>74</sup> *Phallogocentrism* is a term coined by Derrida to describe the hegemonic, binary logic of Western philosophy that prefers one term to the detriment and exclusion of its supposed opposite (most notably, man to woman, and speaking to writing).

maternal body's infinite love – a love that, like the letter itself, can never be 'wrapped up' or concluded" (148). Indeed, Gagnon's entire book reads as a single, infinite love letter, though the 'unending' epistle is subdivided into eight segments of varying length and style. Somewhat ironically, it is in the segment entitled "Le fils" that Gagnon most forcefully articulates the maternal and creates a place for mothers who are ostracized from *une patrie*.<sup>75</sup> For Gagnon, mothers must be acknowledged as real, living beings, not inconsequential abstractions ("ta mère n'étant plus abstraite, je suis là" [61]<sup>76</sup>), and mothers must write. In prose that reads like poetry, Gagnon asserts, "Les mères sont absentes de la parole des Livres. Quelle mère a pensé le fils dans la parole de l'écrit? Les mères ont pansé et crié" (64). The close proximity of words like *panser* and *penser* and *crié* and *écrit* calls for a recognition of mothers as both caretakers that soothe and subjects that think, with voices that are cried out and must be written down.

Despite this first-person plea for mothers to enter into the economy of expression otherwise dominated by fathers and sons, the 'je' of *La lettre infinie* cannot be consistently connected to "the mother" or any other stable antecedent. Both the 'je' that writes and the 'tu' that is addressed are malleable and impersonal ("Nous sommes dans nos lettres malléables et dépersonnalisés" [52]). The correspondents are in perpetual movement between singular and plural (the letter writer calls her addressee "mon unique-multiple" [48]), and between positions of mother and son and/or lover, and between creator and creation and/or co-creator. The undecidability of the addressee so permeates

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<sup>75</sup> "Elles n'ont ni mots ni lieux" (58)

<sup>76</sup> For literary and historical contextualization of the strength of the myth of the traditional mother in Québec, see Patricia Smart's *Ecrire dans la maison du père* and Lori Saint-Martin's *Le nom de la mère*.

the letter that even the *epistolière* who composes it does not know to whom she should send her missive. After mentioning that the Post Office refused this letter with neither address nor stamp, the writer announces, “j’enverrai cette missive autrement,” followed by “Mais à qui” (14) after a blank space of two lines. What would appear to be a question - “Mais à qui?” - does not conclude with a question mark, but with a period. The letter affirms rather than interrogates the indeterminability of the addressee.

As for the *destinateur*, in a section fittingly named “Le vertige,” the letter writer asserts, “moi est neutre; l’autre a un genre. La première personne de la conjugaison n’est pas sexuée, la troisième l’est, j’écris il ou elle et l’on sait. Le je nous demeure étranger” (19). Where third-person pronouns - he or she - are ‘known,’ the first-person singular pronouns (as well as the second-person pronouns, for that matter) are neutral and neutered (“neutre”), both in the sense of grammatical gender (“genre”), but also sex (“sexuée”). The ‘je’ insists that the first person is not only unknown, but unfamiliar or even foreign (“étranger”).

In her manifesto “Mon corps dans l’écriture,” which constitutes part two of the book *La venue à l’écriture* (a collaborative publication with French feminist thinkers Hélène Cixous and Annie Leclerc), Gagnon attributes such estrangement to her situation as a woman in a language designed and dominated by the masculine. Laying bare the exclusion of women’s voices and experiences in a phallogentric linguistic order, Gagnon presents her native language as a foreign one, one in which she is foreign to herself: “Je me suis étrangère en ma propre langue et me traduis moi-même en citant tous les

autres”<sup>77</sup> (71). To push this ‘foreign’ language toward one where an *écriture féminine* can emerge, Gagnon defies certain conventions and confines of language, declaring, “Et s’il faut parfois que la syntaxe s’érupte et s’insurge contre la linéarité apprise, je suivrai les mouvements, les émiettements paradigmes du mien, jusqu’au lexique qui ne m’est pas étranger mais refusé par des flics du bon ordre” (86-87). In this passage, Gagnon articulates her resistance to the linearity of the laws of language. Within *La lettre infinie*, Gagnon’s defiance of grammatical rules of agreement defamiliarizes (making unknowable or ‘strange’) even third-person pronouns. She writes, for example, “elle sont nés tous les autres” (57). In this phrase, we find a feminine singular pronoun, a verb conjugated in the third person plural, and a past participle with the masculine plural declension. Personages and pronouns throughout *La lettre infinie* trouble typically stable markers of identity like gender and number, in an often disorienting dance of *destinerrance*.

We recall the first sentence of *La carte postale*: “Vous pourriez lire ces lignes comme la préface d’un livre que je n’ai pas écrit”; “je” is made dubious through the claim that ‘I did not write [this/the/a/one] book.’ If the ‘je’ who wrote the book is not the ‘je’ who writes the preface, who are these ‘je’? In J. Hillis Miller’s explanation of the ‘destinerrred’ postcard, he positions himself as the author of the postcard, affirming, “I double, triple, quadruple myself in the act of writing that postcard. I become legion.”

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<sup>77</sup> Such citation is not devoid of creation in Gagnon’s work. In *La lettre infinie*, the passage “belle et mortelle comme un rêve de pierre” (61) appears in quotes in the middle of a paragraph. Though the words are not attributed to anyone, the phrase is familiar to readers of Baudelaire. The ‘citation’ evokes the opening of the poet’s “La Beauté,” but the quotation is not a faithful one, for Baudelaire’s poem reads, “Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre” (XVII). Rather than beauty addressing mortals, Gagnon brings beauty and mortality together.

Miller recounts a similar alteration of the addressee: “the recipient, however fortuitously he or she may come upon that postcard, is transformed into someone else, put beside himself or herself, dislocated, by reading it” (900). This is precisely the sort of relationship between sender(s) and receiver(s) that Derrida announces in the introduction to “Envois,”

*Que les signataires et les destinataires ne soient pas toujours visiblement et nécessairement identiques d'un envoi à l'autre, que les signataires ne se confondent pas forcément avec les envoyeurs ni les destinataires avec les récepteurs, voire avec les lecteurs (toi par exemple), etc., vous en ferez l'expérience et le sentirez parfois très vivement, quoique confusément. (9)*

Derrida indicates a simultaneous distancing, collapse and overall inconsistency in the signer and the sender, the reader and receiver, the addressee and the audience of his post cards. His slip between the singular second person “tu” (“toi” in this instance) and its plural counterpart “vous” betrays that the changeability occurs not only from one *envoi* to another, but within any given *envoi*, and within the *Envois*'s introduction. Derrida emphasizes later in his introduction that such *destinerrance* will not only confuse the reader, but be disagreeable (“désagréable”), indiscrete (“sans discrétion”), and even tragic (“de la tragédie” [9]). He asks for forgiveness while reiterating that the reader will not be reassured, nor the reading attenuated, softened or rendered familiar.

If *destinerrance* is presented as deeply uncomfortable, unpleasant or even violent in *La carte postale*, for Gagnon's *destinateur* (who cannot even be called a “signataire,” for this ‘je’ doesn't sign anything at all), it is a liberating force: “Je te parle et je dois être

évasive pour toi, ouverte à toutes les interprétations. Je n'impose pas plus à la lecture qu'à l'écriture. Ensemble, nous sommes totalement libres" (53). There are multiple ways that Gagnon's letter indexes its liberty and infinitude ("l'infinie liberté de signes" [13]), from the *destinerrance* we just discussed where the division and multiplication of the *destinateurs* and *destinataires* grant the correspondents a limitless interpretability, to the letter's expansive epistolarity that spills into and becomes indistinguishable from poetry, philosophy and fiction. Gagnon's scholarly formation in philosophy and poetry<sup>78</sup> clearly informs her writings, both in her engagement with Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist and other theories, and in her careful attention to - as well the liberties she takes with - language. If poetry is a written form that sanctions play with words and syntax, Gagnon incorporates such linguistic transgressions into her prose, and draws together, or even collapses in an indistinguishable hybrid heap, *genres* of poetry, creative writing, theory and epistolarity.

Derrida similarly makes word play a subject of political and scholarly intervention. As he combines different levels of discourse, making the personal and playful comingle with the formal and the distant, he blends genres of writing, or more accurately, perhaps, undermines the very premise of distinct genres. He states, for example, only to immediately contradict himself, "Tu liras, si tu veux, l'étude qui suit, sur le genre épistolaire en littérature (ma thèse: ça n'existe pas, en toute rigueur, je veux dire que ça serait la littérature elle-même s'il y en avait, mais stricto sensu je n'y crois pas davantage – stop – lettre suit – stop)" (98). His assertion of a study on the epistolary

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<sup>78</sup> Gagnon completed a Master's degree in Québec in philosophy, and a doctoral thesis in France on Claudel.

genre in literature is quickly undermined by the thesis that such a genre doesn't exist independent of literature, which itself is untenable. Earlier in the text, he troubles the critical distinction between books and letters, writing parenthetically, "Encore que la question reste ouverte du critère pour distinguer entre un livre et des lettres. Je ne crois pas à la rigueur d'un tel critère" (68). Though letters remain at the heart of "Envois," there is simultaneously an erosion of generic distinctions that allows the epistolary, as well as the postal, to extend into other forms.

Gagnon also expands the epistolary, writing, "Il ne peut y avoir d'une lettre, d'un texte, une révélation ultime, une fois pour toutes. Tout est toujours à recommencer" (51). "A letter" is almost instantly recast as "a text," and its incompleteness means that it will never be once-and-for-all, it must always be begun again, redefined and rewritten. This notion of a need to start over is presented on multiple occasions throughout *La lettre infinie*, as though the missive itself were begun again, despite the fact that it has no beginning: "L'infini ne commence ni ne finit. Il est ouvert. Dedans, ailleurs dehors, avec cela, il faut toujours recommencer" (9). The infinite does not begin, but it must re-begin, so the infinite letter must repeatedly start over.

The letter's multiple (re)commencements afford dissimilar iterations of the same letter. For example, the narrator writes, "J'aimerais en souligner les mots-clefs, en imprimer certains en majuscules. Insister sur chacun ou bien, cela revient au même, laisser défiler librement tous les termes, sans pondération, sans valeur rajoutée" (40). For the first sixty pages of text, the letter does the latter, letting each term pass by on equal footing. The second half of the letter begins again, and this time highlights key terms,

emphasizing their importance with capitalized letters. The first instance of such insistence occurs with the word “entre”: in “Le fils,” the correspondent writes of “une plaie béante infligée ENTRE la mère et le fils” (61). Highlighting the term with all uppercase does not clarify its meaning or role, rather the multiple meanings of “entre” are brought to the fore. “ENTRE” in this sentence is at once a separation, a wound and a division wedged *between* the mother and the son, and a point of *entry* (‘enter’) into *l’écriture féminine*, “la naissance d’une parole” (61). Similarly, when the mother avers (two times with the same wording) “Je te dis que dans l’alterité JE SUIS” (65), the insistent and loaded phrase “JE SUIS” cannot be reduced to a single reading. The “infinite liberty of signs”<sup>79</sup> requires that the dual denotations of “JE SUIS” coexist - I am and I follow – and this recalls the complicated temporality of *le postal* and *la différance*. The ‘je’ is not one with itself. In its alterity, it is other, but it also is. ‘I’ is the ‘I’ that follows, and this is the effect of *différance*. The ‘I’ is always after itself; even in the now it is later, but even as it is after it is already; the “pre -” is “re -” and the “post” begins again.

So the “concluding” phrase of *La lettre infinie* is neither a conclusion nor an exit, but an entrance: “Et j’entre dans la démesure du temps” (108). The sentence signals continuity with the ‘And’ at its opening; a continuity that is extended by the assertion “j’entre” in the present tense, while the very notion of ‘tense’ (*temps*, in French) as a standardized temporal lexicon is replaced by the excessiveness, immoderation, and even outrageousness of the time into which the infinite letter enters once again. With a letter that cannot be concluded and cannot be contained, Gagnon, like Derrida, grants an

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<sup>79</sup> “l’infinie liberté de signes” (13)

extension to the epistolary. The end of the epistolary is deferred and denied by recasting the letter not as a narrowly-defined genre, but as an infinitely open form of writing. Shedding definitions and delineations that would constrain it and kill it, the letter lives on, postponing and posting its ending by starting all over again.

### **Stepping in time**

*Le facteur émotif*, a novel first published in 2005 by Denis Thériault, has as its protagonist a twenty-seven-year-old postal worker named Bilodo who lives and makes his deliveries in Montreal. One of the very few pieces of existing scholarship discussing *Le facteur émotif* is a review by J. Vincent H. Morrissette that asserts that with the novel, “Le jeune romancier nous emmène loin de la tradition gréco-latine-chrétienne-classique-française qui a inspiré et marqué la littérature québécoise depuis ses origines” (957). The reviewer asks whether *Le facteur émotif* will prove “une anomalie” in Québec’s literary history with this departure from occidental literature and philosophy. While there are certainly elements of the novel that distinguish it, in my reading, its philosophy and performance of the postal is of a piece with both Gagnon’s *La lettre infinie* and Derrida’s *La carte postale*. A comparative reading of Thériault’s novel and “Spéculer – sur ‘Freud’” (part two of *La carte postale*) will highlight the postal movement that drives *Le facteur émotif* beyond and through the death it faces.

Denis Thériault’s novel opens with a description of “la rue des Hêtres” and its typically-Montréalais exterior staircases: “Ces escaliers, la rue en alignait cent quinze, pour un total de mille quatre cent quatre-vingt-quinze marches” (11). As “step” in

English can reference both a stair and a stride, “marche” in French can mean both stair and walk (in the third person singular present conjugation of the verb “marcher”) as well as work.<sup>80</sup> The calculated steps indeed index the walking and working Bilodo does on his rounds - the 1,495 steps of a single street on his daily route: “Bilodo le savait car il les avait comptées et recomptées, ces marches, car il les gravissait chaque matin, ces escaliers, l’un après l’autre” (11). This sentence’s repetition and pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables (“comptées et recomptées”; “ces marches,” “ces escaliers”; “l’un après l’autre”) elicit a rhythm of counting and climbing.

The counting of steps that fills the book’s first pages soon finds a parallel in the counting of syllables. The second chapter reveals that Bilodo is a dependable employee with a criminal habit: intercepting personal letters from the (mostly junk) mail in his stacks in order to read them in the privacy of his apartment before dropping them in their rightful mailboxes the following day. He is particularly intrigued and excited by the letters of a certain Ségolène living in Guadeloupe whose letters to the Montrealer Gaston Grandpré are brief, enchanting poems that consistently contain the same number of lines and syllables: “Les poèmes de Ségolène, si différents l’un de l’autre et cependant identiques par la forme puisqu’ils étaient toujours composés de trois vers: deux de cinq syllabes et un de sept, pour un total de dix-sept syllabes, ni plus ni moins” (21). It isn’t until Bilodo serendipitously stumbles upon a poem of the same form in the Saturday paper that he learns that Ségolène is sending haikus. Syllables in poetry, of course, are also known as feet (or *pieds*, in French), and through the feet of the epistolary haikus and

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<sup>80</sup> in the sense of function (“that works”). A somewhat similar pair of homophones can be found in English’s “run.”

the feet that climb the many “marches” of the *rue des Hêtres*, a subtle affinity between walking and writing is introduced in *Le facteur émotif*, not unlike what Jacques Derrida perceives in Sigmund Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

In the close reading of Freud’s seven-chapter essay that fills the pages of “Spéculer – sur ‘Freud,’” Derrida makes an analogy of speculative writing and walking. Or, more accurately, Derrida highlights an analogy that Freud himself sets forth: expressions in the order of “taking another step” or “going a step further” recur as many as ten different times in Freud’s narration of his speculative process. Derrida makes much of the *marche* and *démarche* of Freud’s writing, and traces the ways that Freud’s treatise works by walking, and does precisely what it describes.

However, Freud’s step in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not always a sure one. The aim of the book is quite evident from its title: to affirm and articulate a drive “beyond the pleasure principle.” In 1920, when the work was first published, the field of psychoanalysis held the pleasure principle to be the dominant tendency governing mental life and its processes. The clarity of Freud’s objective for *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, however, does not neatly translate into clarity of ideas or expression. The brief book is filled with hesitations, amendments, retractions and disavowals, and Freud himself suggests that his speculation is often “far-fetched” (26).<sup>81</sup> His final chapter concludes with a quote by Rückert (translated into French as): “Ce qu’on ne peut gagner en volant, il faut le gagner en boitant... L’Ecriture dit que boiter n’est pas un péché.” Derrida

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<sup>81</sup> A mere seven pages from the book’s conclusion, Freud writes, “It may be asked whether and how far I am myself convinced of the truth of the hypotheses that have been set out in these pages. My answer would be that I am not convinced myself and that I do not seek to persuade other people to believe in them. Or, more precisely, that I do not know how far I believe in them” (71).

seizes upon this allusion to limping to liken Freud's highly inconclusive concluding chapter to a prosthetic leg that consoles and compensates, that could be removed, and that limps along to bring Freud back, yet again, to his point of departure.<sup>82</sup>

Like Freud (at least as Derrida describes him), Bilodo will also come to limp in both his stride and his script. Shortly into *Le facteur émotif*, Bilodo witnesses the death of Gaston Grandpré, who is fatally struck by an oncoming vehicle as he rushes into the street to post a letter to his correspondent Ségolène. Where the calculated steps on the novel's opening page present the consistent rhythm of Bilodo's rounds,<sup>83</sup> the day after Grandpré's passing, Bilodo feels himself weakening after walking only three kilometers of his route, and his climbing on the *rue des Hêtres* is labored and interrupted: "Ce fut encore pire lorsqu'il lui fallut se mesurer aux escaliers de la rue des Hêtres: il n'en était qu'au vingt-quatrième lorsqu'il dut s'arrêter pour souffler, et ne parvient au bout de la rue qu'au prix d'un violent effort de volonté, après s'être accordé pas moins de six pauses" (35). Later on his route, Bilodo is caught off guard by a chained dog and bitten in the calf, reducing his steady stride to a limp. After hours in the emergency room, Bilodo returns home and "boitilla de long en large dans le salon" (36). That same evening, he imagines Ségolène before her mailbox, looking for a reply from Grandpré that will never arrive. As Bilodo limps (*il boite*, in French), Ségolène is at her mailbox ("*sa boîte aux lettres*" (my emphasis, 37). Bilodo's walking and Ségolène's correspondence are subject

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<sup>82</sup> That is, back to the pleasure principle as the dominant tendency. Derrida notes that Freud makes this repeated return within and across the chapters of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>83</sup> The consistency of his step is affirmed when Bilodo does his deliveries the morning of a summer storm. Despite the menacing weather, the narration reads, "D'un pas dont nulle grisaille n'aurait su entamer la résolution, il arpentait la rue des Hêtres, affrontant un escalier après l'autre" (28).

yet again to a parallel movement (a slippage from the nominal to the verbal of “boite(r)” is easy to achieve with the homonym sa/ça: “ça boite aux lettres”).

Soon, the injured mail carrier decides to pursue the correspondence with Ségolène himself; he breaks into Grandpré’s apartment to ransack the deceased correspondent’s desk, studies and imitates Grandpré’s penmanship, and masters the composition of haikus. Four chapters are dedicated to the project of producing a haiku that could pass for one of Grandpré’s creation. As Bilodo increasingly insinuates himself into Grandpré’s life and habits in order to access his psychology and poetic inspiration,<sup>84</sup> he moves closer to achieving the equilibrium<sup>85</sup> (read: lack of limp) of the poetic form. When he finally composes a haiku that is satisfactorily “grandpréesque” (48), Bilodo’s success is that his poetic letter “marche”: “Ça avait marché!” (64). Later, reflecting upon the means of his achievement, the narration affirms, “Peu lui importait la cause fondamentale du prodige pourvu que *ça marche*, et qu’il puisse continuer d’écrire à Ségolène” (my emphasis, 66). After a simultaneous struggle to walk and to write, Bilodo emerges triumphant: his correspondence works.<sup>86</sup>

Soon, Bilodo’s epistolary exchanges with Ségolène not only walk, but dance. With his haiku “Swigne la bacaisse / dans l’fond de la boîte à bois / A-wing-ahin-hin”, Bilodo turns the “boite” that was previously limp or (mail)box, and now wood box, into a dance club<sup>87</sup>, and “lui qui n’avait jamais mis fût-ce un orteil sur une piste de danse rêva

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<sup>84</sup> Bilodo moves into Grandpre’s fully furnished apartment when it comes up for rent, eats as he ate, drinks as he drank, dresses in his silk kimono and listens to his collection of recordings of ancient Japanese flute music.

<sup>85</sup> “le délicat équilibre” (46); “ce subtil équilibre qui était la marque du bon haïku” (55)

<sup>86</sup> walks

<sup>87</sup> Boîte de nuit

cette nuit-là qu'il swignait allègrement avec Ségolène" (72). The concluding line of the haiku – A-wing-ahin-hin - bears no meaning save a rhythmic one. Bilodo has gone from limping to enthusiastically stepping in time.

The time that Bilodo steps in(to), however, is not what he might expect. Three pages before the close of *Le facteur émotif*, Bilodo hurries into the street to mail a letter before the day's final pick-up. He, who now so greatly resembles Grandpré that he mistook himself for the dead man when he looked in the mirror just moments before, is hit by a speeding van as Grandpré was months before him. As he lies dying, he sees a mailman above him looking down, and that mailman is himself. While Bilodo comes to the realization that his life is "en forme de boucle" (117) from his place on the pavement, the reader realizes that the book's conclusion was already presented in an earlier scene. Time has looped around to look again upon the accident and its aftermath.

However, the 'end' of *Le facteur émotif* does not merely replicate a prior passage. There is repetition, to be sure, but with difference and *différance*.<sup>88</sup> The perspective between the two iterations of the scene changes, but more importantly, there is also a sense that alterity continues in the midst of uncanny resemblance and doubling. Bilodo sees himself, but simultaneously recognizes that he is not himself: "C'était lui-même, le 'lui' d'avant, qui le regardait de là-haut" (116). At the same time that the Bilodo who looks down is the earlier 'him' ("le 'lui' d'avant"), this Bilodo has yet to become him; he has at once already died, and has yet to meet his own end, as will the Bilodo after him: "son tour viendrait et [...] la boucle se perpétuerait, l'entraînant lui aussi vers sa propre

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<sup>88</sup> In the context of *Le facteur émotif*, *différance* involves the past and the future and undoes oppositions like beginning and ending, life and death, Bilodo and Grandpré.

fin, puis celui qui viendrait ensuite, et l'autre encore qui lui succéderait, et ainsi à jamais" (118). The ends of these Bilodos-Grandprés are not self-same; there is difference and deferral, a spinning off and sending away that means that neither Bilodo nor Grandprés is at one with himself, is "present" or knowable at any given moment.

As Bilodo and Grandprés become increasingly inseparable signifiers with identities that shift, overlap and are otherwise destabilized, some consistency may be found in the movement of the *facteur émotif*. The adjective in the title of Thériault's work could be translated as 'emotive,' 'emotional,' and, most fittingly, 'easily moved.'<sup>89</sup> The "facteur" of *Le facteur émotif* is certainly moved on an emotional level by Ségolène's poetry, but above all, he is a man in movement: climbing the stairs of the *rue des Hêtres*, moving into Grandprés's apartment and way of life, and moving between meanings and roles of "facteur."<sup>90</sup> For a *facteur* is more than just a postal carrier. From Latin's "factum" ("factor") and the corresponding verb "facere," to do or to make ("faire," in French), an early signification of *facteur* was one who creates. *Le Grand Robert* offers *auteur* - "author" - as a denotation. A *facteur* is also one "qui fait le commerce pour le compte d'un autre," who does business for another, on another's behalf. Early in *Le facteur émotif*, the narration emphasizes Bilodo's contentment with

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<sup>89</sup> "Emotif" derives from the verb *émouvoir*, meaning to put into motion. In fact, the published translation of Thériault's novel by Liedewy Hawke has been released under two different titles, neither of which attempts to render "émotif" into English: *The Peculiar Life of a Lonely Postman* (2014), and, more cleverly, *The Postman's Round* (2008).

<sup>90</sup> Derrida gestures to the multiple meanings of "facteur" when he writes of the organism (subject to the death drive) self-addressing its death note and acting as letter writer, addressee, and courier to guard itself against any death "qu'il ne se serait pas annoncée, signifiée d'un arrêt, d'une lettre ou d'un faire-part plus ou moins télégraphique dont il serait à la fois l'émetteur, le récepteur et le transmetteur, d'un bout à l'autre du trajet et *en tous sens le facteur*" (my emphasis, 379).

his job, his satisfaction with his small but essential role in the neighborhood, by stating, “Il n’aurait voulu changer de place avec personne au monde. Sauf peut-être avec un autre facteur” (13). The possibility is presented of Bilodo changing places with another *facteur*. This is effectively what he does as he takes Grandpré’s place, doing Grandpré’s business on his behalf (paying his rent, frequenting the restaurant where Grandpré regularly ate lunch, continuing Grandpré’s correspondence), and becoming an *author* of haikus.

An additional meaning of “facteur,” where the word finds a cognate in English, is in its sense of an element, an agent, a “factor” contributing to a result. This denotation of “facteur” is most *à-propos*, for it is in this sense that a single ‘facteur’ is never (self-) sufficient; it is necessarily partial and interconnected. It works in consort with and recalls its relation to other factors. As Derrida wrote of the *postes* and *envois* in the plural, we might say, “*Il n’y a même pas le facteur, il y a les facteurs*” in *Le facteur émotif*. Within “Spéculer – sur ‘Freud,’” Derrida tells us that refusing to see a given term’s link, connection, and *différance* with other terms leads to death or to a dead stop, but the *facteur* of *Le facteur émotif* does not die, and neither does correspondence.

### ***Lifedeath and the letter O***

Neither Derrida, nor Gagnon, nor Thériault is considered an epistolary theorist, and while their philosophical works of fiction may be primarily preoccupied with something other than the epistolary, the striking similarities in their performance of the

postal can offer insight into the epistolary imaginary in the face of death. In the three texts analyzed in this chapter, we have witnessed what could be described as an infinite suspension of the epistolary in the *before* – before the end of a single letter (Gagnon), or of a treasured correspondence (Thériault) or of the epistolary era as a whole (Derrida). However, despite the repeated extension of the epistolary enacted in each letter, death is not simply deferred or denied in these texts.

Gagnon’s text vacillates between temporalities where her addressee is living and dead. In the opening segment of *La lettre infinie*, the writer unequivocally states, “Tu es mort” (12), and much of the letter grapples with questions of loss. However, in another (later) passage, the writer just as clearly declares “Nous sommes vivants” (62), and the *destinataire* is most often addressed and described in the present tense as a living being. The infinite letter therefore exists both before and after death or between life and death to become like the epistles Gagnon describes when she writes of “lettres bavardes, dalles mort-nées, aux postes tombales. Puis emportées au diable vert dans la charrette des archives mort-vivantes” (74). The expressions ‘still born’ (literally ‘born dead’ in French) and ‘living dead’ collapse the distance between life and death and complicate the letters’ temporality and categorization.

*La carte postale*, for its part, speaks at length about the ‘death instinct’ that Sigmund Freud sets forth in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Freud writes of the detours of the death instinct as “circuitous paths to death, faithfully kept to by the conservative instincts,” that “present us to-day with the picture of the phenomena of life” (46). By this logic, life itself becomes a death detour, and as a result, life and death are no longer

opposing ends of a spectrum, but a common outcome on a shared path. Freud struggles to reconcile the death drive and the pleasure principle; he perceives both the reality principle and the death instinct as undermining the pleasure principle by working against it. In Derrida's reading, however, pleasure, reality and death are not at odds with one another, but work (and walk) together. The idea of an 'unopposable' death makes way for Derrida's declaration of *lifedeath*: "Si la mort n'est pas opposable, elle est, déjà, *la vie la mort*" (305). The centrality of this concept to Derrida's overall interpretation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is made clear in the fact that "Lifedeath" serves as the title to a ten-session seminar Derrida delivers on Freud's book.<sup>91</sup> Yet *lifedeath* is not limited to Derrida's analysis of the death instinct. It is performed in the "Envois" through post cards that refuse death (even or especially death of the age of the epistolary) as finality or opposition.

As for *Le facteur émotif*, the novel stages a literary and literal example of *lifedeath*: a repeatable and repeating death that cannot be separated from the life it both precedes and follows. As long as BilodoGrandpré lives/dies, the correspondence, too, will live on and die on. So the three texts we are considering together do not simply suspend or deny death and remain infinitely in the *before*. These letters are "en mouvement infini" (Gagnon, 51), and with their respective (*dé*)*marche*, they move into, through and beyond the deaths they face.

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<sup>91</sup> It is under the name "Spéculer – sur 'Freud,'" that the seminar is later published in *La Carte Postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*.

We recall that the final chapter of Freud's treatise includes a quote on limping, and that Derrida applies this citation to Freud's entire chapter, likening the limping text to a prosthetic limb. Derrida justifies his reach for prosthesis by citing Freud's own reference in an earlier chapter<sup>92</sup> to detachable members of certain animals who can regenerate a severed tail, as well as the prosthesis of the palate that allowed Freud to eat and speak in the wake of mouth cancer. Derrida's use of prosthesis is also attributable to the ongoing bilingual word play in *La carte postale* concerning "les legs de Freud." The pun moves between the French understanding of *legs* as 'legacy' and its irresistible false cognate in English. In a post card of "Envois," Derrida muses that the book he is writing will undoubtedly be called "Legs de Freud: à cause de la marche et des jambes, du pas de Freud qui n'avance jamais dans *Au-delà*, et dont je suis toute la démarche" (59). Though this title is not ultimately chosen for the work, it is the name of a chapter within it, and the steps of Freud's legs remain an important motif in Derrida's analysis.

By layering 'legacy' upon the paths, steps and prosthesis of Freud's speculation, Derrida engages with questions of inheritance, bringing Freud's writing into conversation with unacknowledged philosophical predecessors such as Heidegger, Nietzsche and Socrates as well as Freud's firstborn grandson, who is referred to at length in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* without ever being named or identified as Freud's own kin. Crossing or collapsing 'Freud' with philosophers who predate him by millennia or with his daughter's child, Derrida again disrupts a linear model of inheritance. As he reversed the irreversible sequence of heritage from Socrates to Plato, Derrida troubles the *before*,

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<sup>92</sup> chapter V

making it moveable, proving time and inheritance to be ambulatory. Thinking through ‘legs’ as prosthesis, we can more readily follow the detachments and unexpected reattachments Derrida effectuates in his analysis of inheritance and its reversals, exchanges and anachronistic correspondences.

Derrida has written of prosthesis elsewhere in his *œuvre* as a supplement, and a supplement serves two, seemingly irreconcilable, functions: 1) to complete, that is to compensate for something that is lacking, and 2) to add on to something which is already complete. Though the former would make the supplement sound like an addendum, an add-on after the fact, Nicholas Royle affirms that “For Derrida [...], there is nothing before the logic of the supplement” (51). Once again, what is believed to be “before” is destabilized. Or perhaps, like prosthesis, the notion of “before” itself becomes dislodged and detachable, one of any number of possible fillers that could be re(-)placed. If we return to the quotation cited in the epigraph at the opening of this chapter, we remember Derrida declaring that the missives of his “Envois” are “*les dernières lettres*” of “*la dernière correspondance*.” By unfastening “dernière(s)” from its placement before its modifiers to reinsert it after, we confront not the last letters of history, but the most recent ones.

Word order and placement are certainly subject to alteration through prosthesis. In early usage, the word prosthesis was literally understood to mean “adding a syllable to the beginning of a word” (Sarah S. Jain, 32, quoting work by David Wills). A prosthesis effects a prefix, modifying what follows by preceding it, thereby suspending meaning and revealing its contingency. In this light, *athèse* and *hypothèse* (two terms Derrida uses

repeatedly to highlight the lack of thesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) are examples, or results, of *prothèse*, and they join another important pair of terms that is similarly modified: *Weg* and *Umweg*.

We have already highlighted the recurring references to steps in Freud's essay and Derrida's analysis of it. However, we have not yet sufficiently emphasized the place of paths and detours in these texts. At one point, Freud writes of the reality principle as "a step on the long indirect road to pleasure" (7). The phrase in German, "auf dem langen Umwege zur Lust" (quoted in Derrida, 301), leads Derrida to dub the reality principle the "Umweg," that is, the detour, where the pleasure principle is the "Weg," the way. In his fifth chapter, Freud introduces the death drive and recasts all of the instincts that would seem to work to preserve life and resist death as a series of "détours" (Freud employs the French word in his German text) on the way to a death of one's own choosing ("ever more complicated *détours* before reaching its aim of death" (46)). Recalling Freud's earlier description of the reality principle as a "*long détour*" (301), Derrida reads the death drive as another *Umweg* on the way to pleasure. Derrida insists that the relationship between the *Weg* and its *Umweg* is not one of opposition. It would be easy for an English speaker to hear these two German terms as antonyms: the Way and the Un-way, but *Umweg* in German is literally the *around* way, and Derrida insists that the 'around way' is the way through Freud's text.

If the way *into* is *around*, our postal path is necessarily curved, and, as we have seen, it bends back to its point of departure. This explains the important place of 'O' and *Enso* in the trajectories of *La lettre infinie* and *Le facteur émotif*. When the reader first

witnesses Grandpré's death in *Le facteur émotif*, it is through the perspective of mailman-Bilodo, who, bending his ear to the mouth of the dying man, believes "en-dessous" or "grand saut" to be Grandpré's final utterance (31). It is only in the second death scene, where Bilodo-as-Grandpré lies dying, that the reader knows him to say "Enso" (118).

Bilodo first learns the term "Enso" when a manuscript of Grandpré's haikus that has been rejected for publication is returned to the apartment Bilodo has come to inhabit. The manuscript bears the title "Enso." Bilodo researches the signification of the word and discovers that it is a circle used in zen meditational exercises that symbolizes "la boucle, la nature cyclique de l'univers, l'éternel recommencement, le perpétuel retour au point de départ" (76). Written as a stylized "o," "un cercle plus ou moins orné de fioritures" (43), Bilodo immediately recognizes the symbol from pages of Grandpré's writing.

The "O" of *Enso* finds something of a parallel in *La lettre infinie*. On the opening page of Gagnon's letter, she writes, "l'infinie lettre ou l'O infini ne se ferment jamais et j'y entre pour en sortir" (9). Within the very first paragraph of her missive, 'letter' assumes a dual meaning: the infinite epistle is (either or also) the letter O of the alphabet. Though this passage marks the sole instance where "l'O infini" is explicitly named in Gagnon's text, more tacit evocations of the infinite "O" carry throughout the opening section "Liminaire" and throughout the letter as a whole, serving multiple functions and assuming multiple traits. Within the first section, 'O' might be equated with "octobre" - a month associated with death - where the letter writer situates her reflections and ponders the passing of her addressee (10), or with the "orgasme" (15) evoked in its

concluding sentence, or, most convincingly, with the “ouverture” (13) for which it advocates.

*La lettre infinie* calls for “une éthique de l’ouverture” where the impossibility of rules and finalities is recognized and respected (13). This openness or opening is demonstrated throughout the infinite letter and reflected in the shape of the letter ‘O’ itself with its open interior like a hole or a void. The letter writer says to/of her addressee, “Tu aurais pensé que toute faille, tout trou appelle une cicatrice.” Such openings are troubling to the *destinataire* who would prefer to cover them up, to have every seam sealed like “un couvercle qui referme étanchément la boîte” (13). The addressee struggles to make a leap into the void, a “saut dans le vide d’eau” (12). Here, ‘O’ assumes another layer of meaning as it manifests in its homonym “eau,” water. Water is depicted as an amorphous, moving mass “où ça se renverse et bascule” (14), where there is churning and overturning, swirling and cyclical movements.

In *Le facteur émotif*, the ‘O’ of *Enso* is also associated with water and its tendency to “tourbilloner.” As Bilodo struggles to compose his first haiku, he unwittingly retains the mysterious ‘O’ that decorates Grandpré’s pages of writing by transforming it into “eau”: “quand l’aube pointa, il n’était parvenu à écrire que ‘l’eau’” (44). Water appears in the haiku that opens and closes Grandpré’s collection of original poems, too:

Tourbillant comme l’eau

contre le rocher

le temps fait des boucles (76)<sup>93</sup>

In both the book-within-a-book and the book as a whole, *Enso* is deeply connected to water. When Bilodo witnesses Grandpré's death early in the novel, water floods the scene and seals the fate of Grandpré. He leaves his apartment under a "pluie torrentielle" (29), and the street he rushes into is described as "une rivière en crue" (30). The van that hits Grandpré is speeding in defiance of the downpour ("défonçant l'averse" [30]), and as Grandpré catapults through the air everything else seems to immobilize and fall silent; the only sounds are the quiet hum of motors and "la friture de la pluie" (30). Descriptions of water accompany every step of the scene, and at the novel's close, when Grandpré-Bilodo murmurs *Enso* and the novel is shown to be subject to *Enso*'s circular structure, the scene is "inondée" (116).<sup>94</sup>

In *Le facteur émotif*, it becomes impossible to separate Bilodo's stride and script - indeed any and every aspect of his fate - from the eddying movement of *Enso*. *La lettre*

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<sup>93</sup> Ironically, this exemplary haiku does not contain the prescribed number of syllables. As the narration clearly states earlier in the novel, a haiku consists of two five-syllable lines and one seven-syllable line "pour un total de dix-sept syllabes, ni plus ni moins" (21). However, Grandpré's verse has six, five and five syllables in its three lines (or six, five and six if "boucles" is counted as two syllables despite its placement at the end of the line). The haiku's rhythm is irregular; its feet are slightly off.

<sup>94</sup> In *La lettre infinie*, Gagnon evokes "l'eau du temps," describing it as "un cercle tournant dans les trajets du corps bibliques, dans les premiers versets de sa genèse utérine" (14). Rather than an external force, here the turning circle of time works within the body. Given Gagnon's allusions to the Bible and G/genesis in this passage, it is of interest to note that in the first book of the Christian Bible, water is depicted outside of time as it exists prior to the six days of creation. The first lines of the first creation story read: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters." It is immediately after this description that "the first day" begins. The waters, therefore, preceded God's recounted works of creation. In *The Sea and Medieval English Literature*, Sebastien Sobeci provides the following interpretation of this chronology: "The biblical sea preserves an echo of uncreated primeval chaos, the first a priori and all-encompassing abyssus that, because it predates time, is immeasurable by the creation of the six days" (39). The water of time in *La lettre infinie* similarly defies linear time.

*infinie* similarly walks and writes on and in ‘O’s : “nous pourrions marcher sur les eaux, les mêmes, celles que j’écris” (26). Gagnon and Thériault’s texts continually inscribe the contour of an infinite ‘O,’ making it bolder and more complex as more ink is added to the letter, as more steps (re)trace its curve, deviating ever so slightly with each new detour until it is possible to follow any number of different paths or ‘O’s that crisscross and correspond within the letter(s). And yet this ‘O’ “ne se ferm[e] jamais” (Gagnon, 9). Derrida specifies that Freud does not move in a closed circle,<sup>95</sup> but the movement of Freud’s text may be associated with the ‘O’s of Ernst’s “o-o-o-o-o” in the game *fort:da*.<sup>96</sup> Derrida meditates on this ‘game’ and Freud’s interpretation of “o-o-o-o-o” at length, and identifies a parallel movement in the child’s repeated distancing of his object of pleasure and his grandfather’s continual casting off of the pleasure principle. In Derrida’s estimation, all of these ‘o-o-o-o-o’s are *envois*.

*La carte postale, La lettre infinie* and *Le facteur émotif* all contain such *envois* that send the postal off and around an endless path. Like Derrida’s post cards with their undecidability, *différance* and *destinerrance*, and like the ‘O’ of *Enso* and the infinite letter, the epistolary in these works is Open; rOtating, it can be turned aROUND in any number of different ways. Each turn of the epistolary sends the post off in different directions, through and around the before, the after and death, and most importantly, it

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<sup>95</sup> Be it dialectic or hermeneutic (287)

<sup>96</sup> Ernst (Derrida is as quick to point out as Freud seems reluctant to make known) is Freud’s firstborn grandson, the child of his daughter, Sophie. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes of a game Ernst plays with a spool that involves throwing it out of reach and out of view while uttering “o-o-o-o-o.” Freud interprets this utterance, and Sophie assents, as the German “fort,” meaning gone or distant. The game continues as Ernst recuperates the toy and announces, “da!”: here!

sends back. Like Gabrielle Roy who invites reflection on her earlier epistolary production, like Freud who incessantly returns to his pleasure principle, like Gagnon who must continually begin her letter again, like Bilodo who (se correspondence) enters *lifedeath*, these (*r*)*envois* circulate in a form and movement (O) that keep the post from the past, that recognize that the after is already and always informs the before. If there is any fear that the epistolary is “on its last legs,” these letters assure us that they can be remembered and that the postal prostheses and production will go far.

## Yetis and Trolls: The *Monstrum horrendum* of Epistolary Fetishism

*To be sure, [this letter] was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description.*

-Edgar Allan Poe, *The Purloined Letter*

In the still early years of the internet, in 1993, a now iconic cartoon by Peter Steiner was published in *The New Yorker* magazine. A single frame, the cartoon shows a dog sitting on a chair before a desktop computer. On the floor beside him sits another dog. The first looks down from his seat to tell his fellow canine, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.”<sup>97</sup> Steiner’s joke plays upon the idea that authentic identity is inaccessible online, and it casts the internet as profoundly disconnected from the real or the biological. The image’s popularity - becoming the magazine’s most reprinted cartoon in history - signals the resonance of such a depiction of the World Wide Web with a broader public.

The same sort of disembodied imaginary characterizes prominent Québécois epistolary theorist Benoît Melançon’s conception of the internet<sup>98</sup> and of correspondence that occurs through electronic and digital exchange. In the opening remarks of his essay “Sévigné@Internet,” Melançon writes, “on insistera d’abord sur le fait que l’échange

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<sup>97</sup> This cartoon has enjoyed some circulation in Québec as well, as evidenced by spinoffs on “Québec meme,” including a direct translation of Steiner’s text into French “Sur Internet, personne ne sait que tu es un chien” with a photograph of a sable-colored mutt poised with its paws on a laptop keyboard, or the cartoon that takes the same text but substitutes the word “chien” with “patate” to read: “Sur Internet, personne ne sait que tu es une patate. Personne!”

<sup>98</sup> In fact, Melançon references Steiner’s cartoon in his essay “Sévigné@Internet,” though not explicitly for its immaterial imaginary.

électronique est, au sens littéral, dématérialisé.” He contrasts the perceived immateriality of email with the materiality of paper letters, and the respective im/materiality of these epistolary media is quickly conflated with the relative dis/embodiment of its correspondent(s). He calls the letter (that is, a traditional pen and paper epistle),

ce signe du corps de l’autre avec lequel effacer son absence, ce signe de son propre corps remis à l’autre ; il s’agissait d’offrir et de recevoir symboliquement des corps. Ces corps, ces lettres incarnées, se substituaient au présent dysphorique de la séparation : nous ne sommes pas ensemble et nous souffrons de cela, mais nous pouvons nous toucher et lutter contre les outrages du temps, nous unir par le papier (il faut y insister: pas seulement sur le papier) et rêver de retrouvailles.

The letter-body connection that Melançon sets forth relies upon the materiality of the written page functioning as a fetish. He repeatedly iterates in his essay that the paper of the letter stands in for the physicality of its writer, and he goes so far as to frame this fetishism as a defining characteristic of the letter.

To Melançon’s logic, the letter’s digital counterparts, precisely because they are paperless, have no space and no place, conceptually or physically, for the body. He avers: “Ce qui transite par les ordinateurs [...] est privé de valeur matérielle. Le courrier électronique n’a pas de corps. [...] voilà qui distingue radicalement l’électronique de l’épistolaire.” Through intersecting notions of im/materiality, dis/embodiment and fetishism, Melançon advances his thesis that digital forms of exchange, and emails in particular, do not constitute a continuation of the epistolary, but rather represent a radical break from traditional pen and paper letters.

“Sévigigné@Internet” was first pronounced at a conference in 1995, published in 1996, then republished with a “Postface inédite” in 2011, and again in 2013 with an accompanying inventory of recent epistolary production called “Epistol@rités: d’aujourd’hui à hier.” Though Melançon’s initial claims and conclusions regarding email are softened somewhat in appendices adjoining later publications of “Sévigigné@Internet,” he neither revokes nor revises the notion of the internet as a body-less realm, nor of traditional letters as uniquely suited to the fetishism that typifies epistolarity in his estimation.

2013, the year of “Sévigigné@Internet”’s most recent (re-)publication, marked the twenty year anniversary of Peter Steiner’s dog cartoon, and in an article in *The Washington Post*, the latter was deemed “as relevant as ever.”<sup>99</sup> However, an online epistle published from Québec in the same year shows instead the internet to be a realm where one’s physical being and identity are very much in question, threatened and on display.<sup>100</sup> In the fall of that year, Québécois actress Marilou Wolfe was rumored to be splitting with her husband and father of her two children, Guillaume Lemay-Thivierge. On October 23rd, 2013, comedian and online ne’er-do-well Gab Roy published a letter

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<sup>99</sup> In the article, Steiner was quoted as saying of the cartoon, “It’s as true as it ever was [...] But the Internet is so ubiquitous, so ever-present in our lives now, that unlike a dog here or a dog there, it’s become like a huge, baying pack of hounds that won’t ever shut up.”

<sup>100</sup> Several spin-offs of Steiner’s cartoon suggest a change in perspective as to anonymity and disembodiment over a twenty-year history online. In 2012, Merlyna Lim created a cartoon featuring a dog before a computer replete with advertisements so precisely targeting the online user that the screen contains multiple images of what appears to be that very dog, wearing sunglasses in one picture and eating a raw slab of meat in another. The text below reads, “On the Internet, everybody knows you’re a dog.” A Jon Carter cartoon from KDnuggets more closely mimics the dual-dog component of Steiner’s comic while updating the desktop computer to what appears to be a flipscreen or ipad. While the joke is similar to Merlyna Lim’s, the text is more explicit: “IT USED TO BE THAT NOBODY ON THE INTERNET KNEW I WAS A DOG. NOW, BECAUSE OF BIG DATA, EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT I AM A 15-YEAR OLD LABRADOODLE WHO SECRETLY LIKES CAT FOOD.”

addressed to Wolfe on his personal website under the pretense of offering his “services de rebound.” The language of the letter transforms Wolfe into a dog, subject to violent, non-consensual sexual acts. In a disturbing sort of reversal of Steiner’s cartoon, a dog does not “pass” as a human on the internet, nor does a human enjoy anonymity or disembodiment online; rather, everybody is told Mariloup Wolfe is a dog when her body and identity are publicly violated in the epistle with the filename /shotgun-sur-mariloup-wolfe/.

I contend that “Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe” provides an example of the letter as fetish online and demonstrates the limitations of thinking of the internet, and of digital exchange or electronic epistolarity more specifically, as fields where the body is excluded, or where the physicality of users or correspondents is not at stake. Where Melançon uses the notion of the fetish to maintain a divide between what he calls the “textual” and the “material” (and by extension, the corporeal), alleging that only traditional lettermail can fully occupy the function of the fetish, I argue that the fetish underpins a pervasive and persistent expression of a masculine epistolary imaginary that can be found in every epistolary medium. Furthermore, I disagree with Melançon that a paradigm of fetishism constitutes a defining characteristic of the epistolary. To be sure, letters can and have served as fetishes, as this chapter will repeatedly affirm, but through psychoanalytic writings on the subject of the fetish, we will also affirm that the process of fetish-making is an aberration, a masculine perversion of the feminine and of the epistolary.

Through a corpus that includes Gab Roy's "Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe," Benoît Melançon's *Epistol@rités*,<sup>101</sup> Sigmund Freud's "Fetishism," Jacques Lacan's "Séminaire sur 'La lettre volée,'" Maxime-Olivier Moutier's *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu*, and Vincent Kaufmann's *L'équivoque épistolaire*, I explore the troublesome letter-body connection at play in epistolary fetishism, where the phallus is imposed on the feminine, bodies are distorted, and *monstra horrenda* emerge.

Part one of the present chapter, "Disavowing the Feminine (or The Letter and the Fetish)," explores Benoît Melançon's, Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's models of fetishism and their implications for what I call a "masculine imaginary" of the epistolary. My project neither seeks nor suggests a universal masculine imaginary, rather I consider a particularly pervasive expression of a *dominant* masculine imaginary in both the epistolary and in psychoanalysis. In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler considers the "formulation of a bodily ego" as it relates to gender and sex identifications and avers, "psychoanalysis documents the hegemonic workings of those identifications" (14). I agree with Butler that psychoanalysis, particularly as it is conveyed in the writings of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, gives voice to a hegemonic (read: patriarchal and hetero-sexual/sexist) worldview. With an eye to the imaginings and effects of this hegemonic masculinity, I trace the thread of the fetish from psychoanalytic thought to some of the most disturbing expressions of the epistolary.

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<sup>101</sup> *Epistol@rités* is the title given to the 2013 ebook that gathers Melançon's three essays on the epistolary and the internet: "Sévigné@Internet," "Postface: quinze ans plus tard," and "Epistol@rités: d'aujourd'hui à hier."

The second part of the chapter, “Reimagining the Masculine: Yetis and Trolls,” shifts its focus to the “monstrum horrendum” that Lacan evokes in his “Séminaire sur ‘La lettre volée,’” and to the epistolary manifestations of this masculine monster that I perceive in Vincent Kaufmann’s letter-writing yeti and in Québec’s popular discourse of the internet troll. I seek to illustrate how these monstrous figures manifest and maintain the fetish in diverse and disruptive expressions of contemporary epistolarity.

### **Disavowing the Feminine (*or* The Letter and the Fetish)**

In *Epistol@rités*, Benoît Melançon repeatedly reinforces his letter-object-as-body argument by invoking a vocabulary of the “fetish.” He explains in his “*Postface*,” for example, that the letter, “parce qu’elle est d’abord un objet,” is subject to “être investie d’un affect fort, voire devenir un fétiche représentant le corps de l’autre.” In “Sévigné@Internet” and its “*Postface*,” Melançon maintains a firm distinction between the nexus of letters-objects-bodies and what he understands to be its foil of emails-non-objects-non-bodies. In his original essay, he states, “Le fétichisme qui caractérise la lettre n’a pas cours électroniquement;” his *Postface* unequivocally reaffirms this stance.

If an email could be considered a fetish (and Melançon stresses his doubt regarding this “if”), it would only be a “textual” fetish. *Epistolary* fetishism, he avers, is textual and material. He explains, “Le fétichisme épistolaire est textuel (dans la lettre, on parle d’objets fétichisés) et matériel (la lettre est un fétiche auquel, de plus, on peut adjoindre un autre fétiche, sous la forme d’un objet l’accompagnant); si tant est qu’un fétichisme électronique soit concevable, il ne saurait être que textuel.” The parenthetical

gloss of the textual fetish that Melançon provides immediately undermines its status as a fetish. When one speaks *about* fetishized objects in the letter, access to the fetish is indirect (the fetishized objects are indirect objects). The fetish is portrayed as an independent body situated outside of language, and indeed this interpretation is confirmed when Melançon recounts that in the case of a “material” fetish, the letter itself *is* a fetish. The “material” fetish, Melançon seems to suggest (that is to say, the letter in its traditional postal form), is the true expression and embodiment of fetishism.

Melançon is not the first to call the letter a fetish. In 1956, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan makes the letter the fetish *par excellence* in his seminar on Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter.” Melançon’s *Epistol@rités* makes no mention of Lacan’s work. However, given the very significant ways that psychoanalysis has shaped the overall understanding of fetishism, and the fact that Lacan specifically addresses the relationship of the letter to the fetish and to materiality, I think it is important to bring Melançon’s notion of epistolary fetishism into correspondence with Freud and Lacan’s writings on the subject.

As with most of Sigmund Freud’s work, his notion of the fetish is framed by and understood through the Oedipal complex, which relies upon a familial structure and relationship of a son to his father and his mother. In his 1927 article “Fetishism,” Freud identifies the primal scene whereby the fetish is formed as that in which a young boy first glimpses the female genitalia on/of his mother.<sup>102</sup> Prior to this encounter, Freud explains,

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<sup>102</sup> Freud assures his readers that “In every instance, the meaning and the purpose of the fetish turned out, in analysis, to be the same” (152), a meaning he reveals to be “a particular and very special penis” (152).

the child presumes his mother to have a penis, as he and his father have penises. When the boy remarks that, in fact, his mother does not have a penis, he perceives this not only as an essential *lack*, but as evidence of castration.<sup>103</sup> The boy surmises that his mother had a penis that his father cut off, and consequently fears for his own penis. In order to squelch or to compensate for this fear of castration, the child represses his discovery of the ‘castrated’ mother and creates a substitution for the phallus he had expected to see. In Freud’s words, “the fetish is a substitute for the woman’s (the mother’s) penis that the little boy once believed in and [...] does not want to give up” (152-53). The fetish is the object or the body part that comes to represent the mother’s penis in “a memorial” to “the horror of castration” (154).

Freud’s description of the fetish, and its evolution through the work of Jacques Lacan, complicates Melançon’s assessment of what a fetish is, what it does and where it can occur. Indeed, the psychoanalytic presentation of fetishism suggests that the fetish is far less bound to an embodied materiality than Melançon would have us believe. On the one hand, fetishism is deeply connected to the corporeal. The fetish is formed while beholding a body (that of the mother), it represents a body part (the penis), and the fetish may itself be a body part (the foot is a classic example). However, the fetish also manifests a profound disconnect from the body. It represents a refusal to accept the body of the mother for what it is and affirms a preference for a preconceived physicality that is doubly false (the mother, in all likelihood, neither has a phallus nor has been castrated). If we consider the moment of crisis where the little boy sees his mother’s genitals as

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<sup>103</sup> Within the field of psychoanalysis, “castration” is understood to mean the removal of the penis, and not the removal of the testicles as the term otherwise denotes.

presenting a choice between 1) accepting a material, maternal body in its corporeality and 2) preferring an imagined body (as the child mused that his mother's body *would be* and then that it *should be*), the fetishist shows an unequivocal preference for the imaginary over the material.

Jacques Lacan, for his part, resists conflating the fetish with the body. In his *œuvre*, he insists on an absolute separation between the symbolic phallus and the physical penis,<sup>104</sup> and he repeatedly privileges the role of language over that of the corporeal in the formation of the fetish. In an article that Lacan wrote in collaboration with Wladimir Granoff, the co-authors revisit Freud's article on fetishism to highlight the centrality of language at the fetish's inception. Lacan and Granoff explain, "Freud introduced us to the study of the fetish by indicating that it has to be deciphered, and deciphered like a symptom or a message. [...] This way of presenting the problem is not without significance. From the beginning, such an approach places the problem explicitly in the realm of the search for meaning in language" (2). Lacan and Granoff remind the reader that the first example of a fetish that Freud presents in "Fetishism" is not the result of a physical association, or even a visual one, but the result of a linguistic transference on the part of Freud's patient. Freud is working with a man who fetishizes "a shine on the nose," and Freud holds, "The fetish, which originated from his earliest childhood, had to be understood in English, not German. The 'shine on the nose' [in German '*Glanz auf der Nase*'] – was in reality a '*glance at the nose*'" (152). A shine (and a glance, for that matter) is, of course, intangible. The notion that the fetish is "like a message" and is

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<sup>104</sup> Toril Moi demonstrates that this is unsuccessful even within Lacan's own writings.

*translatable* frames the fetish as a sort of text, one that could be translated from one language, or one medium, to another.

Though Lacan and Granoff do not explicitly invoke the epistolary in their 1956 article, the metaphor of the “message” that they employ to describe the fetish is not unlike a letter, though it can just as easily be equated with other forms of epistolary expression, such as an email or a text *message*. When Lacan writes explicitly of the letter as fetish in his Seminar from the same year, I argue that he holds the fetish’s “message” in view, that is to say, he is concerned with the letter’s content as much as its form, and its *position* more than its paper. Lacan writes of the letter “*en position de signifiant, voire de fétiche*” (18) in his “Séminaire sur ‘La lettre volée,’”<sup>105</sup> a position based on a complicated conception of materiality and location.

Though Lacan, like Melançon, identifies materiality as a key element of the signifier (i.e. of the fetish and of the letter), Lacan emphasizes that this materiality is not what we might presume. It is an “odd” (15)<sup>106</sup> materiality that cannot be reduced to the letter’s material state. Lacan affirms, “Mais si c’est d’abord sur la matérialité du

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<sup>105</sup> “The Purloined Letter” tells the tale of an incriminating missive and its multiple changing of hands. When the (unnamed) lady to whom the letter is addressed (presumably the queen) is surprised by the entrance of her husband and a minister in her royal apartment, the minister schemes to steal the letter she half-concealed on her desk and to blackmail her for political gains. He pilfers the letter before her eyes, replacing it with one he procures from his pocket. An inspector named Dupin ultimately locates the purloined letter in the Minister’s quarters, where it had been reverse folded, readdressed, resealed and hidden in plain sight. In taking the letter from the thief’s chambers, Dupin replaces it with a look-alike of his own creation. Within “The Purloined Letter” then, though the letter “belongs” to a lady, it circulates in a masculine economy: it is produced, reproduced and redistributed strictly by the hands of men, who never simply steal the letter, but continually replace it. The action of the tale is recounted through the character of Dupin and entirely extradiegetic, thus all access to the letter, its meaning and its movements is through the lens of the masculine inspector and narrator.

<sup>106</sup> Lacan makes recourse to the English word used in “The Purloined Letter” and laments Baudelaire’s translation of “bizarre,” preferring instead “singulier.”

signifiant que nous avons insisté, cette matérialité est singulière en bien des points dont le premier est de ne point supporter la partition. Mettez une lettre en petits morceaux, elle reste la lettre qu'elle est" (20). The materiality of the letter is such that it cannot be divided; even if the letter is torn to pieces, it remains a single letter. For Lacan, this unique materiality is what allows the letter to function as the fetish.

Lacan turns to conventions of the French language to reinforce his notion of the letter's materiality as unified and indivisible. He remarks that "partitive" articles (we might hear 'articles of partition') are not employed to speak of letters: "pour la lettre, qu'on la prenne au sens de l'élément typographique, de l'épître ou de ce qui fait le lettré, on dira: – que ce qu'on dit est à entendre à *la lettre*, – qu'il vous attend chez le vagemestre *une lettre*, – voire que *vous avez des lettres*, ... jamais qu'il n'y ait nulle part *de la lettre*" (15). Lacan suggests that the linguistic integrity of the letter, like its "odd" materiality, does not tolerate partition.

However, the example he gives of what will *never* be said about the letter threatens to undo itself. "[J]amais qu'il n'y ait *nulle part* de la lettre": the negatives layer on top of one another to the point of canceling each other out. If 'Nowhere is there any letter' will never be uttered, the possibility remains that 'any/some letter' is somewhere and will be spoken. Alternately, we might hear "no part" resounding beneath the "nowhere" of *nulle part*. In this case, the phrase Lacan provides as a negative exemplum becomes "there is no part of the letter." *Never will one say* that there is no part of the letter. Contrary to what Lacan claims to affirm, the letter is inescapably threatened with partition.

Conversely, or rather comparably, Melançon argues that for the fetish to function, its material must be destructible. In another effort to demonstrate that only the letter – and not email - is capable of acting as a fetish, he insists upon the wholeness or the invulnerability of epistolarity via the electronic. He writes in “Sévigné@Internet,”

Sauf à n’insister que sur des exceptions, on constatera qu’il n’est guère loisible de mettre le feu à son terminal, qu’un écran cathodique ne se froisse que difficilement, que les larmes ou les gouttes de parfum versées sur un clavier ne sont recommandées par aucun fabricant, que l’on ne connaît pas d’exemples de portatifs déchirés en petits morceaux puis confiés au vent ou à la rivière [...] – toutes choses que les épistoliers et leurs lecteurs, depuis des siècles, se vantent d’avoir faites.

In Melançon’s estimation, the fact that emails, screens and other electronic exchanges and devices cannot (or can only with great difficulty) be compromised or destroyed bars them from the function of the fetish. It is the letter’s physical destructibility (not its indivisibility as Lacan proclaims) that enables it to be a fetish for the body. And yet, like Lacan’s linguistic example that signals its own undoing, Melançon’s list of electronic indestructibles is, without exception, coming apart. Perhaps barely (“guère”), with difficulty (“difficilement”) or against user recommendations (“recommandées par aucun fabricant”), but partition threatens each of these devices, too.

Partition that threatens wholeness is precisely the threat of fetishism: castration is imposed upon the mother and menaces the masculine beholder, yet both figures remain intact. This quality of being both divided and intact can describe the purloined letter in

Poe's tale as well. Poe writes, "It was torn nearly in two, across the middle - as if a design, in the first instance, to tear it entirely up as worthless, had been altered, or stayed, in the second" (34). The fetish's quality of being destroyed and yet whole, disproven yet enduring, absent yet there leads to Lacan's evocation of *nullibility*. He writes,

Ne sommes-nous pas dès lors en droit de demander comment il se fait que la lettre n'ait été trouvée *nulle part* [...] Faut-il que la lettre, entre tous les objets, ait été douée de la propriété de *nullibité*[...]?<sup>107</sup> Il est évident (*a little too self evident*) que la lettre a en effet avec le lieu, des rapports pour lesquels aucun mot français n'a toute la portée du qualificatif anglais 'odd' (15).

Michael Wood explains the meaning and use of "nullibility" in this way: "Lacan has settled on Wilkins's word 'nullibility' [...] to designate that which can't be found although the seeker has looked 'everywhere'<sup>108</sup> - an object, in other words, that changes the meaning of 'everywhere,' since it is neither present nor absent as objects are supposed to be, but both present and absent" (32). Nullibility allows Lacan to trouble conventional notions of place and renew the relationship of the letter to the fetish. The purloined letter was nowhere to be found, and yet it is found. The mother was discovered without a penis, and yet the mother is made to have a penis.

Reluctantly and/or unwittingly, Melançon affirms the "nullibility" of the epistolary in his paradoxical statements about "place" online. He contends, for example, that "Le message électronique est immatériel, il n'occupe aucun *lieu véritable*" (my

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<sup>107</sup> Lacan attributes the term "nullibility" to the writings of Bishop Wilkins.

<sup>108</sup> Though Wood's explanation is otherwise on point, "everywhere" does not capture the meaning of *nulle part*.

emphasis). Despite his claim that emails do not occupy a real place, Melançon later states, “Internet est apparu comme le *lieu* de tous les possibles identitaires” (emphasis mine). Email occupies the *lieu* of the internet and occupies no *lieu* whatsoever.<sup>109</sup> To borrow Lacan and Poe’s wording, we might say that the materiality of email is *odd*. But this odd materiality does not make it immaterial,<sup>110</sup> nor does it put email at odds with the possibility of a textual and material epistolary fetishism.

I believe that Melançon’s epistolary fetishism is ultimately not incompatible with the fetishism Freud and Lacan set forth. However, by focusing on the fetish above all as a means to distinguish postal from electronic exchange, Melançon elides the formation and function of fetishes and ignores the consequences that accompany epistolary fetishism regardless of its im/material support. I will elaborate upon three critical consequences of epistolary fetishism that Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis bring to the fore and that will be apparent in each of the examples of epistolary fetishism that we explore later in the chapter.

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<sup>109</sup> Another potential paradox of Melançon’s statements: With the internet one can assume any possible identity, but email cannot be identified with the letter.

<sup>110</sup> Despite the tenacity of the imaginary of the immaterial, theories of the electronic, of the internet and of the body increasingly recognize how electronic exchanges are grounded in the material, and how the body enters into electronic exchange. Two recent publications, for example, explore the material infrastructure that makes our seemingly immaterial digital environment possible. Tung-Hui Hu’s *A Prehistory of the Cloud* highlights the data centers and networks of circuitry that underpin what is imagined as an ethereal “cloud,” and Nicole Starosielski reminds her readers that “wireless” internet is in fact enabled by massive ocean cable systems in her *The Undersea Network*. As for the body online, Lissa Holloway-Attaway and Blekinge Tekniska Högskola explore “the relationship between virtual and physical forms of embodiment” (1) in an article entitled “Beyond Representation: Embodied Expression and Social Me-dia.” Clare Madge and Henrietta O’Connor, for their part, challenge the concept of “disembodied” internet existences by thinking “online identities and embodiment” and “the simultaneity of online/onsite worlds.”

1) *The epistolary fetish assumes a distinctly masculine lens.* Freud's description of the formation of the fetish is entirely dependent upon a masculine experience of a masculine gaze on a feminine body as well as a patently masculine preoccupation with castration.<sup>111</sup> Both Freud and Lacan present fetishism as a decidedly male phenomenon, or one that is exceedingly uncommon among women.<sup>112</sup> When we approach the epistolary through and as fetishism, we privilege a masculine perspective. Unsurprisingly, when Melançon seeks to illustrate the letter's function as a fetish in "Sévigné@Internet," his examples involve only male correspondents; he alludes to letters of the character Rodolphe in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and Denis Diderot's missives to his lover Sophie Volland. Given the large body of creative and critical production linking letters to women writers and to "écriture féminine,"<sup>113</sup> the masculine viewpoint that the epistolary fetish involves becomes even more pronounced and, I would argue, more unsettling.

2) *The epistolary fetish disavows femininity and distorts corporeality.* Freud writes, "the fetish is designed precisely to preserve [the woman's (the mother's) penis] from extinction" (152). In the framework of the fetish, the idea of what a body and what a woman should be (based how a little boy has imagined them) is so powerful that the misinformed preconception - what we might call here the *phallusy* - endures against all evidence to the contrary. The birth and bedrock of Freudian fetishism is a refusal to perceive a feminine body for what it is. When the letter acts as a fetish, it disavows or

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<sup>111</sup> Freud avers, "Probably no male human being is spared the fright of castration at the sight of a female genital" (154).

<sup>112</sup> Butler demonstrates how the psychoanalytic phallus is also markedly *heterosexual*.

<sup>113</sup> See "The Legacy of Letters in Québec."

distorts the feminine and/in its corporeality, and this is a necessarily violent process.

Freud writes of the fetishist, “To point out that he reveres his fetish is not the whole story; in many cases he treats it in a way which is obviously equivalent to a representation of castration” (157). In the letters we examine, the ‘treatment’ of the fetish and of the feminine often finds expression through fantasies of castration and rape. Though such epistolary violence occurs on the level of the imaginary and of language, it is not necessarily without consequences for women’s real, lived and embodied experiences.<sup>114</sup>

3) *The epistolary fetish relegates the letter to a time and place ‘before.’* The fetish represents not only the desire to “maintain the disavowal” (154) that the mother does not have a phallus, but the desire to return to a time *before* the disavowal was necessary, that is, before the misconception was revealed to be precisely that. A number of passages from Freud’s “Fetishism” highlight the impulse to recover a lost ‘before.’ For example, he writes,

it is as though the last impression before the uncanny and traumatic one is retained as a fetish. Thus the foot or shoe owes its preferences as a fetish – or a part of it – to the circumstance that the inquisitive boy peered at the woman’s genitals from below, from her legs up; fur and velvet – as has long been suspected – are a fixation of the sight of the pubic hair, which should have been followed by the longed-for sight of the female member; pieces of underclothing, which are so

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<sup>114</sup> Monique Wittig nicely articulates the real effects of the imaginary of the fetish in her reflections on heterosexuality in the essay “On the Social Contract.” She writes, “I confront a nonexistent object, a fetish, an ideological form which cannot be grasped in reality, except through its effects, whose existence lies in the mind of people, but in a way that affects their whole life, the way they act, the way they move, the way they think. So we are dealing with an object both imaginary and real” (40-41).

often chosen as a fetish, crystallize the moment of undressing, the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic. (155)

A lexicon of temporality and sequence punctuates this passage with words like “before,” “followed” “last” and “still.” Freud prefaces these remarks with the acknowledgement that “One would expect that the organs or objects chosen as substitutes for the absent female phallus would be such as appear as symbols of the penis in other connections as well” (155), yet the fetish is frequently found in objects bearing no symbolic relation to the penis. If we read Freud closely, we discover that the fetish results not so much from the desire to find an alternate manifestation of the penis, as from the desire to turn back time, to solidify the “the last impression *before*” (my emphasis) the child is confronted with the reality of the female body in his mother’s corporeality. The foot, undergarments and pubic hair are all objects that, in Freud’s imagined scene, the boy perceives immediately prior to seeing the female genitalia. These objects or their close affiliates (shoes, velvet, fur, etc.) are chosen as fetishes because they are vestiges of “the last moment in which the woman could still be regarded as phallic,” that is, they precede the moment in which the masculine imaginary of the feminine phallus was revealed to be a *phallusy*. Epistolary theory and production that equates the letter with the fetish follows a familiar pattern of positioning the letter with and in the *before*.

All of these consequences of fetishism are apparent in the letter Gab Roy posted on his blog to Marilou Wolfe in October 2013. To expound upon the fetishism of Roy’s letter, I am obligated to clearly name what it does and, at times, cite what it says. Let me

foreground my analysis and its accompanying citations with an acknowledgement of the discomfort – a certain ethical uneasiness – that I experience in repeating passages of Roy’s epistle, even if such quotations act in service of a frank critique. The following paragraphs and pages contain explicit and disturbing language, not only from “Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe” but from other epistolary texts that lie at the outer limits of correspondence. My aim in reciting such language is to indisputably illustrate the pervasive sexual and textual violence that typifies a masculine expression of epistolary fetishism and that has yet to be sufficiently exposed and explored.

We have explained how fetishism involves a masculine imaginary that disavows and distorts the feminine through castration. In “Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe,” such castration is apparent in the essential *lack* Gab Roy attributes to Mariloup Wolfe in the form of an absence that he calls “ce vide qui hantait ton existence tout ce temps.” In the place of this perceived void, he imposes the (or rather, *his*) phallus. Roy’s epistle describes in lurid detail the sexual exploits that he fantasizes with Mariloup Wolfe; he writes where he will fuck her (“Je serai celui qui te fourrera sur un comptoir”), where he will come (“après être venu dans ta face en te traitant de salope”), where he will stick his fingers (“combien de mes énormes doigts je peux enfoncer dans ta plotte”), where he will spit (“écartiller tes fesses pour cracher dans ton cul”), as well as the grimaces of displeasure he will see on Wolfe’s face (“Toi et moi savons que malgré tes grimaces, tu adores quand je [...]”). This litany of violent and vile acts is framed as a means of recovering what has been lost, of restoring the years during “tout ce temps” that Mariloup was “haunted” by lack. Roy writes, “Oui, Mariloup, je serai celui qui te fera rattraper

toutes ces années perdues” or again “pis on reprend les années perdues, beubé.” Roy presents his letter and the violence it contains as a way to “take back” the past or to return to a ‘before’ in order to restore Mariloup to a state of completion.

Jocelyne Robert, an author and sexologist, calls Roy’s letter a description of “une agression sexuelle” and “un viol” in an article published in *Le Huffington Post Québec* a little more than a week after Roy’s text appeared online. Robert explains her word choice and diagnosis, writing,

- Il n'y pas, dans son texte le début de l'ombre d'un consentement
- Il n'y a pas dans son texte le début de l'ombre d'un plaisir réciproque et partagé
- Il n'y pas dans son texte le début de l'ombre d'une personne en face de lui: juste une chose, des morceaux de chair, des orifices qu'il force, envahit, souille
- Il n'y a pas dans son texte le début de l'ombre d'une alternance des pouvoirs, juste de l'humiliation
- Il n'y a pas dans son texte le début de l'ombre de désir érotique: juste une soif de soumettre et de dominer.

While all of Robert’s diagnoses are on point, I find one particularly pertinent to the question of distortion and violence that occur through epistolary fetishism: “Il n'y pas dans son texte [...] une personne en face de lui : juste une chose, des morceaux de chair.” In the first part of this remark, Robert contends that there is not a “person” in front of Roy. Indeed, the epistle creates a sort of personification *en creux*, a de-personification, where Wolfe is attributed with dog-like characteristics. Roy plays repeatedly with the name of the actress and the “wolf” that appears in both her first and last names. He writes, “ne

vois-tu pas que je suis occupé à te faire du dirtytalk en t'appelant ma Marichienne?"

Changing her name from Mariloup to what could be translated as "Maribitch," Roy casts his addressee as a domesticated animal that is inferior and is to be submissive.

Mariloup's transformation from a person to a dog makes clear the distortion of the corporeal and of the feminine that accompanies epistolary fetishism.

The failure to recognize Wolfe's personhood within the text of the letter cannot be attributed to the 'body-less' nature of online exchange, for Wolfe's body, or more accurately her body parts, are omnipresent in Roy's missive. The "pieces of flesh" that Robert evokes in the second part of her appraisal confirm the castration upon which Roy's writing depends. Wolfe's body is put into pieces that are put on display. And like Wolfe's name before it, parts of her body are further distorted through anti-anthropomorphism: her hands and feet become "pattes," for example, and Roy's language and treatment is correspondingly *im-personal* ("pour te fourrer à 4 pattes de façon rude et impersonnelle").

What heightens the place and the significance of the victimized body in Roy's letter is, of course, the fact that the referent to the "morceaux de chair" that it rapes and ridicules is a real woman who has been singled out, named and name-called, and sexually demeaned. Jocelyne Robert's analysis emphasizes that Roy's letter is "Une fiction évidemment. Mais une fiction qui met en scène une femme bien réelle." In the aftermath of Roy's post, this "very real" woman reported that she "a été humiliée, dénigrée, discréditée, ridiculisée, diffamée et atteinte dans son honneur, son intégrité et sa réputation, a subi un stress énorme et une anxiété constante" (Durocher, 2014). Six

months after the letter's publication,<sup>115</sup> Mariloup Wolfe brought a lawsuit against Gabriel Roy for the damage his letter caused her. In the interim between the letter's posting and the lawsuit it provoked, the text became the object of a mass public scandal, "une loupe" on the response of Québécois to violence on social media,<sup>116</sup> and an oft-cited example of rape culture in Québec.

During the flurry of angry and indignant responses to "Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe,"<sup>117</sup> Gab Roy was invited to appear alongside other controversial internet personalities on "Tout le monde en parle," the television show of *Radio-Canada*. According to the show's host, Guy A. Lepage, despite the fact that the content of Roy's letter was deleted from *levraigabroy.com* within six hours of its original posting, "Plus de cent mille personnes ont lu cette lettre dans les heures qui ont suivi." Lepage then asks Gab Roy, "A quoi vous avez pensé en publiant ce papier de très mauvais goût?" More than in Roy's response to Lepage's query, I'm interested in the question's use of the word "papier" to reference this online epistle. For with this term, Lepage invokes the materiality of paper and the corresponding power of the fetish that epistolary critic Benoît Melançon strictly associates with non-electronic letters.

Roy's text illustrates that the gendered violence, perversion and distortion of epistolary fetishism can contaminate the epistolary in any medium where a phallus is forced upon a feminine body, regardless of whether the imposition occurs on the internet, or where paper is at play. The fetishism at work in Roy's letter has countless precedents

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<sup>115</sup> On March 8, 2014, the International Day of the Woman.

<sup>116</sup> See Jessie Mc Nicoll's article "La culture du viol ou l'affaire Gab Roy: un effet pervers du 'politically correct'?"

<sup>117</sup> On December 1, 2013

in personal correspondence and letter fiction, and is sadly all too common in various forms and forums of digital exchange. Though Roy's letter reached a particularly wide audience, it is otherwise not all that extreme an example of what epistolary fetishism entails.

As "Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe" makes abundantly clear, women are the first and the worst victims of epistolary fetishism and the disavowal and distortion it involves. However, the masculine does not emerge from this fetishism unaltered. The fetishist, too, is distorted, deformed or disfigured. Within his letter, Roy also becomes dog-like or even beastly. He calls himself "ton vrai mâle alpha," and signs off "Bestialement, Gab." However, I am more interested in a larger transformation of Gab Roy and other epistolary fetishists that occurs in the epistolary imaginary outside of the letter and that makes them into monsters.

Lacan makes a subtle evocation of a monster in his "Séminaire sur 'La lettre volée,'" when he writes, "si l'on nous permet de faire *provigner* notre monstre [...] C'est qu'à jouer la partie de 'celui qui cache', c'est *le rôle de la Reine* dont il lui faut se revêtir, et jusqu'aux attributs de la femme et de l'ombre, si propices à l'acte de cacher" (18).

This mention of a monster occurs in reference to the minister, who, in stealing and concealing the letter of the tale's title, takes on the qualities of the queen. Lacan emphasizes how, as men come into possession of the purloined letter<sup>118</sup> (and he emphasizes the ambiguity of the expression "en possession" - the man is as much possessed by the letter as he possesses it), it is possible to detect a change in nature and in character that increasingly aligns these men with the feminine. We should recall that in

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<sup>118</sup> "Ce signe ravi, voici donc l'homme en sa possession" (18).

establishing the letter as fetish in his Seminar, Lacan instantly conflates the letter-fetish with the woman. He avers, “Car *ce signe est bien celui de la femme, pour ce qu’elle y fait valoir son être, en le fondant hors de la Loi qui la contient toujours, de par l’effet des origines, en position de signifiant, voire de fétiche*” (18). As he traces the transformation of men “in possession” of the letter, he privileges the letter-woman link, writing, for example, “[La lettre] le transforme de plus en plus à l’image de celle qui l’a offerte à sa surprise, et qu’il va maintenant céder, à son exemple, à une surprise semblable” (20). Lacan characterizes the woman by her mystery, her passivity and other traits he calls “de nature manifestement féminine” (22). As men come into contact with the letter and extend its fetishization, be it the thieving minister or Dupin, they take on the “feminine” qualities of the queen and of the letter.

Upon Lacan’s second evocation of the monster, where its source within Poe’s text is made clear, the monster is revealed to have an antagonistic relationship to the woman rather than one of affinity. In a passage colored by casual misogyny, Lacan writes,

le vrai *monstrum horrendum* - ce sont ses mots - ‘*un homme de génie sans principes*’. Ici se signe l’origine de cette horreur, et celui qui l’éprouve n’a nul besoin de se déclarer de la façon la plus inattendue ‘*partisan de la dame*’ pour nous la révéler: on sait que les dames détestent qu’on mette en cause les principes, car leurs attraits doivent beaucoup au mystère du signifiant. (22)

If the monster assumes feminine traits, it remains a masculine monster - a *man* of genius without principles – that “ladies detest.”

Lacan says of the monster “Ici se signe l’origine de cette horreur,” and in these words we might perceive a flickering up of what Freud has called the “*horror of castration*” (my emphasis, 154). Lacan’s emphasis of the phrase “*partisan de la dame*” reinforces that the origin of this horror is the castration of the woman, for “partisan” echoes “partition,” and it is the woman (the lady) who is subject to this partition when the fetish is formed. Together, Poe and Lacan’s words tell us that behind, and arguably in, the purloined letter, there lurks a *monstrum horrendum*, a horrible monster that recalls and perpetuates the horror of castration of the feminine subject.

In this first part of the present chapter, we have focused on the relationship of the fetish to the body, particularly as it concerns bodies of correspondence (the materiality of letters versus emails, for example) as well as feminine bodies that are addressed and abused in the masculine imaginary of epistolary fetishism. In the subsequent section, we will turn our attention to the monstrous, masculine bodies, imagined to inhabit the outer limits of correspondence in critical and popular appraisals of misogynistic missives, as examples of the *monstrum horrendum* that accompanies purloined letters.

### **Reimagining the Masculine: Yetis and Trolls**

*nous savons que, pour rendre à la lecture son avenir, il faut en renverser le mythe [...]*

Roland Barthes, *La mort de l’Auteur*

In 1990, Vincent Kaufmann published what would become a highly influential work in the world of epistolary criticism, entitled *L'Équivoque épistolaire*.<sup>119</sup> The book's *Avant-propos* foregrounds the temporal and theoretical context from which it issues, opening with the statement, "Comme beaucoup de mes contemporains, j'ai appris autrefois à ignorer scrupuleusement la biographie des écrivains qui me passionnaient. La mort de l'auteur, cet empêchement de lire en rond, venait d'être décrétée" (7). Kaufmann recounts that it is during this post-mortem period, that is, in a critical climate dominated by poststructuralism and its infamous proclamation of 'the death of the author,' that he first encounters the personal correspondence of Franz Kafka, Gustave Flaubert and Antonin Artaud.

The citation in this section's epigraph is taken from the concluding sentence of Roland Barthes' 1968 manifesto that declares the author dead.<sup>120</sup> The phrase quoted above is immediately followed by one much more widely remembered and repeated, one that captures or even constitutes the essay's clarion call. These, the final words of Barthes' essay, read, "la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l'Auteur" (67). Looking to the future of reading, Barthes makes the Author a thing of the past, a 'myth' to be 'overthrown' or even killed. For if the reader is to be born, says Barthes, the Author - that is, the myth of the Author - must die. It is therefore striking that in response to the death of the author, Vincent Kaufmann should reinstitute, or more accurately, perhaps, reclaim and repurpose, a myth.

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<sup>119</sup> We discuss Kaufmann's book briefly in our chapter on the letters of Gabrielle Roy (see "Post(e) Mélina").

<sup>120</sup> Later republished in Barthes' *Le bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984, pp.61-67.

For Kaufmann, the epistolary challenges the division poststructuralism imposes between the life and work. Fleshing out the imaginary of this enigmatic zone between the man and the *œuvre*, Kaufmann makes an iconoclastic and unexpected claim: that the letter-writer is literature's yeti, "le yéti de la littérature" (9). The yeti serves as a manifestation of the epistolary ambivalence that is evoked in the book's title and is alluded to in the *Avant-propos* when Kaufmann writes, "Il y a en effet dans le geste épistolaire une fondamentale *équivoque*, dont l'exploitation conduit aux frontières de l'écriture poétique. La lettre semble favoriser la communication et la proximité; en fait, elle disqualifie toute forme de partage et produit une distance grâce à laquelle le texte littéraire peut advenir" (8). Kaufmann suggests that letter writers convoke addressees only to revoke them, and that their letters do not serve to bring correspondents together so much as to maintain or even produce the distance necessary to create a literary work. He subsequently calls the yeti the mythical "missing link" ("le fameux chaînon manquant" [9]) between the life and the work of an author, and he describes this creature as running between the lived and the written, the literary and the prosaic, the man and the *œuvre*. For Kaufmann, the "abominable letter-man" and his epistolary production emerge from "une zone énigmatique" (9) between life and literature, where one is never entirely certain to have seen the yeti or its "imperceptible mouvement d'approche de l'écriture" (*ibid*).

There is something at once playful and compelling in the way Kaufmann presents this creature of mythic proportions, full of mystery and intrigue, and unfettered by

science.<sup>121</sup> There is also a real appeal in Kaufmann's characterization of the epistolary as a series of missed connections, as something other than the sincere and spontaneous outpouring that popular nostalgia or epistolary criticism focused on personal expression might have us believe. But this latter facet of the epistolary, as Kaufmann describes it, also signals where the yeti teeters from the delightful into the deeply disturbing, or into the *horrendous*.

Kaufmann populates the terrain of epistolary creation with what he himself dubs "a monster," and he highlights the monstrosity of his yeti when he says of the letter writer, "il semble en tout cas raisonnable de l'affecter de l'hypothétique monstruosité généralement prêtée au yéti. Après tout, il y a bien, au centre de tout grand texte littéraire, quelque chose de monstrueux. [...] Passer de l'homme à l'œuvre, c'est devenir inhumain" (9). After citing an assortment of beasts, phantoms and monsters that appear either as characters or more fleeting references in the publications of various authors included in his corpus, Kaufmann continues,

L'épistolier est l'agent, ou du moins un des agents de ce devenir monstrueux, de cet arrachement à une parole humaine visé par l'œuvre. Rien d'étonnant alors si, du monstre, il a souvent la violence. On part en général de l'idée qu'il veut du bien à ceux à qui il s'adresse, mais rien n'est moins sûr. Il y a dans certaines correspondances quelque chose d'extraordinairement cruel, qui les tire du côté d'une activité sacrificielle. (10)

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<sup>121</sup> Kaufmann writes of the yeti, "je voudrais [...] éviter de le discipliner en lui imposant trop de science humaine : mieux vaut le risque de voir de temps en temps l'abominable homme des lettres s'évanouir dans le paysage que celui de le transformer en vulgaire singe" (9).

Here, we begin to understand why the yeti is so frequently described as “abominable.” Kaufmann characterizes the transition from the life to the work as a monstrous and violent, even a cruel endeavor. In these citations, Kaufmann acknowledges that the transition from the life to the work, or from the writer to the inhuman, is violent, and he also concedes that the victim of this violence is frequently the one to whom the *épistolier* writes. However, he seems to ignore an insistent pattern in the violence he perceives and describes: that the letter writer (or yeti) is masculine, and that its preferred victims are women.

The corpus of correspondence that Kaufmann analyzes in *L'équivoque épistolaire* is extensive and impressive. He includes nine different letter writers in his investigation of the yeti, all of whom he carefully situates temporally, thematically and geographically. However, nowhere does he make note of the fact that his is an exclusively male consortium of correspondents: Kafka, Flaubert, Proust, Rilke, Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Artaud, Valéry and Gide. The closest he comes to an admission of his gendered corpus is in the occasional substitution of “abominable homme des lettres” for “yéti,” or his reference to the writer as “l’homme,” though the latter can just as easily be read as an instance of employing the masculine-as-universal that is common in the French language; he does not acknowledge that his study assumes a decidedly masculine lens. Furthermore, *L'équivoque épistolaire* identifies evidence of epistolary violence in Kafka’s letters to Felice, Flaubert’s correspondence with Louise Colet, Proust and Baudelaire’s missives to their mothers, and Rilke’s letters to a princess of his

acquaintance, but fails to recognize the gendered pattern that is continually repeated in the yeti's violence and its victims.

I have identified only two moments in Kaufmann's book when gender or sex is deliberately invoked, and both illustrate the violence of a male letter writer to a female addressee according to the framework of fetishism. The first is found in two little words at the close of the citation "Rien n'est plus insoutenable pour l'épistolier que la présence de l'autre. Il faudrait que celui-ci soit toujours absent, qu'il ne se présente jamais, qu'il ne prenne jamais corps, qu'il reste *sans sexe*" (my emphasis, 21). Kaufmann writes this during his analysis of Kafka's correspondence with the author's sometimes-fiancée Felice. The way sex is evoked here is telling, educed in a neutered imaginary "sans sexe." We can hear in this phrasing a logic of the fetish that resists the woman's corporeality, as well as a longing to suspend time in an infinite 'before.' Kaufmann writes that the correspondent does not want his addressee to take on a body ("qu'il ne prenne jamais corps"), but to remain sexless, for if the addressee has a body, the correspondent will be obligated to confront her *sexe*. Significantly, in French, the same word denotes both sex (as in sexual identity, or what we might loosely translate as gender) and the sexual organs or genitalia. To make his addressee be "without sex" (i.e. without genitals) is to perpetuate the horror of castration. This is effectively what he has done; Felice is not "une autre" but "un autre," her gender is intolerable and has already been repressed and replaced.

A second explicit reference to sex in *L'équivoque épistolaire* can be found in the context of Kaufmann's analysis of the correspondence of Flaubert. Kaufmann writes of Gustave Flaubert's correspondence with Louise Colet as follows:

Flaubert dénonce constamment la différence *sexuelle* comme la source de toutes les autres différences, de tous les malentendus et de tous les parasitages qui empêchent de voir les choses du même œil. Toujours il en appelle à la *disparition de cette différence*, pour redonner sa chance à une complicité perdue [...]. Le tort de Louise, c'est de confondre l'art et ses passions de femme, de mêler *sa personne* à son style. Dans tout ce qu'elle écrit, elle est encore *trop femme* (my emphasis, 126-27).

As in Kafka's case, we can detect an expression of epistolary fetishism in Flaubert's desire to sublimate the feminine. Here, the status and identity of Colet<sup>122</sup> as a woman are mentioned only to rebuke and to exorcise her as such. The difference of her body and her writing must be made to disappear, that is to say, they must be made to be masculine. Though Kaufmann (I would say quite feebly) distances himself from Flaubert's reproach in his analysis of it, in a parallel gesture, Kaufmann himself only calls attention to gender to signal the desire of the *épistoliers* he studies to enjoy an exchange unburdened by sexual difference: read, by women.

Kaufmann's epistolary in(ter)vention therefore participates in the pattern of violence against women that is apparent in correspondence of epistolary fetishism. A male letter writer privileges female correspondents to enact his violent disavowal of the

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<sup>122</sup> who is always referenced as "Louise," while "Gustave" is dubbed "Flaubert"

feminine and of the corporeal. As a result of this epistolary abuse, the letter writer himself is distorted and deformed, made into a monster that Kaufmann calls the yeti.<sup>123</sup>

Kaufmann's corpus in *L'équivoque épistolaire* focuses on European writers of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but his violent modern letter-writer certainly has a corollary in contemporary Québec. We might find a "yeti," for example, in the Québécois author and correspondent Maxime-Olivier Moutier. Moutier's book *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu*, first published in 1999 and again in 2007, is made up of a series of fanatical letters that contain violent, sometimes murderous, domestic and sexual fantasies. Moutier composed and posted these letters in Montreal between December 1996 and March 1997 and later reworked them for publication. Within a single, brief article, Francine Bordeleau calls this collection of letters a "roman épistolaire" (8), a "troublant témoignage" (9), an "autofiction constituée de lettres" (8), and "matière autobiographique qui devient littéraire" (8). She specifies, "Lancée dans l'urgence, oui, sans doute, la matière autobiographique des livres de Moutier n'en est pas moins soumise à l'épreuve de la littérature, transformée en œuvre littéraire. C'est donc de l'écriture, en effet" (8). By using personal letters to inspire or create a published work of literature, Moutier follows the pattern of the yeti that Kaufmann sets forth: he is an author who makes his

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<sup>123</sup> Kaufmann's explicit evocations and elaborations of the yeti are limited to the *Avant-propos* of his book, but the threat of letter-writing monsters carries throughout the whole of *L'équivoque épistolaire*. For example, drawing upon the story *La métamorphose* that Kafka wrote in the early stages of his correspondence with Felice, Kaufmann muses, "Pourquoi ne pas lire *La métamorphose* comme une fable sur ce qui se passe lorsque l'épistolier sort de l'ombre, lorsqu'il impose à l'autre son réel?" (20). This "réel," Kaufmann insists, is a "réel monstrueux" (21): Kafka himself is like the *cloporte*, the woodlouse, his tale describes: "Le cloporte est comme la chute de l'épistolier, un fragment de réel monstrueux qui menace d'en tomber, en guise d'avertissement de ce qui se passerait s'il n'y avait plus la distance épistolaire" (21). Without the distance the epistolary affords, the letter writer will be revealed to be the monster – the yeti or the enormous insect – that he is.

correspondence a literary laboratory, whose correspondence is “passage” and “transition” (Kaufmann 9) toward literary production. I would add that Moutier also respects the behaviors of the yeti in that his letters are addressed to a woman (Valentine Brochu,<sup>124</sup> who replied only once to the many mailings she received<sup>125</sup>).

If Moutier’s yeti-like behaviors weren’t enough to invite a reading of epistolary fetishism in *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu*, the *Avant-Propos* makes explicit reference to psychoanalysis. Moutier professes, “En même temps que l’écriture et l’envoi de ces lettres, je faisais une pleine psychanalyse” (9). He pursues, “*Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu* représentent aujourd’hui, pour moi, une des nombreuses choses majeures à s’être libérées – comme en une extraction – de cette expérience de l’analyse” (10). The statement that *Les lettres* were “set free” from Moutier’s experience of psychoanalysis suggests that the epistles represent a release of the repressed. Accordingly, the author writes that the letters are the expression of an idea that he has carried with him since early in his childhood. He explains,

J’avais décidé de mettre en acte une vieille idée que je traînais depuis loin dans l’enfance. Celle de prendre une femme pour lui faire entendre tout ce que je me devais de faire entendre dans la vie. [...] Dire quelque chose que personne de moyennement humain ne pourrait entendre. J’aimais cette femme. Autant que celle d’avant. J’étais fou et j’aurais fait absolument tout pour que cette fille, presque choisie au hasard, n’ait d’autre choix que de m’aimer. (9)

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<sup>124</sup> It is not made clear in the text or elsewhere whether Valentine Brochu is a pseudonym or the addressee’s real name, however it is affirmed and confirmed on multiple occasions that Moutier mailed his epistles to a real woman.

<sup>125</sup> Her response is not included in *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu*.

Moutier expresses his longstanding desire to force a woman – any woman but, importantly he chooses a real woman – to listen to him and to love him. In these remarks of the *Avant-Propos*, women are universalized and made to be entirely substitutable: “a woman” becomes “this woman” who is like “the one before.” This substitutability foreshadows the fetishism that will characterize *Les Lettres*. The fact that a/this/that woman must hear what “personne de moyennement humain” could hear further announces the distortion and disavowal that will occur in Moutier’s letters, where the woman in the masculine subconscious is made to be ‘inhuman’<sup>126</sup> or ‘subhuman.’

As we move from the *Avant-propos* and into the letters themselves, we find Moutier’s missives filled with fantasies that move between expressions of intimacy and of violence. Nearly every letter shifts from admiration and/or tenderness to contempt and/or brutality, as in the passage from the letter dated December 19, 1996: “Tu es porteuse d’un corps que j’ai de plus en plus envie de brutaliser. Que j’ai d’abord envie de caresser lentement, puis de brutaliser de nouveau” (71). In Freud’s “Fetishism” he notes, “Affection and hostility in the treatment of the fetish – which run parallel with the disavowal and the acknowledgment of castration – are mixed in unequal proportions in different cases, so that the one or the other is more clearly recognizable” (157). That this movement between tenderness and brutality might find its cause or its parallel in the relationship to castration seems confirmed by more than one scene of Moutier’s *Lettres*.

The strongest evidence *Les Lettres*’ relationship to fetishism and castration can be found in the missive dated the 22<sup>nd</sup> of January, where the letter-writer stages an inversion

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<sup>126</sup> A reminder that when Kaufmann writes, “Passer de l’homme à l’œuvre, c’est devenir inhumain” (9), the inhumanity is not only at work within the author, but imposed upon his addressee.

of the primal fetish scene.<sup>127</sup> In this inverted re-creation, Moutier makes himself the woman or the mother, while replacing what is in Freud's description "a little boy" with "une fille." Moutier writes, "Je vais ressortir mes robes et mes faux cils," and a sense of re-enactment is immediately evoked with the verb "ressortir," even as the events are described in the future tense. He continues, "Je vais me déguiser en gonzesse, me préparer pendant des heures. Il y aura du rouge à lèvres, des faux seins, des escarpins et une fausse intelligence. Exactement comme une femme" (155). At this stage of his transformation, Moutier will have 'put on' femininity and become "exactly like a woman."

In the passage that follows, he will 'take off' his masculinity, plucking and shaving his body: "Je vais m'épiler les sourcils, me raser sous les bras" (155). The action of shaving, I contend, is particularly important to Moutier's preparations, for through the razor it requires, Moutier wields the tool and the threat of castration. Yet he brings the razor only to his underarms; he does not shave his pubic area and does not cut (around) his member. Soon he will flaunt his un-castrated state, but first, to better recreate the primal scene, his genitals must be hidden, indeed all of Moutier will be hidden ("je vais descendre me cacher dans la ruelle" [155]).

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<sup>127</sup> Another instance of epistolary fetishism appears in a letter dated December 19, where Moutier writes, "Je nous vois en train de tronçonner des jeunes filles sans même les avoir préalablement assommées. Je nous vois occupés, concentrés à bien découper chacun des membres en petits morceaux, une cigarette toujours au coin du bec. Pour la vengeance" (73). The wrong that needs avenging has no clearly stated source within the letters; what is clear is that Moutier exacts his revenge indiscriminately against women and implicates Brochu in this violence. The fact that the avenging act involves sawing or slicing a living body quite unmistakably evokes castration.

From his place of hiding in the dark alley,<sup>128</sup> Moutier will watch (“guetter” “surveiller”) and wait (“attendre”). He awaits a girl to re-enact the primal scene (“Je le fais si souvent. Je vais attendre la fille” [156]); he waits so that he can show a child what he would have wished to discover as a child: not a ‘lack,’ not a castrate, but a phallus. The letter recounts, “Quand elle sera à la bonne distance, je vais surgir de l’ombre de la ruelle, les petites culottes de soie baissées, et je vais aller me branler dans son champ de vision, devant ses yeux tout excités, son regard tout horrifié” (156). As Moutier embodies his fantasy of a woman with a phallus, he portrays the girl with the same reaction as the little boy in Freud’s “Fetishism,” that is, one of horror.

In this imagined scene, Moutier takes the place of a woman and subjects a girl to the perceived position of a little boy. It is interesting to consider this perverse reversal of gender roles in relation to a statement Moutier makes in his interview with Francine Bordeleau:

J'estime que nous devons aujourd'hui nous situer dans un monde où les rôles sont à redéfinir. Les femmes font leur place en diminuant les hommes. Il se trouve que je prends la part de l'homme québécois à qui on ne cesse de dire qu'il est un minable, un insignifiant, et qui a acquis une piètre image de lui-même. Moi, je me tiens debout, j'oserais même dire que je suis macho. J'aime être un homme, j'ai le goût d'être un homme, alors que les hommes n'osent plus être des hommes. (9)

Moutier’s call to “redéfinir” the roles of women and men does not represent an opening up toward new possibilities, but a “redefining” that insists upon recovering an earlier

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<sup>128</sup> The potential metaphor for female genitalia that “ruelle” evokes should not be overlooked.

configuration of their roles (presumably one where women were expected to be subordinate and subjugated). Moutier expresses a thinly-veiled desire to ‘put women in their place,’ and not in a place that women would make for themselves (“elles font leur place...”), but one that he would make for them, and indeed that he did make in his letter from January 22.

If we are tempted to interpret Moutier’s repeated declaration in the *Avant-Propos* of *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu* that “j’étais fou,” (9, 10) as a means for the author to distance himself from the letter-writer and the violence or misogyny of his correspondence, in his conversation with Bordeleau, Moutier fully assumes the content of the letters and the highly unbecoming masculinity portrayed therein, taking pride in his self-elected role of *porte-parole* for young Québécois men who dare to be men.

The malignant machismo that finds expression in *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu* resembles the aggressive masculinity that Gab Roy gives voice to in his letter to Marilou Wolfe. After insulting and accusing Wolfe’s husband of being “un ostie de fag,” Roy insists that he is “un vrai homme,” a “vrai mâle,” and a “vrai mâle alpha.” With their correspondingly inflated senses of masculinity, Moutier and Roy’s letters share a similar subject and tone, and a number of passages from their missives closely echo one another. For example, the rape scene where Roy wants Wolfe on all fours finds a domestic parallel in Moutier’s writing, where he recounts, “Tout ce que je veux, moi [...] C’est ton corps à quatre pattes, en train de frotter le carrelage au savon de Paris, un fichu sur la tête, un pistolet sur la tempe.” (50). Though the body of Roy’s letter does not

talk about having a gun to his victim's head, the filename he gave his missive does hold a shotgun to Mariloup Wolfe.

Given the distorted masculinity and epistolary fetishism that Gab Roy shares with Maxime-Olivier Moutier, we might call Gab Roy a yeti, too, if he weren't already a troll. "Troll" has become a common term to describe individuals online that seemingly sabotage correspondence with their irrelevant or inflammatory comments, leading to the internet adage "Don't Feed the Trolls" and the occasional threat to beat the troll "back under his bridge." I see in the internet troll a contemporary counterpart to Kaufmann's yeti and another prolific and pervasive manifestation of the *monstrum horrendum*.

Trolls are a menace known to internet users internationally, and, as an online phenomenon, trolls are a ubiquitous and fast-moving matter. My exploration necessarily limits its scope to a small window into the world of trolls as I consider discourse on Gab Roy and on trolls more broadly (from the fall of 2012 to the early part of 2014) that is available in mainstream media outlets of Québec: newspapers, online journals, radio interviews and blogs. I do not seek out Québec's trolls in vitriolic chat rooms, twitter feeds or never-ending comments sections, though these venues represent common locations for encounters with trolls, and highlight how trolls interface with contemporary correspondence and epistolarity: it is in spaces intended for dialogue that trolls emerge. Admittedly, through trolling, dialogical exchange frequently breaks down and is overcome by monologic rants, physical and sexual threats or other inflammatory or

silencing posts. While I consider troll antics online to be a form of correspondence, I recognize that it is one that lies at the outer limits of the epistolary.<sup>129</sup>

In late 2012, a year before Roy published his online letter, discussions of “trolls” became increasingly common in mainstream media in Québec, though the term still required glossing for the general public. On October 9, 2012, journalist Judith Lussier published an article in *Urbania* titled “Comment gérer un troll.” In it, she defines trolls as “ces personnes qui larguent de petites bombes sur votre mur Facebook, qui écrivent des choses choquantes simplement dans le but de provoquer, qui vous acculent au pied du mur en vous talonnant de questions ou qui cherchent tout simplement à attirer votre attention en vous traitant de ‘pas bon’.” *Radio-Canada* host Catherine Perrin invited Lussier for an interview the following week to further expose the phenomenon of “trolls sur le web.” Appearing alongside Lussier are Simon Jodoin, *Voir*’s Editor in chief and Director of New Media Development, and Gab Roy, introduced as “humoriste, blogueur et troll.”

One of the first questions of the interview regards a “définition de base de ce que ce serait un troll sur le web.” Jodoin proposes an etymology for the term in an Old French verb related to hunting. To troll, he asserts was to “quêter au hasard pour faire détourner des bêtes avec les chiens dans le but de débusquer du gibier.” In the case of trolls on the web, “Quand quelqu’un lui répond, il devient proie.” Beyond this history of

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<sup>129</sup> I deem that all expressions of epistolary fetishism circulate at the outer limits of correspondence.

troll(er)s on the hunt, Jodoin also makes references to trolls as “personnages mythiques [...] comme dans le Seigneur des Anneaux.”<sup>130</sup>

In the interview, Gab Roy is consulted as an inside expert on trolling. Roy admits “Oui, je m’assume comme étant un troll,” but listeners are assured by Lussier that he is not *the worst* sort of troll. However, neither is Roy fully the sort of troll Jodoin would seemingly want him to be, that is, one who provokes with the aim of stimulating reflection. Instead, Roy admits no motivation for trolling beyond pleasure, quipping, “Le vrai troll c’est quand quelqu’un trolle pour le plaisir.” Still, Roy’s status as a troll is somewhat ambivalent throughout the conversation, and he closes the interview claiming to be a troll “à ses heures.”

In late 2012, Gab Roy was counted among a handful of “stars du Web québécois” (Poulin-Chartrand). He was known for his provocative humor, and his “détracteurs” knew him as being guilty “de sexisme, de racisme, d’intimidation” (*ibid*). However, more than for being a troll in his own right, Roy was notorious for his “armée de trolls” – an enthusiastic fan base ready to attack, defend, sabotage or otherwise do Roy’s bidding

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<sup>130</sup> John Lindow, a scholar of Scandinavian Studies, develops the characteristics of the mythical creatures of trolls through a survey of Scandinavian literature and folklore spanning a millennium. In his book, *Trolls, An Unnatural History*, the most notable and recurring qualities of trolls include the fact that “they are shifting and changing, hard to pin down in the end, except perhaps by what they are not: human, normal, helpful” (12). Interestingly, the first troll recorded in Old Norse poetry is female, yet Lindow also notes the victims of trolls are twice as likely to be women than men in the Scandinavian accounts he examines (“although men and boys are kidnapped by trolls, most often the victims are women [...] kidnapped women outnumber boys and men by more than two to one” [64]), and in the epilogue of his text, where he considers recent usage of the term ‘troll’ in the online context, he acknowledges that the postings and tweets of internet trolls are very often misogynous (142).

online and off.<sup>131</sup> It isn't until after the publication of his letter to Mariloup Wolfe, after he unmistakably enacts epistolary fetishism, that Gab Roy's reputation as "troll" is firmly solidified. The day after he posted his letter replete with epistolary fetishism, *Métro* ran an article where Roy is never named,<sup>132</sup> but only referenced as "un malheureux troll" "ce troll" or "notre troll" more than five times throughout the piece.<sup>133</sup>

Though Roy's letter to Wolfe occurs via relatively fresh technologies of epistolarity afforded through the internet, the nature of his misogynistic, fetishistic correspondence is nothing new. In "Rousseau and the Invention of the Male Love-Letter," Jean-Louis Cornille performs an analysis of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 18<sup>th</sup> century epistolary novel, *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. Cornille asserts that the novel marks "the invention of a completely new technique, the development of an

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<sup>131</sup> Joseph Elfassi reflects on the rise and fall of Gab Roy in an article published in *Voir* under the title "La fin d'une époque : la mort du Roy" : "Avec son armée de trolls et sa verve vitriolique, Gab pouvait faire descendre des carrières montantes, humilier des adversaires qui n'étaient pas prêts à se battre avec la même folie que lui: pendant des années, j'ai vu des vlogueurs, des blogueurs et des chroniqueurs s'en prendre à lui directement et le regretter amèrement très peu de temps après. Jusqu'à la lettre de Mariloup Wolfe: après ça, c'était une armée contre lui."

<sup>132</sup> The author refuses to name Gab Roy in the article, arguing that it would bring him too much pleasure or glory. This highlights an interesting aspect of trolling in Québec: though trolls can be and often are associated with anonymity, there are multiple trolls (Gab Roy is a noteworthy example) who fully assume their persona as such and carry out their antics in their own name.

<sup>133</sup> While Québécois media are awash in the scandal of Roy's letter and the debate it has incited, other instances of Québécois celebrities being trolled are similarly hot topics online. For example, Michelle Blanc, a trans woman who built her marketing, writing and speaking career around her work online, announced in December of 2013 the legal and personal action she was taking against the internet harassment and death threats she was facing in a blog post entitled, "Trolls, ça va maintenant être moins facile de se cacher derrière un écran." In an update to her post more than a year later, Blanc published a confrontation she had with one of her trolls, Francis Robert, where he defended his behavior, writing, "j'estime que troller est un droit démocratique et ça fait 13 ans que je me tiens sur le web [...] et câlisse qu'on était bien entre hommes blancs avant 2005-06, l'année où la paix cybernétique s'en ai allé pour faire place" (sic), at which point Blanc interjected with an incisive reply. Robert's comments make plain not only the misogyny we have already seen as a trait of epistolary fetishism, but a racist ideology that also motivates his trolling.

unprecedented configuration” (291). He contends that the novel’s novelty is so powerful as to alter the epistolary, writing, “What is there so new in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* that the letter would be influenced by it? It is the expression of a totally original position, namely, the letter-writer as the male figure in the love relationship as depicted in the novel” (*ibid*). If *La Nouvelle Héloïse* does indeed constitute the first instance of this “position,” it is certainly not the only or the last. The description Cornille gives of Saint-Preux’s letters in Rousseau’s novel echoes much of what we have seen in more recent expressions of a masculine epistolary imaginary of the fetish, and, in point of fact, Cornille’s article details multiple scenes of the letter and/or its attachments becoming fetish(es) for the masculine beholder and correspondent.

What Cornille articulates more clearly than we have so far done, however, is how such letters steadily silence their addressee, and how they do violence to her so as to declare the epistolary a masculine territory, when it is in fact a feminine domain.

Cornille writes,

If the body is a representation, it is in the letter that it is enjoyed, and it is by this distancing that the definitive mutation of the woman letter-writer into a recipient or addressee is completed. Before it was possible to speak in her place, was it not first necessary to make her be silent? It is therefore only by keeping Julie away, by reducing her to just an image, that Saint-Preux will finally make his own the art of letter-writing attributed for so long to the other sex. In doing this, Rousseau uses the woman violently: he attacks her inner fortress, her final, innermost stronghold, the last retrenchment where her writing had taken refuge; he fights

bitterly with her over the monopoly of it and contests the ground that is properly hers. (298)

Through this discourse of the “letter” as “body,” of the “mutation of the woman,” and of “us[ing] the woman violently,” Cornille effectively situates epistolary fetishism (without using this term) on the “ground that is properly hers,” what we might rephrase as “the *genre* that is properly woman’s.” For this is indeed what Cornille suggests, that Saint-Preux/Rousseau (there is a conflation of the two) steals or even “rape[s]” (297) a feminine form and makes it into a “male love-letter.”

As we have witnessed in Gab Roy’s “Shotgun sur Mariloup Wolfe,” Maxime-Olivier Moutier’s *Les lettres à mademoiselle Brochu*, and multiple works of epistolary theory, a masculine entry into the epistolary is often a forced one that violently distorts or suppresses women to make way for a monstrous fetishism. When the masculine beholder perceives the feminine body, he distorts it, and this is what the *monstra horrenda* of yetis and trolls portray: bodies that are disavowed, bodies that are deformed, bodies that are made monstrous through the violence of renunciation. Yetis and trolls - monstrous beings of ambiguous realms from borders and bridges, to the internet and the epistolary - are figures behind or between correspondence-as-fetish that (pre)occupy the epistolary imaginary and make manifest the horror to which their feminine correspondents are subject.

If Rousseau’s letters in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* offer a prototype of the masculine epistolary of the fetish, I find Cornille’s label of the “male love-letter” either too inviting or too cynical for what it is describing. Yetis and trolls are neither the authors nor the

couriers of love-letters. I propose instead that we return to the lacanian equation of the letter and the fetish to consider the usefulness of “purloined letters” as a designation for contemporary epistolary fetishism that displaces the feminine of correspondence’s “écriture féminine” to replace it with a monster.

### **Conclusion**

Jacques Lacan reads “The Purloined Letter” largely in translation, performing his analysis through Baudelaire’s French translation of Poe’s English text. However, Lacan declares that Baudelaire has failed (“trahi” [17]) Poe in rendering “The Purloined Letter” “La lettre volée.” Lacan resists an apprehension of “purloined” as “pilfered,” admittedly relying on the etymology of *purloin* more than on the actual usage of the word. He reports his etymological findings on the prefix (pur) and root (loin) of the verb as follows:

Nous reconnâtrons dans le premier élément le latin *pro* en tant qu’il se distingue d’*ante* par ce qu’il suppose d’un arrière en avant de quoi il se porte, éventuellement pour le garantir, voire pour s’en porter garant [...]. Pour le second, vieux mot français: *loigner*, verbe de l’attribut de lieu ‘au loing’, ou encore ‘longé’, il ne veut pas dire ‘au loin’, mais ‘au long de’, il s’agit donc de ‘mettre de côté’, ou - pour recourir à une locution familière qui joue sur les deux sens - de ‘mettre à gauche’. (17)

From this etymology, Lacan offers the word “prolongé,” prolonged, as a literal translation of “purloined,” suggesting that it is the letter’s detour<sup>134</sup> to its destination that is prolonged.<sup>135</sup> Lacan ultimately proposes “*lettre en souffrance*” (17) as a rendition for the title that would remain within a properly postal lexicon.

What Lacan neglects to add to his (psycho)analysis of “purloined”’s etymological components and alternative insinuations is the familiar and altogether *a propos* understanding of “loin” (or loins) - also of Old French - as it relates to the body. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, Biblical and poetic traditions refer to the loins as “the part of the body that should be covered by clothing and about which the clothes are bound” as well as “the seat of physical strength and of generative power.” Though the term literally denotes the parts “between the false ribs and the hip-bone” (OED), it is easily conflated with the sexual organs given its associations with both concealment and fecundity. One need only think of a “loin cloth” to understand how the word most readily lends itself to a misconception that would transform the loins into a mis-placed phallus.

Indeed, through fetishism, letters become pur-loined, pro<sup>136</sup>-loined and pre-loined; though the phallus is no part of the loins, the masculine imaginary prolongs its preconceived notion and imposes a phallus where there is none to avenge and to prevent a castration that did not and will not occur. “Purloined” is therefore a fitting term to

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<sup>134</sup> Per a reading of Freud’s *Au-delà du principe du plaisir*.

<sup>135</sup> Lacan affirms, “c’est bel et bien la lettre détournée qui nous occupe” (17).

<sup>136</sup> The latin prefix “pro,” as Lacan suggests, educes a before that anticipates what comes after and foregoes it. In the case of the fetish, “foregoes” can be understood both in the sense of ‘going before’ and ‘going away.’ To forego is indeed the gesture of fetishism, where the impulse to suspend an undesired and denied discovery leads the subject to return to and invest in what he sees immediately before the mother’s genitalia.

describe correspondence that disavows the feminine, imposes the phallus and distorts corporeality.

“Purloined” might also describe the *monstra horrenda* of yetis and trolls. With his evocation of the “monstrum horrendum,” Poe most likely alludes to a passage in Virgil’s *Aeneid* that recounts the encounter with the cyclops Polyphemus, describing him as: “Monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum”<sup>137</sup> (3.658). The monster is depicted as horrendous, misshapen, enormous and deprived of an eye. In J.N. Adams’ book *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, he quotes the passage from *Aeneid* in a section on the personification of the penis, explaining “The creature to whom Virgil [...] was referring was the one-eyed Polyphemus” (34) and later highlighting “the image of the penis as one-eyed” (34) that commonly figures in ancient Greek art. The phallic undertones Adams detects in Virgil’s description are strengthened by the word “ademptum” that qualifies the monster’s eye. “Ademptum” is related to the Latin verb “adimo” which means “to deprive” or “to steal,” but also “to castrate” according to the Oxford Latin Dictionary. A castrated (‘one-eyed’) penis might be distinguished beneath the monster’s plucked-out eye.

The threat of castration is further reinforced by the subsequent adjective “horrendum” and its resonance with what Freud calls “the horror of castration” (154). More than “a memorial” to this horror (*ibid*), the monster is an omen, for a *monstrum* in Latin is also a portent. Like the “pro” of Latin that serves as a prefix in purloined, the *monstrum* is “in advance of” a castration that did not and will not occur. So the

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<sup>137</sup> There is another, less frequently cited encounter with a *monstrum horrendum*, Rumor, in the *Aeneid*. This monster is also described as *ingens*.

*monstrum* is *pur-* and the *horrendum* is *-loined*, and this *monstrum horrendum*, like the purloined letter it accompanies, makes manifest the consequences of epistolary fetishism: the relegation of the letter to the ‘before,’ the corporeal distortion it enacts, the monstrous violence of the masculine imaginary.

When Inspector Dupin recounts the discovery of the purloined letter at the ministerial hotel, he remarks, “To be sure, [this letter] was, to all appearance, radically different from the one of which the Prefect had read us so minute a description.” I hear an echo of Dupin’s “radically different” in Benoît Melançon’s pronouncement “voilà qui distingue radicalement l’électronique de l’épistolaire.” In Poe’s story, the inverted and re-sealed epistle appears radically different from the one the police pursued; in Melançon’s essay, emails are cast as radically different from lettermail. Both instances betray a desire to maintain a previous conception of what the letter is (or rather what it was), as well as an ignorance of how men have transformed it, divided it or distorted it through a familiar phenomenon of fetishism.

Just as ostensibly dissimilar missives prove to be one and the same purloined letter in Poe’s tale, epistolary expression of the fetish, whether it appears online or in print, with a yeti or with a troll, is, in effect, a “purloined letter,” too. Purloined letters reveal the dark underbelly of a masculine epistolary imaginary defined by fetishism, where *monstra horrenda* make manifest the distortion and deformation they enact. Fortunately, not all letters are purloined letters, not all emails are fetishes, and not all epistolary books or blog posts give voice to this violent epistolary imaginary. But when we learn to recognize expressions of epistolary fetishism and the gendered violence and

distortion upon which they rely, we will undoubtedly encounter that expression in various forms of contemporary correspondence, and never will we say that some (purloined) letter is nowhere to be found, for we will find it in Québec.

## Reflecting on the Epistolary

*A man's letters...are only the mirror of his breast...*

-Samuel Johnson to Mrs. Thrale, Litchfield, October 27, 1777

Linda S. Bergmann writes in her article “The Contemporary Letter as Literature,” “letters can constitute a highly self-reflexive genre, a form that uses an intense awareness of audience and of self to reflect and engender the growth of the writer” (130). The “highly self-reflexive” quality of letters is no doubt why mirrors have served as a prominent and poignant symbol in letter fiction across continents and centuries, and why mirrors remain an enduring emblem of contemporary epistolary expression of Québec. Examples of mirroring in modern missives can be found in Marie Savard’s *Bien à moi* and Lori Saint-Martin’s *Lettre imaginaire à la femme de mon amant*, both of Québec.

Playwright Marie Savard originally composed *Bien à moi* as a melodrama for the radio, and it first aired in 1969. The piece was subsequently staged as a play in February of 1970 by director André Brassard, but it remained unpublished until 1979. The protagonist of *Bien à moi* is a married woman who calls herself “la Marquise.” Battling madness and unheeded by both her husband and her doctor, la Marquise determines she must care for herself and begins to fill her days by addressing herself a suite of letters. *Bien à moi*, as its title suggests, is filled with reversals of familiar epistolary phrases that replace the second person pronoun with the first. Such substitutions are at once hilarious and tragic: “Je m’embrasse tendrement” (29), “Ma chère moi” (31), “Je me renvoie donc

mes lettres, mes photos et, si ce n'était déjà fait, me renverrais chez ma mère" (52). The self-reflexivity of the character's address is most strikingly pronounced in her missive dated "aujourd'hui, le 18 janvier" (39), where la Marquise stands naked before a mirror on stage and masturbates to her own reflection. The shocking scene acts as a microcosm for the piece as a whole, where la Marquise becomes her own "other,"<sup>138</sup> her own lover and her own addressee, exploring herself, contemplating herself and pleasuring herself through her body and her correspondence. The mirror magnifies the self-reflexive gesture that dominates the letters and the letter-writer of *Bien à moi*.

Another (and admittedly less infamous) instance of an epistolary mirror scene can be found in Lori Saint-Martin's collection of "nouvelles," entitled *Lettres imaginaire à la femme de mon amant*. The eponymous text of the collection concludes with the letter-writer/narrator contemplating herself in a mirror and affirming, "je me suis regardée dans la glace: la trentaine souriante et calme, pas du tout marquée. Indemne. Je suis indemne." The reflection assures the letter-writer that she is unmarked and unscathed. The narration continues, "Tout rentre dans l'ordre, je n'enverrai pas cette lettre. Je [...] reprends mon livre" (16). The book the letter-writer takes back up is Choderlos de

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<sup>138</sup> There are two pages of text before the start of the first letter, with no stage directions to indicate how the lines are to be delivered or by whom. Presumably, it is La Marquise herself who gives the introduction: une joyeuse dame en ville / joviale ou pleine de bibites selon l'avis / de plusieurs / n'ayant trouvé aucun remède auprès / de son médecin / ou de l'autre / en vint à la conclusion de s'occuper d'elle / elle-même / sans autre / elle trouvait normal de parler au mur / s'affolait quand le mur lui répondait / son médecin / ou l'autre / n'a jamais compris son cas / il parle encore / elle / s'écrie » (21). Though the word « autre » is repeated in this passage, it is never entirely clear to whom it refers. It could be a sort of punctuation or clarification for the "médecin" that precedes it; her doctor is the other. It could be a universal, unknown "other," on the scale of society itself, who, like her doctor, can find no remedy for her, cannot understand her case. It may be a stand-in for a particular person, her husband, for example. Regardless, La Marquise concludes that she must take care of herself without an other, or, as her own other.

Laclos' *Les liaisons dangereuses*, a French epistolary classic to which *Lettre imaginaire* alludes on more than one occasion. Like the powerful and conniving anti-heroine in Laclos' 18<sup>th</sup>-century novel, the narrator and protagonist of *Lettre imaginaire* has the potential to disrupt and destroy the domestic sphere she addresses. However, the two works in which these women writers appear come to decidedly different conclusions. The final letter of *Les liaisons dangereuses*, penned by Madame de Volange to Madame de Rosemonde, recounts the grisly fate of the Marquise de Merteuil: "J'avais bien raison de dire que ce serait peut-être un bonheur pour elle de mourir de sa petite vérole. Elle en est revenue, il est vrai, mais affreusement défigurée; et elle y a particulièrement perdu un œil. Vous jugez bien que je ne l'ai pas revue : mais on m'a dit qu'elle était vraiment hideuse" (441). If the adulteress of *Les liaisons dangereuses* becomes hideously disfigured, the narrator of *Lettre imaginaire* assures herself and her readers that she is "indemne." The mirror's reflective capacity in Saint-Martin's text is multifold: it allows the letter-writer to reflect upon herself and upon her (unscathed) body, as well as upon her letter in relationship to other letters - a reflection that occurs across time and across epistolary works.

Indeed, when the mirror is evoked in epistolary texts, that text enters into, and offers a reflection of and on, other texts within the epistolary tradition that include scenes of reflection. A notable example of a classic mirror scene can be found in Françoise de Graffigny's 18<sup>th</sup>-century *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. The "Peruvian" of the title is Zilia, an Inca princess captured by the Spanish during their conquest of Peru and then 'rescued' by French sailors, brought to France, and educated under the tutelage of a man named

Déterville.<sup>139</sup> *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* recounts two encounters with a mirror, which collectively offer what is perhaps the most commented of all epistolary mirror scenes. In the first, Zilia is “mortified” (“mortifiée” [50]) and incredulous, but upon her second mirror moment, she admires the looking glass, calling it “cette ingénieuse machine qui double les objets: quoique je dusse être accoutumée à ses effets, je ne pus encore me garantir de la surprise en me voyant comme si j’étais vis-à-vis de moi-même” (55). Madeleine Dobie offers a persuasive analysis of the function of the mirror in Graffigny’s novel:

there is a sense in which the mirror simply ‘brings into focus’ the status of the self as it has always been articulated in the *Lettres*. Like the letter form, and indeed, like language more generally, the mirror as a point of identity is a site of ambivalence. The representation of the self is spatially split, its presence made absent, and therefore temporally deferred, so that the sense of self appears to depend on a process of alienation in an ‘other’ which is foreign to it. (105-106)

In this passage, Dobie describes the function of the mirror by highlighting a “split” in the self that creates “an ‘other’ which is foreign to it.” (She also draws attention to an accompanying temporal split to which we will return shortly.) As Zilia finds an “Other” in the mirror, Zilia herself is always already an “Other” to the French readership of *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. If Graffigny’s novel offers the most enduring instance of a

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<sup>139</sup> This plot point gestures to the ways in which the histories and cultures of foreign societies are subject to deformation. In a blatant instance of anachronism, Zilia’s displacement from Peru to France represents a leap from the 16th century to the 18th.

mirror scene, it is but one of a suite of epistolary novels that stages a foreign “Other” in relation to the self.

In 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century France, Françoise de Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* and its predecessors Gabriel-Joseph Guilleragues’ *Lettres portugaises* and Charles-Louis de Montesquieu’s *Lettres persanes* enjoyed enormous popularity. Within these epistolary novels, Peru, Portugal, Persia and its peoples are imagined and depicted in service of French culture and society. Particularly in the cases of *Lettres persanes* and *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, the letters are marked by the colonial era in which they were composed and betray a fascination for the Other being encountered through France’s imperial exploits in the broader world. A post-colonial critical approach to the novels sheds light upon the eroticization, fetichization and stereotypification of Persia, Peru and its peoples, revealing how Montesquieu and his contemporaries explore and exploit the Other in complicated, and not unproblematic, ways. However, as the mirror scene suggests, critics are generally in agreement that, far more than they illuminate anything about the “Other,” these epistolary works serve to shed light on, and hold a mirror to, the self.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> Many authors and characters within Québec’s epistolary production invoke French titles and predecessors, and in the epistolary expression of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century Québec, the titular and epistolary trend of *Lettres* (*insert foreign modifier here*) has resurfaced with Lise Gauvin’s *Lettres d’une autre*, Ying Chen’s *Lettres chinoises*, as well as Olivier Kemeid and Geoffrey Gaquère’s *Lettres arabes*. The 1984 novel *Lettres d’une autre* transposes Montesquieu’s project from 18<sup>th</sup> century France to 20<sup>th</sup>-century Québec, resurrecting a strong female voice of *Lettres persanes* - Usbek’s favored wife Roxane - and making her a Persian exchange student who has come to Québec to study literature. The lingering question posed by Montesquieu’s work is “Comment peut-on être Persan?” (74), a question a Frenchman asks Rica at the conclusion of letter 17. Gauvin redirects the question in her work. As Roxane attempts to imagine a sovereign Québec with an identity distinct from that of Anglophone Canada, the United States and France in

If epistolary theorists accept that correspondence is a privileged form of “écriture de soi” (as Foucault suggests and Diaz and other feminist scholars affirm) and a “discours de l’intime” (as Sophie Marcotte advances) where the letter writer reveals, reflects upon and expresses the self, I contend that this is true not only the writer, but of the form. The “highly self-reflexive” nature of the epistolary positions correspondence to reflect upon and to correspond with itself and other bodies of epistolary expression. As we have seen in the introduction and across chapters of “Bodies of Correspondence in Contemporary Québec,” epistolary scholarship has often placed letters in contrast to literature, making “literature” an “Other” to the epistolary as enduring as the figure of the foreigner.

As with the “Other” encountered in the mirror, this othering confrontation of letters and literature involves a temporal split, where what was present is present no more. When the epistolary is placed in opposition to literature, it is often relegated to the before and made to be a pre-literature or a proto-literature. However, when we allow letters to enter into multidirectional correspondence that includes self-referential exchange, the epistolary offers rich reflections on epistolary expression of the past and present. Opening up correspondence across different bodies of epistolary expression in order to reflect upon the place and the imaginary of the correspondence of Québec is precisely what each of the chapters included in the present study has attempted to do,

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*Lettres d'une autre*, the query is not how to be Persian (a term that rings almost as an anachronism in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century), but the much more urgent and self-interested question of how to be Québécois(e): “Comment peut-on être Québécois(e)?” In Ying Chen’s *Les Lettres chinoises*, the question becomes at once more universal and more personal: “comment être moi-même sans toi?” (133) an immigrant named Yuan has moved to Montreal asks his lover Sassa who remains in Shanghai. Chen’s novel traces these characters’ shifting alliances, affections, and identities through a web of letters akin to Montesquieu’s. Within the novel, the question is not how to be someone else or how to assume a collective or a national identity, but “comment être moi-même,” how to be myself.

through an apparatus of feminist, psychoanalytic and deconstructionist theories and a rich array of Québécois epistolary texts.

In the chapter “Post(e) Mélina: Reading *After* Gabrielle Roy’s Letter(s),” we quoted narration from Roy’s novel *Alexandre Chenevert*, where the character Godias says of the letter from his colleague, Alexandre, that “la lettre l’avait fait réfléchir, oui, certainement” (350). Indeed, all of Roy’s letters - the ‘real’ and the fictive, the private and the published - “fait réfléchir” on the place and power of the epistolary for the author as they converse across autobiography, fiction and personal correspondence. In this chapter, we argued that the momentous missive Roy wrote to her mother Mélina at the start of her career, as described in *Le temps qui m’a manqué*, demands a rereading of the author’s diverse expressions of correspondence as commonly marked by memory and/of the body of the mother.

In the chapter, “When the ‘After’ is ‘Already’: Philosophical Fiction of the *Postal*,” the epistolary becomes a medium not only to *réfléchir*, but to *renvoyer*, that is, to send letters off to oneself and to unknown destinations and destinies. As Bilodo discovers the extent of his transformation into Grandpré when he looks into the mirror in Denis Thériault’s novel *Le facteur émotif*, reflections and reverberations across works of philosophical epistolary fiction like Madeleine Gagnon’s *La lettre infinie* and Jacques Derrida’s *La carte postale* demonstrate the substitutability of sender with receiver, of before with after, and of life with death and assure us that the epistolary will continue, and will continue to return, resend, remember and reflect, even in the face of death.

Substitution and reflection (or lack thereof) also preoccupy the final chapter of the present project, “Yetis and Trolls: the *Monstrum horrendum* of Epistolary Fetishism.” Substitutions are at the heart of fetishism, where letters are made into bodies upon which the phallus is imposed. In the last chapter of “Bodies of Correspondence,” a close reading of Gabriel Roy’s internet epistle complicated the narrative of the internet as a “disembodied” space and served as a point of entry into our discussion of the epistolary’s fetishistic relationship with the body that can characterize traditional and digital correspondence alike. An examination of the epistolary antics of Québec’s best known “troll” of recent history opened up a parallel between the internet troll and literature’s “yeti,” a term used by epistolary theorist Vincent Kaufmann to describe author-correspondents’ violent entry into literature.

To conclude our investigation into “Bodies of Correspondence in Contemporary Québec,” we might consider one more expression of Québec’s contemporary epistolary, one that defies designations that would relegate it to a corpus that is either real or fictional, private or public, personal or mass-produced, women’s writing or not, traditional or electronic, and one where unexpected manifestations of reflection emerge. The work in question is *Des Nouvelles de Martha* by Québécois novelist and playwright Marie Laberge. Described as a “feuilleton épistolaire” that ran from January 2009 to December 2011, *Martha* is a collection of letters distributed at two-week intervals (for a total of 26 letters per year and 78 at the project’s culmination). The letters are real in that

they were mailed through the Canadian postal system to individual addresses, fictional in their content and the character “Martha” who composed them. They are private in the sense that they were addressed to individuals and remain unpublished (subscriptions for libraries or groups of individuals were refused, as were any requests to receive the letters after December 2011<sup>141</sup>), and public insofar as anyone was invited to purchase the letters for themselves or for a friend. Similarly, the letters are personal to the extent that they were personalized for each recipient, with Cher/Chère followed by the subscriber’s first name, the full name and home address printed on each envelope, and mass-produced in the reality that over 10,000 readers received the same *Nouvelles de Martha*. The letters complicate somewhat the categorization of women’s writing through the textual distinctions based on whether the subscriber identified as male or female. Indeed, two different templates exist for Martha’s letters; in the *Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec*, one set of *Des Nouvelles de Martha* is labeled “pour hommes,” another “pour femmes.” Finally, the letters can be considered “traditional” through their circulation via the post and on paper, but they are at the same time indebted to the computer technologies used to manage the database of subscribers, to take and distribute orders, and to produce the letters that are unmistakably typed and printed, not handwritten.

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<sup>141</sup> Though interested readers who learned of the project after its debut were able to subscribe and retroactively receive the letters sent out to date. In mid-September of 2009, for example, a brightly colored slip of paper was enclosed with Martha’s letter dated 09/12/09 advertising the next year’s letters, reading: “*Martha* continue! Dès janvier 2010, le personnage créé par Marie Laberge revient avec 26 nouvelles lettres. Pour ne pas rater une seule lettre, **abonnez-vous maintenant!** Vous désirez faire connaître Martha à quelqu’un qui ne s’est pas abonné à temps l’an dernier? Vous pouvez, dès maintenant, acheter et faire envoyer **l’an 1**. Les lettres personnalisées seront expédiées en deux envois groupes avant la fin de l’année 2009, la personne sera donc prête à recevoir l’an 2 de Martha en abonnement » (original emphasis).

*Des Nouvelles de Martha* opens with a letter in which Martha articulates her decision to renew contact (and correspondence) with an old friend (each subscriber) following her newfound state of living alone. She describes her shock at the unforeseen departure of her youngest daughter Julie (at 28 years of age) from the family apartment for the Plateau. Martha paints a picture of the family dinner where Julie announced her intentions to move and Martha's own reaction to this news in both sets of letters. To her female readers, Martha writes, "C'était tellement bizarre... J'avais l'impression d'être double: une partie de moi qui sanglotait et se répandait sans aucune retenue, et l'autre, froide, stoïque, presque brutale qui regardait, observait, enregistrerait les réactions de chacun, comme si j'étais devenue une actrice qui comptait les spectateurs tout en les faisant pleurer" (01/1-2). In the first letter "pour hommes," also dated January 4, 2009, Martha describes her reaction in these terms:

Je suis partie à pleurer. Pas une petite larme élégante et discrète, non, les chutes du Niagara, les sanglots nets, la vraie scène! [...] Le plus bizarre, c'est que je voyais tout ce que ma réaction provoquait, j'étais comme une actrice capable de pleurer en jugeant d'un œil froid l'attitude du public. Laisse-moi te dire que ce n'est pas rassurant d'être en mesure de faire ça! J'avais l'impression d'être une hypocrite finie. La duplicité que ça s'appelle... quand c'est volontaire. Chez moi, c'était plutôt le choc. (1-2)

Though in slightly different terms, both letters evoke doubling or duplicity. Martha becomes multiple, and the split subject is at once sobbing and stoic, actor and spectator.

If the first letter shows the subject to be split, the second insists that there is one “true” Martha. In the letter dated January 18, 2009 (to male readers), Martha reflects upon how, despite having lived through years of feminism, she finds herself to be self-effacing in love (“La martyre de l’amour tend toujours l’autre joue” (2/2)) and nowhere is this more true than in her parenting. From her role as a martyr, however, she will transform into Martha: “Mais je viens de prendre conscience qu’au fond de moi, il y avait quelqu’un d’autre que cette immolée à l’amour, il y avait Martha! La vraie, celle qui existe toujours, la patiente – pour ne pas dire la naïve – qui espérait voir son tour arriver” (2/2). In the corresponding letter to women readers, Martha writes of “laissant la vraie Martha se montrer” (02/03). By insisting upon a “real” or “true” Martha in the singular, Martha suggests that the duplicity she exhibited at Julie’s departure is a farce, and she aims to let the one true Martha emerge.

However, elsewhere in the letters, the proclamations of singularity are made dubious through the continued duplicity of letters. For example, on December 5, 2011, Martha writes to her female readers that there is only one way to recount the events she will describe in the letter “Ma chère / Cette lettre ne peut s’écrire que d’une seule manière” (24/1). However, there is clearly more than one way to write the letter, as Martha herself writes the same letter, recounting the same events, differently in the missive addressed to her male readers, which opens, “Cher / Cette lettre sera écrite en suivant scrupuleusement l’ordre chronologique. Ne le prends pas comme un indice de perte de mémoire, mais comme une volonté de rendre justice aux événements” (24/1). Indeed, over the course of the three years of correspondence, Martha’s letters always

describe the same characters, events and emotions, but do so differently in the two iterations of the letters.

It is indeed the *chronology* of the letters that prevents a reader from interpreting the divergent sets of *Des Nouvelles de Martha* as two distinct correspondences that the same character maintains with different acquaintances. A number of different letters make it clear that the two versions of the letter (“pour hommes” and “pour femmes”) are being written at exactly the same time. For example, in Martha’s letters to male readers dated June 7, 2009, she writes of her fear of losing her newfound friend and love interest, Marcel, followed by the following visual break and subsequent text:

-----...-----

(Plusieurs, plusieurs heures plus tard, pour ne pas écrire: le lendemain.)

C’est le téléphone qui a interrompu l’écriture de cette lettre. Je vais quand même en laisser le début pour te permettre d’évaluer la distance parcourue pendant ces points et ces lignes qui n’occupent pourtant qu’un mince espace visuel sur la page. (12/1-2)

This same technique divides the writing of letters to Martha’s female readers; Marcel’s telephone call pauses and punctuates the composition of both of Martha’s letters. A singular, unified Martha does not compose the two versions of her letter one after the other; instead, a doubled, divided Martha simultaneously composes her divergent correspondence. It is therefore fitting that this same letter reiterates how Martha has a

sense of being split: “Je suis partagée, séparée en deux : d’un cote, il me manque et je trouve ridicule cette réaction, et de l’autre...il me terrorise avec cette façon de prendre la place que j’ai eu tant de mal à libérer dans ma vie” (12/1). The letter, its writer and time are all divided.

Another example that defies the possibility that a single Martha is composing similar letters to different correspondents is the last letter of 2010, which is temporally split over Christmas Eve and the 26<sup>th</sup> in letters to women and men by the very same interruption. When Martha returns to the letter two days later, she brings her missive to a close with good wishes for the New Year and with promises to continue her correspondence in 2011. To her male readers, she quips, “Je me souhaite de t’écrire encore en 2011 et de me savoir reçue chez toi en toute complicité. Bonne année!” (26/5). To women subscribers, she closes the letter with, “Je t’embrasse tendrement et j’espère, pour ma part, que nous aurons encore à partager ces moments privilégiés qui ont tant de valeur à mes yeux. Bonne année!” (26/5). The final letter of the year prior similarly announced Martha’s intention to continue writing in the coming year. On December 26, 2009, Martha intimates to her female readers, “J’ai bien peur que tu entendes encore parler de tout ce beau monde l’an prochain” (26/4); to men, she writes more plainly, “Bonne année et à très bientôt, en 2010, puisque je ne te laisserai pas tranquille et que je t’écrirai encore avec bonheur” (26/5). Of course, the final letter of 2011, and of *Des Nouvelles de Martha* as a whole, does not contain such an announcement of Martha’s intention to continue writing in the New Year, however, neither does the final letter state that the three-year correspondence is about to cease.

Subscribers had been informed that *Des Nouvelles de Martha* was a three-year project, and they did not receive the familiar invitation new the close of 2011 to renew their subscription for the following year or to purchase *Martha's* letters for a friend. Still, the letter dated December 30, 2011, does not contain any language that would signal that this extended correspondence has come to a close (it is called “Cette dernière lettre de l’année” [26/1], not the last letter *tout court*) and neither do any of the letters shortly preceding it. The reader who will understand that the correspondence will – or rather, has already – cease(d), is a reader who has access to both sets of *Martha*, the letters addressed to men and those addressed to women.

Over the course of the epistolary project, the sets of letters to male and female readers have always been similar, but different, as if the author composed one version of each missive, and then re-wrote it without consulting the first, though with the information that is to be imparted still fresh in her mind. The content is nearly identical and the tone is consistent, but the way of telling is distinct, the wording, the order and occasionally the details that are included or excluded vary. The final letter of 2011 represents is the sole specimen of the 78 letters that makes up *Des Nouvelles de Martha* in which the template of the letter to male readers and to female readers is identical.

I interpret this condensation of *Martha* at the close of the correspondence as a sign that all along, *Martha's* correspondence occurs elsewhere than we would anticipate. Though she addresses thousands of readers, the “true” correspondence does not occur between the character and her readers, but between the multiple *Marthas* introduced in

the opening letter of 2009. Accordingly, both the opening and the closing letters of the *Martha* project write of the reflection that the correspondence affords. In her first missive to men, Martha announces her intentions for the correspondence and forecloses the dialogical exchange typical of letters, writing, “Et je n’attends pas de reponse. Ta lecture est ma reponse. Je t’envoie le fruit de mes réflexions” (01/3). By calling her letters “the fruit of her reflections,” Martha already insinuates that she is contemplating and corresponding with herself as much as if not more so than with her addressee. The notion of reflection returns in the final letter of the series, where Martha writes, “Ta présence au bout de ces mots, tes yeux attentifs, ton cœur compréhensif, ta curiosité m’ont permis de réfléchir” (26/4). What the years of writing have allowed Martha to do is to reflect, and in the absence of (a) reflection, that is, when the letter no longer has other letters with which to correspond, that correspondence has already ceased. This is the case in the final letter of *Des Nouvelles de Martha*, even if it is only apparent *after*.

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