

THE TREND OF EPISTOLARY NOVELS

Colas DUFLO, Professor in French Literature, Paris Nanterre University

Stéphane PUJOL, HDR French Literature lecturer, Paris Nanterre University

Part 1 – The trend of epistolary novels and Rousseau's *New Heloise*

CD: After Memoir-Novel, the other great novelistic form that dominates the 18th century is the epistolary novel, or novel by letters. Stéphane Pujol good morning, you are a specialist in 18th-century French literature, a subject that you teach at Paris Nanterre University. Rousseau's *New Heloise* sparked such a craze that it must have aroused many vocations among writers.

SP: Good morning Colas Duflo. Indeed, we can say that there is a 'before' and an 'after' *The New Heloise* in epistolary novels history, and even more broadly in the history of the novel genre. But if Rousseau's novel was so successful, it is also because others had laid the foundations. French authors, of course, but also English authors like Richardson with *Pamela*, in 1742, a novel that will be a model for Rousseau, for Diderot and even for Sade.

It can be said that *The New Heloise* plays a part in the history of sensitivity in the 18th century, as it creates an unprecedented connection between the fictional text and its reader. Sade claimed his admiration for this novel, probably because it poses a problem that haunted a good deal of literature since Racinian tragedies in a new and acute way. It is the old conflict between duty and passion that the Enlightenment rewrites somewhat, in the form of a latent antagonism between happiness and virtue.

Part 2 – Major epistolary novels written before Rousseau

CD: There were epistolary novels before Rousseau: which ones should be mentioned?

SP: Indeed, there were quite a lot of them. *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, by Guilleragues in 1699, can be considered the first French epistolary novel. But it consists of only five letters written by the same person and the plot is minimal. Although the letter's recipient, the young nun's lover, does not respond, his voice is nevertheless heard through the words of his victim, seduced and abused. This pattern will be used again in the *Letters from the Marchioness de M***, to the Count de R**** written by Crébillon's son in 1732. We should also note in that the development of the epistolary novel is not unrelated to the development of genuine correspondences, as the Post became a regular service around that time.

Among the novels that became a real success, we can mention, alongside Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* in 1721, Mme de Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, published in 1747, which tells the story of the young Zilia, torn off from both her homeland and her betrothed, Aza, by French

conquerors, or Madame Riccoboni's *Letters from Mistress Fanny Butlerd*, published in 1757, which revolves around wrongful male behaviour. Let's note that women wrote many of these novels, because they saw in this novelistic form a way to slightly tear the binding social order.

Part 3 – Benefits of epistolary novels and polyphony's function

CD: Similarly, to Memoir-Novel, the epistolary novel allows an immediate expression of the characters' subjectivity. But the multiplicity of characters also allows a plurality of points of view, a narrative polyphony. Can we imagine that this is why many turned towards this novelistic form?

SP: First we must notice a very interesting phenomenon, one that concerns both epistolary novels and Memoir-Novels. They both are "I" novels. Unlike previous centuries, and especially in contrast to future times, third person novels are temporarily overtaken by a novelistic writing opting for subjectivity in the 18th century. We must distinguish between two sub-forms appearing in the 18th century: monological novels, which present only one voice, and polyphonic novels, which multiply senders and recipients. In the latter, which has produced true masterpieces, the multiple voices are arranged in a complex and meaningful order that gives space for narrative suspense effects and interweaving points of view.

The same story can thus be told in several ways, according to the perspective adopted by the writer. And each character is painted in a different light depending on the various correspondents. A letter can be sincere. It can also be deceiving. Although it is supposed to be a faithful depiction of the self, it can also be just a lie or a ploy, as shown through Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*.

Part 4 – The epistolary novel's different forms

CD: There are sentimental, philosophical and libertine novels in the 18th century. Are there any form that lend themselves particularly well to epistolary writing?

SP: Even if the epistolary novel is often associated with the sentimental register, it lends itself to all uses. If we consider the wide variety of production in the 18th century, we are struck by this multitude of applications. What subsists in almost all of them, however, is the frequent blend of a love story with social or philosophical considerations. It was already the case in Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, it still is the case in Rousseau's *New Heloise*.

Conclusion – Must read epistolary novels

CD: You mentioned Rousseau. Posterity mainly remembers Rousseau and Laclos. Are there any other epistolary novels that you could specifically recommend, that the gentleman of today should discover and keep in his collection?

SP: Absolutely. We must, of course, re-read the *Persian Letters*, which remains a model of the genre because it perfectly embodies the Enlightenment novel by blending serious topics with playful ones, with constant irony, in all statements and enunciators. Moreover, if we leave aside Guilleragues' monodic novel, Montesquieu appears to be the epistolary novel's inventor, or at least of its polyphonic version. 18th-century readers also liked Madame de Graffigny's *Letters from a Peruvian Woman*, which echoed Montesquieu's foreign point of view. But this one is from a feminine point of view, so both tone and themes will be somewhat transformed. Finally, we can only invite our gentlemen and our gentlewomen to read *The Perverted Peasant* by Restif de La Bretonne, published in 1784, a social fiction about a lady of pleasures, or Senac de Meilhan's *Emigrant* published in 1794, thrusting the readers into the Revolution's torments.

CD: Stéphane Pujol, thank you very much.