

Resistance on the Circuit: The Novel in the Age of the Post

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Novels have always had an intricate symbiotic relationship with the information technologies of their epoch. About what technological innovation could one boast: "This new technology for disseminating information had a profound effect on its epoch: it increased the speed, regularity, and geographic reach of communication; it facilitated the development of new public infrastructure and a uniform system of addresses; it enabled the development of new genres of writing, new forms of literacy, new forms of entertainment, shifts in the rhythms of the day, new associations for the purpose of knowledge or politics; all of this allows much wider public access to information of all kinds." What is it? I am not thinking of the Internet of our own day but the public postal system of the long eighteenth century. I repeat the above but now with the eighteenth century referents included: this new technology for disseminating information (the public post) had a profound effect on its epoch: it increased the speed, regularity, and geographic reach of communication; it facilitated the development of new public infrastructure (the post office, the turnpike, trans-Atlantic packet ships for the Royal mail) and a uniform system of addresses (street names and numbers); it enabled the development of new genres of writing (the periodic public newspaper, the critical journal, the encyclopedia), new forms of literacy (letter writing, fast reading), new forms of entertainment (the novel), shifts in the rhythms of the day (letter-writing before breakfast, solitary writing and reading, sharing responses to novels with correspondents), new associations for the purpose of knowledge or politics (scientific corresponding societies, revolutionary committees of correspondence). All of this allowed much wider public access to information of all kinds. Indeed, while the postal network took much longer than the Internet to emerge, once established it had as profound an effect upon the European and American writers and readers of the eighteenth century as the Internet has had upon its users in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

But what *is* the post? Here are five of its basic communication traits. First, the post is a public (rather than private) system that operates by applying a uniform set of protocols to its communications. Second, operating through what has been called the postal principle, "the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter" (Siegert 5), the post is open to all who can read, write, or have those actions performed on their behalf. Third, the post offers reliable, periodic delivery so that one can imagine sustaining two-way communication for an indefinite period. In this way, the post becomes a new matrix for long-distance human associations. Fourth, the post values dispatch or speed, by which it reduces social distance but also enlarges the social field of potential actors. Fifth and finally, the post promotes the assumption that postal communication is (or can be) private, a privacy secured by the fold, the seal, and later the envelope. In the history of media this makes the

personal, familiar letter a privileged site—along with the intimate conversation and the diary—for thinking through and expressing how one really feels.

What are the constituents that allow the post to do its work? First, it may be understood as a complex, heterogeneous network of humans, objects, and places linked together by a dense group of protocols (address schemes, schedules, procedures, etc.). To conceptualize this heterogeneity in operation, imagine the eighteenth-century post boy, riding at relatively high speed on a horse, traveling over a road or turnpike, carrying a pouch of letters, each of which observes certain conventions of address and genres of letter writing, thereby reflecting diverse practices of literacy. Second, one might consider the post as part of the history of writing because it extends one of the central features of writing by enabling communication at a distance. But while the post can support print's special power—to make things public by publishing them to “all”—it can also enable one-to-one and one-to-few communication predicated on the imperative to keep things private. As the beginning of this essay suggests, I assume that there is a strong affiliation between the post and those later communication technologies that cede their material and tactical connection with the sender. The telegraph, the telephone, the Internet each have their distinct technical potentials and trajectory of institutionalization, but each also builds upon the five general features of the post: as a public system, through which you can openly address anyone, at periodic intervals, with dispatch and privacy.

While it is the goal of the postal system to deliver the missive/message from sender to receiver, in fact, as we all know, there is often a difference between what is intended with communication and what actually happens. The functioning of the post in the actual world leads to every kind of communication failure: temporal delay, physical destruction of mail, address failures that land letters in the dead-letter office, mistaken delivery, and calculated interception and reading by other than the intended addressee (whether it is a prying friend or a prying state). Bernhard Siegert has shown that postal communication depends upon the *relay*—that place in the routing of the letter where there is a halt, where the postman does his or her work, where the outside can intrude in unexpected ways—before the mail is again sent on its way (Siegert 10–12).

How should we understand the relationship between these two institutions that emerged into cultural centrality over the course of the long eighteenth century—the post and the novel? Most obviously, the post sustained the circulation of novels: it enables the far-flung physical distribution of novels; the newspaper circulated by post allows for the advertising of novels, usually in the form of the list of books sold by booksellers; the post is integral to the emergence of reviewing agencies (the *Monthly Review* and the *Critical Review*, and the more ambitious journals of the early nineteenth century); and finally, the post, like conversation, facilitates something that is always crucial to modern popular media: the development of a “buzz” about a new novel. A second sort of connection between the novel and the post has been extensively explored by literary scholars. By this account, the eighteenth-century vogue for letter writing provided authors of “the novel in letters” (like Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*) with a powerful new way to weave novelistic narrative. Thus, in both novels and law, letters can have evidentiary force—as documents

signifying reality because they are penned by identifiable hands, or, as Richardson argued, they are "written to the moment." Literary critics have explored how novels written in letters can bring an intensification of subjectivity, which evidences a modernist epistemology. Finally, letter writing in both novels and everyday life has been associated with the private literary practice of women.

While building on these insights, I would like to turn away from the special case of the novel in letters in hopes of developing a more general approach to the novel and the post. Considered in its broadest light, the post is a technology for doing what novels represent: human association through communication. A large group of novels—variously called the novels of love and romance, of manners, or of social conduct—focuses with particular intensity upon the dynamics of human association: how characters come together, link, or divide, thereby succeeding or failing to form a society at novel's end. As a test case, I will briefly consider Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, considering how postal communication inflects the novel's representation of human association.

From early in *Sense and Sensibility*, characters are crypts of information—they carry secrets about themselves (or others) that limit their relations with others. Thus, as Edward and Elinor get to know and love one another, Edward carries the secret of his engagement to Lucy Steele; as Marianne and Willoughby get to know and love one another, Willoughby carries the secret of his seduction of Eliza Williams, who also happens to be the ward of Colonel Brandon, a relationship that Colonel Brandon keeps from his new friends at Barton cottage. The shaping influence of these secrets on the relations among the main characters in *Sense and Sensibility* suggests a certain paradox: if all these secrets were suddenly made public, it would not so much clarify but simply annul the new love-fraught associations that have begun to form and constitute the affective substance of the novel. It will be the work of the plot of the novel to disseminate this vital information gradually enough so that reliable communication (among characters and with the reader) may be achieved by novel's end. I want to argue that the post as it functions within the text slows down, complicates, and structures the communications by which characters are changed and new associations are formed.

The information impasses of *Sense and Sensibility* are intensified by the relationship between the sisters, Elinor and Marianne. The conduct-book agenda of the novel contrasts the values of these two characters around secrecy and openness in which Elinor practices good sense, discretion, and restraint in her communications and Marianne displays her feelings to all and practices a damn-the-world's-opinion exuberance of communication. However, both sisters keep the most essential secret of their heart from the other: Elinor does not tell Marianne the full extent of the love she feels for Edward or disclose the secret of Edward's engagement to Lucy Steele, and Marianne declines to tell Elinor that she is not engaged to Willoughby. Marianne offers this concise gloss on the sisters' mutual noncommunication: "We have neither of us any thing to tell; you, because you do not communicate, and I, because I conceal nothing" (Austen 193). This information blockage is all the more striking because the action of the novel repeatedly shows that the two noncommunicating sisters are alter-egos of one another, hardwired with an intimacy so fundamental that a shock to the heart of one is repeatedly registered on the body

of the other. For example, late in the novel a servant returns from Exeter with the false information that Edward Ferrars has married Lucy Steele, the syntax of the narrative tangles the responses of the two sisters, so Elinor's turning pale and Marianne's fainting appear to happen in one virtually simultaneous, sympathetic movement: "Marianne gave a violent start, fixed her eyes upon Elinor, saw her turning pale, and fell back in her chair in hysterics" (356).

What arrives to overcome the emotional gridlock of this novel—intimacy without communication, desire blocked by secrets—is a letter. Most of the main characters of the novel have gathered for breakfast at Barton Park in preparation for a day expedition to Whitwell. "While they were at breakfast the letters were brought in. Among the rest there was one for Colonel Brandon;—he took it, looked at the direction, changed colour, and immediately left the room" (Austen 74). This moment and the scene that follows bring to the fore the latent tension between two aspects of the post—while it transmits private communication, it does so in a public or semi-public way. Brandon's blush comes from reading the "direction," which connects his name (the addressee) to the name of his ward Eliza (the addresser), while he is among friends. His sudden removal from the room to read the letter, which we later learn tells of the distress of Eliza because of her seduction and abandonment by Willoughby, excites the curiosity and surmises of the group and the blunt inquires of the shameless Mrs. Jennings. Brandon guards the secrecy of his correspondence and gives no information, but the urgency of the communication is expressed by his insisting that it "requires my immediate attendance in town." Pressed for delay, so as to prevent the aborting of this day's planned expedition, Brandon insists he must act with postal dispatch: "I cannot afford to lose *one* hour" (Austen 76).

Within the plot this communication from the distance, the letter of distress, posted from Eliza to Brandon, opens the apparently self-enclosed society of the country house to the outside. It does so by exposing what is hidden within that community—Eliza as the natural daughter of the first Eliza, Brandon's love, and Eliza as the object of Willoughby's libertine machinations. The unexpected letter offers the first sign of the moral decay beneath Willoughby's specious attractions. Two chapters later, Willoughby delivers a second shock to the Dashwood family with the news of his sudden departure, demanded from his old cousin and would-be benefactress Mrs. Smith. Later we learn that the cause of this disturbance is once again Eliza. "Mrs. Smith had somehow or other been informed, I imagine by some distant relation, whose interest it was to deprive me of her favour, of an affair, a connection—but I need not explain myself farther . . ." (Austen 384). These are words spoken by Willoughby by way of explanation and excuse to Elinor near the very end of the novel. While Willoughby speculates that an interested relation has provided Mrs. Smith with the incriminating information about Eliza, William Galperin has speculated that that person is in fact Colonel Brandon. Without debating the point with Galperin—there are features of novelistic plot and Brandon's character to dispute it—I would like to suggest that Galperin is trying to impose an efficient and logical communications regime on the novel: Colonel Brandon learns of Willoughby's perfidy in one chapter, and two chapters later so does Mrs. Smith. It is therefore logical to believe that Brandon has communicated this information to

Mrs. Smith (Galperin 113–16). In this way Galperin denies the novel what I suggest the post helps introduce into Austen's novel: the heterogeneity, asynchrony, and contingency of communications within a field of associations that are complex, mutually dependent, and controlled by no one.

The scene in which Eliza's letter arrives at Barton Park introduces a central motif of letter reading in the novel. When characters find themselves excluded from the secrets of the heart, their eyes are drawn to what they can see: the semi-public circulation of letters. Although Elinor is initially reluctant to credit Lucy Steele's claim of a secret engagement with Edward, when she sees a letter directed to Lucy in Edward's hand, she concludes that "a correspondence between them by letters, could subsist only under a positive engagement, could be authorized by nothing else" (Austen 154). Elinor and Brandon interpret evidence of Marianne's correspondence with Willoughby in London in the same way. The exposure of secrets is also advanced by those characters who trawl for information they can then enjoy disseminating. This is particularly true of Mrs. Dashwood's cousin, Sir John Middleton, and his mother-in-law, Mrs. Jennings. Pitched against the indiscrete and often erroneous disclosures of the gossips are characters who function as secure transmitters of information; they are the novel's discrete postmen and postwomen; they move information among the characters without releasing it to all. When Lucy Steele insists on sharing news about her secret engagement to Edward with Elinor, Elinor expresses surprise that she has made "so unnecessary a communication" (Austen 152). But by sharing her secret with Elinor, Lucy compels a confidence and gives agony to a rival. Brandon transmits the gift of a living for Edward through the again reliably disinterested information carrier, Elinor. Although Elinor knows that it will make Edward's marriage to her rival more likely, she nonetheless faithfully transmits the information to Edward. Finally, Willoughby shows the same faith in Elinor's integrity as the bearer of privileged information when he makes her the recipient of his late-night self-justifying disclosures; he knows that Elinor will get these messages—albeit in somewhat filtered form—to Marianne.

There are no moments in this novel when a letter bearing secrets is read in public. But we get the essential equivalent in the scene where Marianne encounters Willoughby at the London ball and speaks in public and in person her apprehension of a dreadful failure of communication: "Here is some mistake I am sure—some dreadful mistake. What can be the meaning of it? Tell me, Willoughby; for heaven's sake tell me, what is the matter? Have you not received my letters? Will you not shake hands with me?" The effect produced is what Lisa Zunshine has characterized as "embodied transparency": into the restricted information economy of the Austen novel, with its subtle mind reading and measured disclosures, appears a demand for information that is shocking because it produces a spectacle of unreciprocated love that is so embarrassingly public (72–78).

Marianne's public performance of her inner feelings—and the letter with which she reiterates her demand to have an "explanation" of his behavior—prepares for the traumatic, brutally honest "Dear Madam" letter with which Willoughby informs Marianne that "my affections have been long engaged elsewhere" (Austen 208–09) and at the same time carries back to Marianne the tokens of her love: her letters and her lock of hair. In the epoch of the post, the coherence and integ-

rity of the self is associated with the privacy of the post. So it is appropriate that Marianne's scream of agony comes at the scene where she relinquishes her guard over the privacy of her correspondence and gives the letters to her sister: "[A]fter some time thus spent in joint affliction, she put all the letters into Elinor's hands; and then covering her face with her handkerchief, almost screamed with agony" (208). This scream has been read by Tony Tanner as a protest against the novel's stifling of Marianne's desire (Tanner 75, 89–90). Notice what mediates that desire and its protracted crisis: desire is channeled into secret conversation and then private correspondence with Willoughby. The relaxation of the privacy of that correspondence by sharing it with Elinor begins the psycho-somatic illness and the dissolution of Marianne's (old) self.

As in other Austen novels, the end of *Sense and Sensibility* links the resolution of the romantic plot, the mutual avowal of love between Elinor and Edward, with a utopian information regime. The discretely incommunicative Elinor can finally openly share the sentiments of her heart with another. For most of the novel, Elinor has experienced the impossibility of direct communication with Edward: she has agonized over the meaning of Edward's bouts of reticence and embarrassment, she has seen the outside of his letters to Lucy, and she has faithfully carried the offer of a living from Colonel Brandon to Edward. But at novel's end, Edward's proposal releases Elinor into the playful freedom of their private conversation, creating the delicious illusion of unmediated communication. Now the privacy of Edward's correspondence with Lucy Steele, which has functioned as a bar on intimacy with Elinor, can be opened up and consumed without restraint. Edward then confesses to Elinor his judgment of the deficiencies of Lucy's correspondence: "[H]ow I have blushed over the pages of her writing!" (Austen 414). This conversation produces an authorized retroactive retelling of the novel's history.

The communication ethos at work in *Sense and Sensibility* exceeds the functionalist ideal of communication that structures the postal system. Rather than simply "imparting information or knowledge," these final scenes of the novel activate an earlier than modern sense of what it means to communicate. Here, "to communicate" also means "to give to another as a partaker; to give a share; to share in, partake, use in common" (*OED Online*). The final conversations between the heroine and her partner constitute a form of social communion. The etymology of "to communicate" further suggests how communication actively associates or links humans to one another: from Latin, *communicat*: "to make common to many, share, impart, divide"; derived from *communis*, from compound of "com" (together) + "munis" (bound, under obligation). This etymology of "communication" brings a larger idea into view. If we reduce communication to the sending of a message from point A to point B, we will underestimate the centrality of communication to how the novel works. Novelistic communication forges the associations represented as unfolding gradually among its characters; novelistic communication also folds in and implicates the reader as a communicant in those communications. Both within and outside the novel, communication brings humans together by sharing, exchanging, or imparting information, ideas, messages that may be truthful or erroneous. A sense of an ending is achieved for this novel from the way the

plot suddenly lifts the obstacle to a private, uncensored correspondence between the heroine and her love object.

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