

LINDA S. KAUFFMAN

SPECIAL DELIVERY

*Epistolary Modes
in Modern Fiction*

FOREWORD BY CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Chicago and London

LINDA S. KAUFFMAN

SPECIAL DELIVERY

*Epistolary Modes
in Modern Fiction*

FOREWORD BY CATHARINE R. STIMPSON

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Chicago and London

Linda S. Kauffman is professor of English at the University of Maryland, College Park.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637

The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

© 1992 by The University of Chicago

All rights reserved. Published 1992

Printed in the United States of America

01 00 99 98 97 96 95 94 93 92 54321

ISBN (cloth): 0-226-42680-7 (cloth)

ISBN (paper): 0-226-42681-5 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kauffman, Linda S., 1949—

Special delivery : epistolary modes in modern fiction / Linda S. Kauffman.

p. cm. — (Women in culture and society)

Includes index.

1. Epistolary fiction—History and criticism. 2. Fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 3. Women in literature. 4. Letters in literature. I. Title. II. Series.

PN3448.E6K38 1992

809.3'04—dc20

91-23819

CIP

Postage-stamp illustrations by Kathryn Jacobi.

Chapter 2 is a revised and expanded version of Linda S. Kauffman's "Framing Lolita," in *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, edited by Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989); reprinted with permission. Chapter 4, revised and expanded, is reprinted with permission from *Theorizing Feminist Writing Practices*, edited by Elizabeth A. Meese and Alice Parker (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, in press). An earlier version of Chapter 6 appeared in *Writing the Female Voice: Essays on Epistolary Literature*, edited by Elizabeth C. Goldsmith (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989); reprinted with permission.

© The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

SPECIAL DELIVERY

W O M E N I N C U L T U R E A N D S O C I E T Y

A series edited by Catharine R. Stimpson

FOR KAY AUSTEN

FOREWORD

“This is my letter to the World/That never wrote to Me—.” So Emily Dickinson begins one of her most famous poems. Born in 1847, Alexander Graham Bell was an adolescent when she wrote it. In 1876, the year in which he started to patent the inventions that were the basis for the telephone, she was forty-six. She was to die a decade later. However, let us imagine that history had a different sequence, that Dickinson had been born after Bell; that her Amherst study had contained a telephone, fax machine, tape recorder, cassettes. Let us imagine, moreover, that Dickinson had found letters from the contemporary world in her mailbox: junk mail, fund-raising appeals, L. L. Bean catalogs, Visa and American Express bills, and, occasionally, a personal letter, printed out on pinfed paper by a daisy wheel. What then might the first words of her poem have been?

Special Delivery has provoked this fanciful question. For Linda S. Kauffman is writing about nothing less than the letter in literature in the twentieth-century. I first discovered Kauffman's ideas in 1986 when I heard her read a paper about Vladimir Nabokov and *Lolita*. Her voice was distinctive, at once incisive and subtle, sophisticated and shrewd, eloquent and witty. In the same year, she published her first book, *Discourses of Desire*, an analysis of the genre of the love letter from Ovid to *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters* (1972). A critic who refuses to be boxed in, she synthesized a number of critical approaches: a structuralist interest in genre and the relations of texts to each other; a poststructuralist interest in the “politics of representation,” in questions of who gets to say what and to whom; a psychoanalytic interest in desire, the wish for that which we do not have; a Bakhtinian interest in dialogue and polyvocality, in the clash and convergence of several languages; and, finally, an interest in gender. As a feminist critic, Kauffman insisted that women's subjectivity is not only the product of language, not only the product of material reality, not only the product of individual will and grit, but of all three.

Special Delivery now deepens Kauffman's methods and extends her reach. She is taking up seven books written between 1923 and 1986, all of which use letters. Four of these epistolary adventures are by men (Viktor Shklovsky, Vladimir Nabokov, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida) who pro-

duce, among other things, a picture of women. Three of these adventures are by women (Doris Lessing, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood). They generate their own narratives about gender and its meaning. Kauffman, however, asks us to revel in the complexity these books share, their invitation to readers to enter into a restless, unstable, dramatic world. For each of these texts makes "different discourses interrupt each other dialogically in order to initiate a crisis." With a fine lucidity, Kauffman also shows us what this crisis is, the postmodern necessity of questioning older and reassuring myths about the self-willed potencies of the individual; about romantic love; about language as the mirror of nature; about the reliability of distinctions between theory and practice, between fact and fiction.

Although Kauffman demonstrates how much language talks about itself and how much language tells us who we are, she refuses to abandon the realities of history and twentieth-century society from the Russian Revolution to the dismantling of the Soviet empire. *Lolita*, for example, is a novel "about" father-daughter incest and a dazzling display of the novel as a fiction, as a mansion of mirrors. Beyond *Lolita*, incest happens, painfully, destructively. The task of the critic, Kauffman persuasively argues, is to measure the encounters between language and the history that language inexorably, cunningly interprets. In part, these encounters are epistemological; in part, they are literary. For Kauffman, they are also moral and political. They either increase or constrict human freedoms. *Special Delivery* seeks to expand our sense of how free a text can be, and in so doing, to remind us of how free we, too, might be. Surely, this is a message worth sending and receiving.

CATHARINE R. STIMPSON
Rutgers University

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Since *Special Delivery* focuses on writing as a contested dialogue and struggle, I must thank those quarrelsome critics who constantly questioned my perceptions and prose: I'm indebted to Melissa Lentricchia for *The Handmaid's Tale* and segments on feminist criticism, and to Jane Tompkins and Patricia Yaeger for *Lolita*. Louise Yelin honed *The Golden Notebook* chapter, as did Lee Greene and Michael Awkward with *The Color Purple*. Martha Nell Smith livened up many passages, and Lorrie Sprecher was an energetic assistant. Kathy Jacobi's illustrations teach us how to see all over again; she has my deepest thanks for myriad illuminations—verbal as well as visual.

I am grateful for a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship in 1987–88, for leave from the University of Maryland in 1990, and for five indefatigable friends who racked their brains recommending me for grants: Myra Jehlen, Toril Moi, Garrett Stewart, Frank Lentricchia, and Deirdre David. Many discussions with them, as well as with James Thompson, Marilee Lindemann, Susan Leonardi, Rebecca Pope, and Deborah Rosenfelt, are reflected in these pages.

Feminists owe an incalculable debt to Catharine Stimpson, whose activism (not to mention her *savoir faire* and *joie de vivre*) are inspiration to us all. My thanks to her and to Karen Wilson for their editorial acumen, and to Lila Weinberg for meticulous copyediting. Judith Kegan Gardiner, as a reader for the University of Chicago Press, made many suggestions that immeasurably improved the manuscript.

I also wish to thank the conference organizers who invited me to lecture: I spoke on *Lolita* at Emory University, Florida State University, Goethe University in Frankfurt, West Germany, and in 1986 at the Modern Language Association convention. *The Color Purple* chapter first took shape at a symposium for the University of North Carolina's Program in the Humanities in Chapel Hill in 1986. I spoke on Margaret Atwood at the MLA Convention in 1987, on Doris Lessing at the International Conference on Feminist Critical Practice and Theory in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, in 1988, and on Barthes and Derrida at Brigham Young University in 1990. Various segments on feminist theory were presented at Brooklyn College; the Uni-

versity of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; the University of Tulsa; the University of California, Riverside; and the University of Maryland. Greater coherence and rigor resulted from the audience's challenges on these occasions.

I thank the Women's Caucus of the Modern Language Association for awarding me first prize in the Florence Howe Essay Contest in 1988 for "Twenty-first Century Epistolarity in *The Handmaid's Tale*," which is reprinted with an "Afterword" in "*Courage and Tools:*" *The Florence Howe Award Essays*, edited by Joanne Glasgow and Angela Ingram (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990).

Special Delivery is dedicated to my sister, Kay, who helped raise me, and from whom I continue to discover the meaning of perception, perseverance, and courage.

PROLOGUE

Since *Special Delivery*'s subject is antinarrative as well as narrative, it is, appropriately, both sequel and antisequel to *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (1986). The earlier study traces the love letter as a genre from Ovid's *Heroides* to *The Three Marias: New Portuguese Letters* (1972), with chapters on Héloïse's letters to Abelard, *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* (1669), and *Clarissa*. Many of the characteristics that make the love letter an identifiable genre in those texts also can be found in the present study: writing in the absence of the beloved, mourning the inadequacies of language, transgressing generic boundaries, subverting gender roles, staging revolt through the act of writing. My aim in the earlier study was to delineate a tradition, to demonstrate how "amorous epistolary discourse" remains identifiable even when it becomes assimilated into such first-person narratives as *Jane Eyre*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and *Absalom, Absalom!* I also illustrated how, in the process of reaccentuating its predecessors, each text engages in intertextual dialogue; thus Ovid invokes Sappho, Héloïse invokes Ovid, *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* invokes Héloïse, *Jane Eyre* is a subtext in *The Turn of the Screw*, and *The Three Marias* turns back to *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*.

Special Delivery is a sequel in the sense that this tradition is never far from mind; the landmark texts in *Discourses of Desire* reappear from time to time. Given the ambitiousness of a temporal time frame that begins with Ovid, *Discourses of Desire* is of necessity drawn with broad brush strokes. *Special Delivery* frames a much smaller canvas. With the exception of two "novelized" theoretical texts, Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* and Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card*, the study is limited to novels from 1923 to 1986. It is nonetheless an antisequel, for where *Discourses of Desire* emphasized the value of sentimentality, *Special Delivery* satirizes it. Where the former study emphasized generic continuity, the present one emphasizes discontinuity, which is why I have shifted my focus from genre to mode. Alastair Fowler explains the difference by noting that mode, unlike genre, seldom implies a complete external form; to define Sidney's *Arcadia* as pastoral, for instance, conveys no information about its external form. The

epistolary mode, however, has a broader function than many other modes.¹ It is able to combine with other kinds; the very looseness of its conventions has made it resilient, adaptable, and relevant in diverse historical epochs. *Special Delivery* examines the ruptures in both literature and history that make it impossible to forget that the epistolary mode is neither timeless nor transcendent. Indeed, in the 1990s it may seem quixotic to study "epistolarity" (defined as the theory and practice of writing letter fiction), when letter writing has practically become a lost art, supplanted by telephones, fax machines, computers, camrecorders, and tape cassettes (video as well as audio). In fact, in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, writing has all but disappeared: the "epistolary" heroine records her memories on audio tapes, which are salvaged some hundred and fifty years in the future. Yet Atwood memorializes and mines all the classic conventions of epistolarity. Each of the seven texts in my study has the same Janus-like ability to look backward and forward, as remembrance and prophecy.

The first part of this study, "Producing Woman," concentrates on four texts that are love letters or about love and letters: Viktor Shklovsky's *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love* (1923), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1978), and Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1980). *Zoo* is a novel-in-progress, ostensibly written to a woman who has forbidden Shklovsky to speak of love (hence the subtitle). So he muses on Russian history and literature, avant-garde art, cinema, literary criticism, and theory. He disassembles the classic tenets of mimesis in order to defamiliarize the artificiality of language. Writing in the wake of Héloïse and Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse* (*Zoo*'s second subtitle: *The Third Héloïse*), Shklovsky accentuates his generic legacy of belatedness by parodic distortion and diminution. Shklovsky wrote the novel in exile in Berlin, surrounded by the Russian diaspora that fled in the wake of revolution and world war. His addressees range from the beloved, to Mother Russia, to the censors and party officials who have banished him. He combines the lyrical lament for unrequited love with a skeptical assessment of a new world order, transforming *Zoo* into an allegory of exile.

1. Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 106–11, see also pp. 167–69; hereinafter cited parenthetically.

Lolita also deals with unrequited love and exile. It, too, portrays the problematics of address: Humbert variously addresses the reader, the editor, the typesetter, the gentlemen and gentlewomen of the jury, Charlotte Haze, and Lolita herself. Perhaps what Humbert's narrative most resembles is a love letter to Lolita, composed in jail, a series of death sentences. Like *Zoo*, *Lolita* is a patchwork of modes and genres, combining literary criticism, newspaper reports, fragments of diaries, journals, and memoirs. By framing Humbert's narrative between John Ray's spurious forward and his own afterword, Nabokov underscores its artificiality. Nevertheless, few have noticed how consistently Humbert elides Lolita. He "produces Woman" by reinscribing misogynistic stereotypes of femininity; critics of the novel follow suit.

In Roland Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* and Jacques Derrida's *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, the notion of "beyond" is crucial: they each attempt to go beyond the narratable, beyond logic, beyond totalizing theories, beyond the boundaries of gender and genre. Each stresses the performative aspects of language, using amorous discourse to stage his speculations about love, literature, identity, difference. They deconstruct the dichotomies dividing love from scholarship, margin from center, fiction from theory. Both experiment with "writing unprotectedly"; they present themselves as fictional characters, consciously "novelized" and "feminized." Sometimes they nostalgically reinscribe the feminine stereotypes they mean to mock, but at other points they show what can be gained by destabilizing the assumed relationships between gender and identity.

In Part Two, "Women's Productions," my perspective shifts to three novels by women: Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), and *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986). Whereas the men are all continental (only Nabokov writes in English), the women are native English speakers; two are North American. Such particularities inevitably alter the study of mode and generic history. Just as the texts themselves highlight their constructedness, I wish to highlight my study's constructedness; a different selection of texts would have produced a different structural configuration. Since I emphasize the material conditions of production, I can hardly ignore the differences that language, location, nationality, individual and world history make for each of these writers. Even given Shklovsky's and Nabokov's Russian and Barthes's and Derrida's

French backgrounds, in temperament, training, and worldview, far more divides than unites them. Although Shklovsky and Nabokov found themselves in Berlin at approximately the same time, their views on politics and art diverge dramatically. Derrida is a robust Algerian Jew; Barthes's health was delicate, his background (though he was born in Cherbourg) is Protestant and Parisian. Each material circumstance inevitably alters the meaning of exile and address for the women writers too: Persian-born, Doris Lessing grew up in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); her outsider status shapes her view of England, where she emigrated at the age of thirty in 1949. Margaret Atwood's Canadian citizenship sharpens her satiric perspective of imperialism and hypocrisy in the United States. For an African-American woman, the meaning of exile and address is transformed yet again when one turns to Alice Walker.

The binary division of the two parts of my study is not meant to reinforce but to defamiliarize the assumed polarities between male/female, theory/fiction, male theory/feminist criticism. For example, some readers might expect the women writers to promote the authority of individual experience—to insist that identity, gender, and the female voice are inviolable—but that is not always the case. Similarly, literary history and epistolary tradition lead one to expect the women's novels to focus solely on love, as in the classic *Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, in which a solitary nun in her convent cell pours out her feelings in letters to the chevalier who has abandoned her. Instead, these three novels repudiate the claustrophobia of private emotions; they are preoccupied with pressing social issues: racial injustice, political persecution, the decimation of nature and culture.

The Golden Notebook's vision of postmodern fragmentation is reflected in the form (a combination of letters, diaries, notebooks, novellas, journals, and news reports) and in the characterization of Anna Wulf. To Lessing, the nostalgia for a coherent, unified identity is a disabling fiction, closely aligned to the limitations of the conventional realist novel as a genre. Language encourages us to dichotomize and to label those in foreign lands as alien, threatening "others." By undergoing the process of "schizoanalysis," Anna achieves an imaginative awareness of her correspondences with others around the globe.

Alice Walker portrays the ideology of otherness as the rationale for racial persecution in *The Color Purple*. She fuses epistolarity with slave narra-

tive, creating a dialogic hybrid that is "womanist" in focus. She depicts the mechanisms of colonization at home and abroad, shifting the frame of reference back and forth to reveal parallel structures of oppression in Africa and America, giving voice to those whose collective histories have been eradicated.

The Handmaid's Tale also depicts the erasure of history, the silencing of women, and the persecution of marginalized groups defined as "other." It is a symptomatic narrative of the historical transformation of the social relations of production and reproduction, a fact that underscores my point that (as with Lessing and Walker) the female novelists draw upon theoretical paradigms, just as the male theorists draw upon fictional ones. As in Lessing, Atwood denaturalizes and decenters the concept of the self, showing how its construction is shaped by technology, surveillance, and ideology.

While all share an interest in epistolary production, I have purposely selected seven texts that are more notable for their differences than their similarities, another departure from *Discourses of Desire*. Rather than artificially imposing a foolish generic consistency, I emphasize each text's innovative contribution to modal transformation, focusing on the distinctive treatment of seven major motifs:

1. *Representation*. Each writer interrogates the proposition that the function of art is to hold the mirror up to nature. Among critical theorists, that proposition has become known as "the representational or mimetic fallacy." Each writer in my study attempts to expose the underlying ideological assumptions of mimesis, demonstrating that what appears "natural" (history, economics, gender, class, racial classifications) is instead socially constructed. In markedly different ways, each writer self-consciously dramatizes the processes of textual production and reception to undermine the tenets of representation.

2. *Individualism*. At least since 1740, the rise of the novel has been linked to the rise of the middle class. The burgeoning prosperity of the bourgeoisie led to increased literacy, which created a mass market for the novel as a genre. The emerging middle class avidly desired to read about itself—its problems, its triumphs, its desires. Realism became a dominant aesthetic criterion, propelled by the bourgeoisie's self-regard (in both senses of the word). When I allude to "bourgeois individualism" or "bourgeois realism," then, I have in mind the middle class's insistence that (a) fiction reflect (what

they recognize as) "reality," (b) character and plot revolve around privatized emotions and problems, (c) the (bourgeois, Western European) individual's experience is universal.² In this regard, each text in my study is an anatomy of ideology.

3. *The ideology of romantic love.* *Special Delivery* is also an anatomy of this ideology. Love letters have a lot to answer for. Through the ages, they have been instrumental in disguising relationships of power, politics, and economics by glorifying fulfillment as something only love can bring. The writers in my study sometimes confess their nostalgia, but they also expose the snares and delusions of this myth—and literature's complicity in perpetuating it. Satire displaces sentimentality, which leaves its traces nonetheless.

4. *The Oedipus myth as universal trope.* The Oedipus myth constrains us to view the family as the type for society, encouraging an endless search (in church, school, and nation) for imaginary surrogates. The writers in *Special Delivery* posit alternative paradigms of desire, paradigms that (implicitly or explicitly) criticize the relentless familialism and rigid normalization of Western thought. In various contexts, "oedipalization" connotes the triangle of the nuclear family, repressive socialization, or an aggressive will to power.

5. *Generic disruption and defamiliarization.* Each text in my study is written against the grain in multiple senses. At least since *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun*, the letter has been identified as "the voice of true feeling"; traditionally, the solitary heroine's letters are testaments to sincerity, authenticity, and spontaneity. (The criteria were suspect even at their inception, since there is ample speculation and considerable evidence that the "feminine" disorder of the *Portuguese Letters* probably came from a masculine pen.)³ The texts in *Special Delivery* use a variety of strategies to

2. Among the many studies that relate the rise of the novel to the rise of the bourgeoisie, see Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1957); Terry Eagleton, *The Rape of Clarissa: Writing, Sexuality, and Class Struggle in Samuel Richardson* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1982); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1987); Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

3. The literary history and debate over authorship of *The Letters of a Portuguese Nun* is rehearsed by Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1986), chap. 3; its continuing relevance is discussed below in chap. 1 (p. 49), chap. 3 (pp. 103–5), and chap. 6 (pp. 226, 231).

question those traditional criteria of value. One strategy is exaggeration, as when Shklovsky turns himself into a fictional character in *Zoo*. He is the man without qualities, the Dostoyevskian antihero who cannot express any emotion without a sideward satiric glance in his antinarrative. Moreover, he includes actual letters from Elsa Triolet, the woman who spurns him. Not only does she make him the butt of satire, but her authentic letters make his look more hysterical. By undermining sincerity and authenticity, *Zoo* effects a perceptible displacement on the genre; after 1923, it will never again be quite the same.

6. *Dialogism*. My views of genre are informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's theories; while each new contribution to a genre bears a "family resemblance" to its predecessors, it engages in "dialogic" contestation with them: it draws on multiple languages and sources, it posits an alternative logic, it eschews resolution and closure, it depicts ideologues in conflict, it creates an open-ended dialogue that encourages further innovation. The dialogue within the letter novel between letter writer and addressee is doubled by the dialogue between writer and reader. Dialogism is also crucial in representing the writer *as* reader: Shklovsky writes to Rousseau, Nabokov to Poe, Barthes to Werther, Derrida to Joyce, Lessing to Laing, Walker to Hurston, Atwood to Hawthorne. Many other influences—ranging from Sterne to Orwell—also enlarge the dialogic frame of reference. As my allusion to slave narratives suggests, borrowings from multiple genres and non-literary sources consistently revitalize epistolary production. Dialogism also signifies the speaking voice, a crucial aspect of the letter, which is written solely because the writer cannot speak to the addressee. The traditional *je crois te parler* motif informs all epistolary production: writing nurtures the illusion of speaking with one whose absence is intolerable.

7. *Decentering the subject*. In "The Death of the Author," Roland Barthes maintains that neither the author's origins, life, or intentions explain the art; that biography and identity are irrelevant in analyzing the writing. This hypothesis is part of a larger poststructuralist project of showing the relativity of relations between writer, reader, and critic. The legacy of Saussurean linguistics is that symbols become "denaturalized." Meaning is no longer viewed as immanent or transcendent; rather it results from internally generated differential relations. Not only does this paradigm shift undermine referentiality, but some feminist critics worry that it simultaneously undermines the female voice.