

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Epistolary Genre: Valorization and Substitution

In *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (1987), Jacques Derrida composes the part of “Envois” to include a collection of exchanged post cards. The collection of the post cards may remind us of traditional epistolary novels composed of letters. While the epistolary novels replenish the epistolary genre with a main concern about the addresser, the addressee, and the destination of the letter, Derrida’s *The Post Card* highlights the impossibility of the predestined addressee and destination in its transmission<sup>1</sup>. This tendency of reversal reveals Derrida’s intention to go beyond any predestined determination of the generic characteristics. The act of going beyond is not equal to a destruction of all the established generalities. Instead, going beyond simultaneously valorizes and substitutes for the limitation of generalities.

To accentuate the paradox in the act of going beyond, I want to employ Derrida’s analysis of the concept of genre to explicate the paradox and further extend the concept to illuminate the dynamics of subversion in *The Post Card*. Derrida’s book breaches the generic boundary of the epistolary genre by proposing an interminable process of interception with no identified destination. In addition, *The Post Card* also puts the linearity of the intellectual genealogy in the constantly destabilized scene of reversal. *The*

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<sup>1</sup> In my understanding of the meanings of an “addresser” and an “addressee,” both of them respectively refer to the sender’s and the receiver’s determinate identities. The addresser is the original giver of the letter and the addressee is the destined taker of the letter. The relationship between the addresser and the addressee presupposes a predominant sender as the original departure point and a predestined receiver as the final destination. Exchanges of letters in most epistolary novels follow this linear thread between the addresser and the addressee. Different from the linear thread that constitutes an important part of the epistolary genre, Derrida’s *The Post Card* nevertheless proposes an unstable formation of both the sender’s and the receiver’s identities. Derrida reveals the paradoxical possibility of simultaneously constructing and subverting identities in the epistolary writing and exchange. “The sender” and “the receiver” can refer to the identified letter writer and the intended letter receiver, but they might also refer to multiple readers who read and interpret the letter in many different ways. With regard to the multiplicity encompassed in the act of sending and the act of receiving, hereafter in my thesis I use “the sender” and “the receiver” as an interrelated connection instead of using “the addresser” and “the addressee” as a couple with stabilized identities. I will further explain the difference between a receiver and an addressee on p. 10.

*Post Card* opens an “economy of differance” (Derrida, 1976, p. 143), in which difference and deferral are unremittingly evoked to put the epistolary journey in detour.

### **The Law of Genre**

Speaking of the method of classification that categorizes different types of writing, we may be reminded of the concept of genre. What does the word “genre” represent? In “The Law of Genre” (1980), Derrida provides a general view of the concept of genre:

As soon as the word *genre* is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind: “Do,” “Do not,” says “genre,” the word *genre*, the figure, the voice, or the law of genre. [...] Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity. (224-225, Derrida’s emphasis)

Interpreted under the general principle of genre, the concept of genre is mainly founded on the binary judgment of opposites. Under the binary judgment, a literary work may be only defined and classified as that which does or does not cohere with the standard of a certain genre. The concept of genre is limited within the demarcated boundary where certain norms and interdictions are privileged in order that the genre may maintain its purity and authority. Those who are contrary or invisible to the presence of the legitimate genre will be repudiated as impurity, anomaly, or even monstrosity. They cannot participate or penetrate into the unity of genre, since genre is deliberately impervious to any inadmissible form of contamination. In brief, Derrida concludes the general principle of genre with the axiomatic sentence that goes, “Genres are not to be mixed” (223). The claim of no mixture confirms the law of genre, whose regulation permits each generic category to be endowed with certain allegedly given characteristics. The law of genre guarantees for each categorized

genre a distinction among others. Echoing “the imperious call of the law” (225), the regulated categories of genre indulge themselves in the pleasure of enrolling properly identified works in their licensed presence, regardless of the possibility of absence or divergence.

Dissatisfied with this predominant principle of genre that devotes itself to the maintenance of purity, Derrida attempts to “*broach[ing] [its] alienation*” (1976, p. 143, Derrida’s emphasis) by proposing a subversive implication:

Unless, of course, I were actually implicated in a wager, a challenge, an impossible bet—in short, a situation that would exceed the matter of merely engaging a commitment from me. And suppose for a moment that it were impossible not to mix genres. What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the *a priori* of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order and reason? (1980, p. 225)

In this implication of the reverse possibility, the insistent negligence of the absence only highlights the fear of the general law of genre in losing its reputation of presence. The threat of loss compels the law to simply exclude the absence out of its reach. Proposing a counter-law as a baffling element that would disturb the order of the law, Derrida does not intend to produce a binary opposition to decrease the predominance of the law. The intolerable way between opposites would engender a simplified substitution for the dictatorship of the law of genre, whose effect still repeats the metaphysical logic that favors the value of presence. What Derrida endeavors to reveal is the possibility of subversion within the law, in which the act of subversion participates in an examination of the law instead of completely abandoning it. He uses the word “text” to destabilize the defined works under the law:

This text, as I shall try to demonstrate, seems to be made, among other things, *to make light* [*se jouer*] of all the tranquil categories of genre theory and history in order to upset their taxonomic certainties, the distribution of their classes, and the presumed stability of their classical nomenclatures. (228, Derrida's emphasis)

The general law of genre prescribes that each of its categories shares the property of having a naturally given and complete identity, which is supposed to be insusceptible to any uncertain factors. Unassimilated to this law, the text advances to dismantle the organized distribution of those assorted works so that a more proliferate kind of textuality may emerge from the undermining of the general principle. The multiplicity implied in the concept of the text hence corresponds to what Derrida calls "the law of the law of genre," which "is precisely a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy" (227). This parasitical economy, taking the general law into consideration but being external to its normative logic, is the subversive rejection against the law in support of fortifying its own purity. However, the disapproval does not therefore encourage a pure fragmentation without any constraint. If impurity would be the predominant criterion for the assessment of the multiplicity, it would become blind to its effect of cracking the closure guided by the law. With no inclination to repeat the same path paved on the basis of the binary logic, Derrida's proposition of the law of the law of genre encourages:

[...] a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of, without having membership in a set. The trait that marks membership inevitably divides, the boundary of the set comes to form, by invagination, an internal pocket larger than the whole; and the consequences of this division and of this overflowing remain as singular as they are limitless. (227-228)

In this apparent paradox of participation without belonging, "the law of overflowing, of *excess*" (228, Derrida's emphasis) is that which stirs up either the tranquility of choosing

one of the binary sides as the standpoint or that of stabilizing the opposites into a balance. The singular choice may result in an indulgence in a fixed thought of prejudice, while the stable balance is none the less adherent to the suffocated situation of stasis. Excess needs to be evoked by the absence beyond the regime of the regulated law. Its overflowing effects have to be induced from the seemingly thorough presence of the norm. Normative fixation of the law of genre has to be transgressed in the excess. Unnoticed lacunae, left out in regard to their defined anomaly, will become vitalized as excessive supplements to the normative law.

### **Deconstruction in “Envois”: Substitution in Repetition**

With a paradox of the concept of genre in mind, Derrida, in writing “Envois,” therefore repeats the characteristics of the epistolary genre while simultaneously breaching its confinement by means of the ambiguous form of the post card. In epistolary writing, distance plays an indispensable role which makes it necessary to exchange letters between the sender and the receiver. Because of the effects caused by distance in epistolary exchanges, the process of postal transmission is no longer a mild factor to be simplified or neglected. Postal transmission cannot be simply reduced to its auxiliary function of preserving and delivering the sender’s message as intact to the intended receiver. More than being identified as a way of transportation irrelevant to the message, postal transmission is engaged in an itinerary of detours, which might precipitate the impossibility of an accurate and punctual delivery. In these two respects—epistolary exchanges and postal transmission, both ways of managing the temporal and spatial discontinuity produce some restrictions within their limited scope. To transgress the restrictions, Derrida wants to repeat with a difference by re-examining their respective ways of construction.

Before elaborating on the restrictions, I want to expound Derrida’s concept of repetition first. Distinguished from the classical hypothesis of repetition as “secondary and

derivative” (*Post Card* 351), Derrida’s concept of repetition aims at differentiating the constructed scope in an act of participation without belonging to the confinement. Only being mediated by this kind of repetitive movement may the closure possibly be exceeded. Shari Benstock’s analysis of the process of deconstruction explicates Derrida’s way of achieving the excessive effect:

His [Derrida’s] analysis attempts to unsettle, if only temporarily, reigning phallogentric orders through a two-stage process of deconstruction. It first overturns hierarchical relations of sexual difference (masculine/feminine), then displaces the opposition along a relay so that the hierarchy cannot easily reestablish itself. (1991, “Law of the Phallus” p. 7, explanation mine)

The hierarchical relations, which may still refer to other binary oppositions such as that between presence and absence, need to be scrutinized from a skeptical angle so that the possibility of subversion may be inspired. With a further step, the hierarchical relations between oppositions have to be substituted in the process of relay, through which the binary logic would not easily rehabilitate itself. The word “relay” is used as a metaphor of the supplementary process of subversion. As a way of transferring messages, relay is an operation of exchange among multiple posts and a procedure of the division of work. Circulated among different posts, the letter goes through an indeterminate movement characterized by the multiple and divisive process of relay. The letter constantly rests at one specific post and then substitutes another point for the previous one. Time passes by with the process forwarded to approach the receiver’s fetch. The significance of time does not mainly cling to its chronology but to its effects on the letter during the transmission. The letter remains uncertain and liable to changes in the temporal and spatial distance, which may endanger the devised route of transmission to be interrupted. As a result, the sender cannot be singularly regarded as the original departure point and the intended receiver as the final destination. Instead, the letter persistently begins at each post as if it were for the

first time. In this sense, each time the letter halts at one post, it adds an intermediary function to that specific post. However, this single post is not hereafter endowed with a privilege over other points in the relay. Rather, it becomes the trace of the letter after the letter moves to other posts. This is the metaphor of relay in broaching the closure of binary oppositions: to repeat the closure for a re-examination to go beyond the limited logic. Derrida's thought of trace explicates a possible departure from which the confinement may be cracked:

At any rate, they [movements that go beyond the metaphysical oppositions] cannot be described, *as to past norms*, except in this form. No other trace is available, and as these errant questions are not absolute beginnings in every way, they allow themselves to be effectively reached, on one entire surface, by this description which is also a criticism. We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace [...] has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be. (1976, p. 162, Derrida's emphasis, explanation mine)

The movement to breach the logic of binary oppositions has to reconfigure the formation of the binary law so that its way of construction and regulation may be dismantled to reveal its blind spot. This movement is a supplementary kind of repetition, whose tautology aims at swaying an absolute standard of judgment. Barbara Johnson deems the act of repetition as a vital effect in letter transmission and as a necessary process for the act of analysis:

The letter as signifier is thus not a thing or the absence of a thing, not a word or the absence of a word, not an organ or the absence of an organ, but a *knot* in a structure where words, things, and organs can neither be definably separated nor compatibly combined. [...] It is located "in" a *symbolic*

structure, a structure that can only be perceived in its effects, and whose effects are perceived as repetition. Dupin finds the letter “in” the symbolic order not because he knows where to look, but because he knows *what to repeat*. Dupin’s “analysis” is the repetition of the scene that led to the necessity of analysis. It is not an interpretation or an insight, but an act an act of untying the knot in the structure by the repetition of the act of tying it. [...] The analyst does not intervene by giving meaning, but by effecting a *dénouement*. (1977, p. 245, Johnson’s emphasis)

Examining Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter” (1844), Johnson understands the act of tying, of repetition, as a way of untying the structured knot without simply revolving around the circular orbit of thought. Each movement of repetition is a performance to represent the *dénouement*, the arrived result, in a distinct expression, since distance, in both temporal and spatial respects, creates differences among repetitions. In this way, the *dénouement* cannot be so much rated as the absolute resolution as an inception of a differentiated journey. The letter in transmission similarly goes through the repetition of the tying and untying movement, in which the letter is not positioned as either presence or absence. The letter remains indecisive in the paradox of supplementing both public presence and private absence. The repetitive renewal among the multiple public posts further adds to the privacy of letter writing, whereas the enclosure of privacy is still continually breached by any possible deviation arising from the distance of delivery. The posts as halts in the process of relay serve as multiple points of mediations for letter transmission. As Derrida says, “To post is to send by ‘counting’ with a halt” (*Post Card* 65). They cannot be reduced as a series of repetitive and sequential joints that may form a unity. In the relay, there are only temporary halting points that would leave their inscriptions of traces. No durable or fixed occupation with one single halt would be anticipated, since the relay is a constant and varied journey of interminable substitutions.



### **The Private and the Public**

The restrictions in epistolary exchanges and transmission primarily arise from their respective predilection for either the private space or the public space. The restrictions cause their closures in singular preoccupation. The closures demarcate the boundary between the private sphere and the public sphere, as if they could respectively establish their exclusive world guarded by privacy or public operation of the postal system. However, neither the concept of the private nor that of the public could be isolated from a reference to the other. Both concepts depend on each other as a correlative referent, but they also go beyond each other's closure as a contrast. Their connection is a "parasitical" kind: they "live *off of* and are composed *out of* each other" (Benstock, 1991, "Letters" p. 119, Benstock's emphasis).

### **The Closure in Epistolary Exchange**

As the eighteenth-century letter writer who withdraws to the closet to ensure privacy, the sender of the epistolary correspondence tends to circumscribe himself/herself and the receiver within the periphery of the letter to guard their exchange in confidence. The circumscription is intended and created by the sender, since the sender wants to possess an exclusive kind of intimacy only shared with his/her intended receiver. Both the sender and the intended receiver are secluded in the isolated world of privacy. The envelope of the letter seals their overflowing expressions within their world of confidential exchanges, which supposedly excludes a third-person's interference. The disturbance from the outside public space is entitled with no right to intrude upon the privacy. Janet Gurkin Altman analyzes this reserved particularity as a characteristic of "epistolary discourse"

"*Particularity of the I-you*" (117, Altman's emphasis). Altman explains:

*Particularity of the I-you*, the *I* of epistolary discourse always having as its

(implicit or explicit) partner a specific *you* who stands in unique relationship to the *I*. (Epistolary narrative is thus distinguished from both memoir and diary narrative, where there is no reified addressee, or from rhetorical works, where the addressee is anonymous and could be anyone.) In letter language, moreover, the addressee plays a role; he is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance. Such reciprocity whereby the original *you* becomes the *I* of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange. (117, Altman's emphasis)

According to Altman, in the epistolary discourse, the sender shows a propensity for recognizing his/her receiver as the unique one to receive and respond to the letter. The sender supposes that no other person be likely to replace that unique position. This inclination suggests a difference between a receiver and an addressee. Anyone could possibly become the receiver once s/he takes the letter, regardless of the means. The letter might be entrusted to, intercepted, or purloined by anyone else than the intended receiver. Different from the receiver's contingent way of taking the letter, the addressee, as the sender's intended receiver, is privileged to accept the letter. When the sender writes, his/her expressions are mainly devoted to the intended receiver's response. The sender expects in turn to receive messages from the intended other, who is presumed to be the only source of the sender's desire. The intended other is consecrated to be unique. The thought of consecration ratifies a contract between the sender and the receiver, in which their reciprocal interaction is based on the exclusive relationship of highlighting each other as the singular intended receiver. Enclosed in their particular world of intimacy, both the sender and the receiver refer to each other as the unique addressee and destination, where their communication is assumed not to be divulged.

The faith in the particularity of the *I-you* relationship may be observed in the character Chevalier Danceny in Choderlos de Laclos' epistolary novel *Les Liaisons*

*dangereuses* (1782). Danceny falls in love with Cécile Volanges, but their epistolary correspondence is barred because of the disapproval from Cécile's mother. Danceny seeks help from the libertine Vicomte de Valmont to make the correspondence viable in some way. Nevertheless, Cécile is not willing to entrust the task to Valmont. So Danceny writes a letter to persuade Cécile to agree and believe that Valmont can play the role as a reliable mediator to bridge the obstacle between them. In that letter, Danceny displays a faithful attitude towards his friendship with Valmont and the secure privacy of the correspondence mediated by Valmont: "Is it really true that you have refused a means of seeing me? A *simple, convenient, and safe method?*" (216, Letter 93, De Laclos' emphasis). Although Danceny does not yet assure in what way of correspondence Valmont will mediate for him and Cécile (216, footnote 1), he still first chooses to believe that "Valmont's friendship made our correspondence secure" (216), without doubting the chance of Valmont's sabotage of their relationship. He does not cautiously pay attention to the danger of mediation, since he is overwhelmed by the possible immediacy of satisfying his desire for love. Preoccupied with the intimacy increased through epistolary exchanges, he becomes blind to the threats implied in the detour of mediation. Danceny's credulity is not only caused by his misplaced trust in Valmont but also deepened by his faith in the strength of love: "A passing fear, a moment's discouragement perhaps, but quickly banished by love: is that not so, my Cécile?" (216). His credulous belief, without considering possible dangers from the mediation, is eventually involved in the complicity with Valmont in Cécile's degeneracy into the erotic and deceptive desire. Had he ever detected that evil intention, he would have refused the libertine mediator's help from the very beginning. Involved in his exclusive possession of Cécile's love, Danceny has no appetite for other things, not knowing that the help he seeks to prompt his love is the very factor which disrupts his love.

Inspecting the possibility of threats in the process of epistolary exchanges, Gerald MacLean argues that "the public nature of epistolary writing should also alert us to traces

of the third-person reader outside the traditional epistolary dyad” (Gilroy & Verhoeven 15). This argument points out an often overlooked probability that may happen in epistolary exchanges: the letter might risk being disclosed to other readers. The situation might happen by means of an interception. The interception will definitely affect the supposedly intimate and private communication, whether the letter is finally sent to its addressed receiver or not. As in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, although Valmont still sends Danceny’s and Cécile’s letters to each other after he and his collusive schemer the Marquise de Merteuil read them, the correspondence manipulated by Valmont and Merteuil is never simply a dialogue between the two unknowing lovers. The circumstance of interceptive mediation may occur either by a design or simply by an accident, in which the letter cannot be sent and destined in a linear way without hindrance. The obstacle of distance maps out the necessity of mediation in the particularity of the *I-you* relationship. The privacy protected in that relationship therefore cannot be presumed to remain impervious to the world outside the dyad composed of the sender and the intended receiver. The closure of privacy cannot avoid being connected with the public mediation, whether this mediation is beneficial or malicious to the private relationship. The private sphere may not purely maintain itself without touching the boundary of the public space. As Derrida claims, “It is impossible for what is written not to be disclosed” (*Post Card* 58).

### **The Closure in Epistolary Transmission**

Contrary to the exclusively possessed privacy in epistolary exchanges, the public mediation in epistolary transmission is overtly manipulated by the postal system of delivery. The mediation by the postal system functions in an organized way, aiming at accurately transmitting the letter to its addressed destination through a regulated network of posts. The posts are not arbitrary points, but stations subsumed under the control of the postal system. The posts are subject to the central management of the postal system, from which emerges

a hierarchical relation between the posts and the managing center. The hierarchical relation makes it convenient for the postal system to manage the temporal and spatial distance under regulation. The distance is an obstacle that frustrates an encounter between the sender and the receiver, but the efficient postal system counts it as calculable and affordable. In the postal procedure of distribution, the distance may not be unimaginably outstretched and capricious. Rather, the distance can be simply calculated as composed of a series of posts, which may be crossed step by step. This promise, owing to the regulated process of delivery, seems to practically decrease both the sender's and the receiver's anxiety about waiting. The postal system is established to ensure a correct and frequent transmission of the letter at an affordable price for the public. The postal system brings considerable convenience and development to the way of communication. As Ruth Perry observes, the postal system makes good progress in its reliability:

[...] and though, for a Time, it was subject to Miscarriages and Mistakes yet now it is come also into so exquisite a Management, that nothing can be more exact and 'tis with the utmost safety and Dispatch that Letters are delivered at the remotest Corners of the Town, almost as soon as They could be sent by a Messenger and that from Four, Five, Six to Eight times a Day, according as the Distance of the Place makes it practicable. (64, Defoe's capitalization)

The postal system is hence a regulation of possible lapses during transmission. In addition to the envelope sealing the letter, the postal system also secures and protects the privacy of the letter.

However, this guaranteed privacy cannot be regarded as the same thing formed in letter writing. On the one hand, the privacy promised by the postal system is not shielded without censorship. As soon as the letter is entrusted to the postal system by the sender, the letter unavoidably goes through the steps of examination and classification. In this way, the privacy of the letter is not so much preserved as supervised. In that case, the postal system

as a public mediation similarly implements an interception of the letter, which manipulates the privacy by the public device of control. On the other hand, the privacy constructed in letter writing is reduced to mere individual triviality, while compared with the public service of the postal system. Personal expressions through epistolary exchanges are undervalued, now that the primary concern of the postal delivery focuses on the final addressed destination. Lapses are not to be feared but handled. The postal system appears to dominate the complete process of transmission.

This phenomenon of public domination over the value of privacy still prevails in other sections of the society, such as the establishment of knowledge. In “Envois,” for instance, Derrida contemplates the constraint imposed on people’s mind by “an order of generations, an irreversible sequence of inheritance,” in which the descendents of that heritage “overturned nothing at all” (20). Socrates’ position as the origin of the intellectual inheritance cannot be overturned. The inheritance serves as the public foundation of an access to knowledge, whose authority marginalizes heterogeneous individual articulations. Confronted with the private space, the overvalued public space would simply reduce the privacy to regulation. Nevertheless, the reduction also undermines the characteristic of being overt of the public space and hence isolates the public space within its own closure.

In contrast to the public trait of the postal management, the letter features a more ambiguous interweaving of the private with the public. While being prone to the threat of interception, the letter is still imbued with the sender’s desire for the receiver’s presence. In one aspect, provided that the sender is aware of the censorship of the postal system, s/he would write with caution not to divulge the specific details of secrecy. The sender may only hint at the event, since the event might be as much well-known for the intended receiver as for the sender. Or when the sender pours forth his/her feelings in the letter, the feelings may be better understood by the intended receiver than by other readers outside the relationship. Located in the public space of transmission, the particularity of privacy refuses to be

peeped into and forms its encoded language belonging to the specific interpretation between the sender and the intended receiver. The sender in “Envois” reveals this kind of inclination: “to write it ciphered still in order to dispatch it to you, taking all the precautions so that forever you are the only one to be able to decrypt it” (*Post Card* 13).

In the other aspect, the efficiency of the postal system is beneficial to intensifying both the sender’s and the receiver’s desires for each other. The postal system increases the frequency and convenience of the transmission, which facilitates fluent and constant epistolary exchanges. Despite the constancy, the distance still remains not to be eliminated. Inversely, even though the constant exchanges add to the pleasure of approaching the absent other for both sides, they also persistently remind both sides of the remained hindrance of distance. It is the distance that makes both sides ineluctably and continually remember the loss of being unable to encounter the other’s presence. The feeling of loss paradoxically prompts their desires for each other, which reinforces the private bond between them. These two aspects reveal how the letter may connect the private space with the public space without either reducing its privacy to the public regulation or completely enclosing its privacy outside the public mediation.

### **Valorization and Substitution for the Epistolary Genre: The Post Card**

The closures in epistolary exchanges and transmission are what Derrida attempts to deconstruct in “Envois.” His way of deconstruction consists of the acts of repetition and substitution. As to the act of repetition, Derrida valorizes traditional generic characteristics of the epistolary genre. In addition, he interweaves his analysis of the postal system with the articulations of love in the epistolary form of the post card. The valorization of the genre does not retard the writing of “Envois” by circumscribing it in the periphery of the traditional law of genre. Instead, the repeated step not only re-examines the presence of the law of genre but also evokes the absence of deviations to substitute for the closures guarded

by the generic law. In the “parasitical economy” (Benstock, 1991, “Letters” p. 119) of repetition and substitution, the letter is a “knot” (Johnson, 1977, p. 245) which vacillates between its privacy and its public mediation, between the absence and the presence. To further manifest the paradox of the letter, Derrida uses the post card as the epistolary form of “Envois” to highlight an indeterminate position beyond the restricted logic of binary oppositions.

### **Valorization of the Epistolary Genre**

In “Envois,” we may find that Derrida writes the texts of post cards with the traditional epistolary genre in his mind. This is particularly apparent when he mentions that he intends to write a “fiction,” for the purpose of “parodying epistolary or detective literature (from the Philosophical Letters to the Portuguese nun, from the *liaisons dangereuses* to Milena)” (*Post Card* 179).<sup>2</sup> Making references to previous epistolary texts is a common characteristic in epistolary novels. For example, in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*, when the Marquise de Merteuil criticizes “the great defect of all novels,” she writes: “Though the author whips himself up into a passion the reader is left cold. *Héloïse* is the sole exception one might be tempted to make” (de Laclos 79, Letter 33). *Héloïse* most likely refers to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s epistolary novel *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* (1761), which in the eighteenth-century French society “the reading public demanded [it] so ardently that dozens of editions were issued in quick succession” (Rosbottom 481).

In addition to the references, Derrida still valorizes the editor’s function in the epistolary genre. As a generic characteristic of epistolary novels, the editor’s preface is installed before the collection of letters. The author pretends to be the editor to inform the reader of the two main functions of the preface. One of the functions is to verify the

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<sup>2</sup> Here Derrida mentions prestigious epistolary works in the epistolary genre: *The Portuguese Letters* (1669) written by the French writer Gabriel de Guilleragues, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782) written by Choderlos de Laclos, and Kafka’s letters to Milena.



authenticity of the collection and the other to claim the author's expected edification that the reader may get from reading the novel. Concerning the authenticity, the editor often explains how the present collection of letters is compiled, edited, and published. The explanation means to verify the authenticity by describing details of the editing process. The editing is closely related to a principle of selection, according to which the collection may go through some abridgement and correction. As in his preface to *Clarissa* (1747-1748), Samuel Richardson records different kinds of advice proposed to the editor for the proper length of compilation. Moreover, playing the editor's role, he confirms the authenticity by explaining the reason for the eventual lengthy compilation: "Length will be naturally expected," since "the letters on both sides are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects: the events at the time generally dubious—so that they abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called instantaneous descriptions and reflections" (35). Richardson takes advantage of the impromptu writing and thinking to prove that the lengthy letters are the consequence of authentic and immediate accounts.

The intention to authenticate the epistolary collection is detectable in "Envois" as well. Even if the brief introduction before the collection of post cards is not entitled "preface," it actually valorizes the function of the traditional epistolary preface to demonstrate that the collection is genuine. Derrida refers to the source of "Envois" as from "the remainders of a recently destroyed correspondence" (*Post Card* 3). To improve the authentic effects of the post cards, he further indicates the trace of absence: "Whatever their original length, the passages that have disappeared are indicated, at the very place of their incineration, by a blank of 52 signs / and a contract insists that this stretch of destroyed surface remain forever indeterminable" (4). Different from the traditional abridgement by omitting unnecessary contents, Derrida's way of editing chooses to preserve the destroyed lines in blanks rather than blot them out. This preservation of absence displays the

incompletion of the present collection. Unlike the traditional editor's privileged possession of the complete pack of letters, Derrida in advance admits that the retrospective act of collection is impossible to retrieve the post cards in their unchanged conditions. As a result, he repeats the editor's task of selection, though the repetition is practiced "due to a very strange principle of selection" (3), which will initiate incompletion instead of wholeness.

The other function of the preface is to lead the reader to approach the editor's intended edification. As in *Clarissa*, Richardson presupposes moral teachings as what he wants to promote through the publication of the novel: "it is one of the principal views of the publication: to caution parents against the undue exertion of their natural authority over their children in the great article of marriage: and children against preferring a man of pleasure to a man of probity, upon that dangerous but too commonly received notion, *that a reformed rake makes the best husband*" (36, Richardson's emphasis). The edification reminds the reading public to be cautious enough not to follow the same old road to ruin as the characters do in the novel.

Similar to the editor's instruction in the purpose of reading, Derrida's brief introduction before the collected post cards also reminds the reader of "Envois" not to become "the *bad* reader" (*Post Card 4*, Derrida's emphasis) who intends to "predestine one's reading" (4). Different from the aim of edification to regulate the reader's mind under moral principles, Derrida's remarks instead prompt the reader to go beyond the boundary of any predetermined way of reading and to remain incredulous of any identified way of thinking.

In addition to the editor's preface, Derrida also repeats a distinguished use in the epistolary genre: the apostrophe. The apostrophe for the absent other in letter writing reinforces the particularity of the *I-you* relationship between the sender and the receiver. It creates a sense of verisimilitude, as if the sender could interpellate the receiver's immediate presence to the moment. It produces an exclusive kind of possession, which makes the

absent other the only privileged receiver, impossibly replaced by others. As in Françoise de Graffigny's epistolary novel *Letters from a Peruvian Woman* (1747), the Peruvian princess Zilia constantly apostrophizes "dearest Aza" in her letters to her captivated fiancé Aza, the Peruvian king: "Oh my dearest Aza! I would betray all notions of virtue were I to cease loving you for one moment. [...] I shall live only for you" (95). Whenever Zilia delineates details of the events happening around her, she keeps involving Aza in her awareness and judgment. Only to Aza can Zilia pour out her variations of feelings and thoughts. Aza is consecrated as the solely intended other for Zilia to project herself. Similarly, in "Envois," Derrida makes the sender of the post cards persistently evoke the absent other "you" as the sender's confidential interlocutor: "I was addressing myself only to you. To you uniquely, you, you [...]" (*Post Card* 49). Moreover, to emphasize the particularity of "you," the sender frequently repeats, "You are my Destiny, my Destined One" (163).

### **Substitution for the Closures in Epistolary Exchange and Transmission**

Confronted with the closure formed in the private space or organized by the public postal system, Derrida attempts to propose a possibility of subversion within the law of genre and the regulated circulation of postal delivery. This way of subversion is an act of substitution in repetition of the established presence of the epistolary genre and transmission. The substitution aims at dismantling the binary logic that demarcates the boundary between presence and absence, between the public and the private. The movement of substitution is stimulated in an "economy of différance" (Derrida, 1976, p. 143). The différance "does not *resist* appropriation, it does not impose an exterior limit upon it" (143, Derrida's emphasis). It "began by *broaching* alienation and it ends by leaving reappropriation *breached*" (143, Derrida's emphasis). Différance operates in the paradox between making "the opposition of presence and absence possible" and carrying in the "desire of presence" "the destiny of its non-satisfaction" (143). In brief, the economy of

différance does not resist influence, although it will interminably breach the closure and unity of any influence. The paradox of différance extends the time and the space of an “interval” (Derrida, 1982, p. 8) in “reserve” (18) before reaching any determination. The extension of the temporal and spatial distance provides possibilities of evoking differences in postponement. The economy of différance, with difference in deferral or vice versa, is what I want to explore in the paradox between the epistolary genre and Derrida’s “Envois.”

To explore the economy of différance in epistolary writing and exchanges, first I want to embody three different perspectives to map out the paradoxical effects of difference and deferral.

In chapter two “Epistolary Otherness: The Object of Desire,” I employ Jacques Lacan’s concept of the *objet a* to explicate the sender’s construction of the self through a manipulation of the intended receiver as the object of desire. This way of construction depends on the absent other as a necessity for establishing subjectivity. To further transgress the boundary of the self in relation to the other, Derrida proposes in “Envois” a preservation in destruction. Derrida intends to precipitate any guarded construction of the self into destabilizing threats.

In chapter three “Epistolary Writing: Paradox of the Supplement,” I apply Derrida’s concept of the supplement to explain how desire is submitted to “the destiny of its non-satisfaction” (1976, p. 143). The concept of the supplement comprises two paradoxical effects: the addition and the substitution (144-145). Epistolary writing is a way of communication that adds to decrease the sender’s anxiety about the distance from the intended receiver’s absence. On the other hand, epistolary writing also paradoxically substitutes distance and absence for the final consummation of encountering the absent receiver. The sender keeps on writing to reserve his/her desire in non-fulfillment. The act of writing hence oscillates in the ambivalence between presence and absence, immediacy and deferral.

In chapter four “Epistolary Exchange: Play of the *Fort Da*,” I elaborate on Sigmund Freud’s and Lacan’s different interpretations of the *fort da* game to elucidate different ways of interactions in epistolary exchanges. In Freud’s mode of the *fort da* exchange, the sender submits the receiver’s role to the passive other, who is objectified to facilitate the sender’s pleasure of mastery. This way of gaining pleasure consists of constancy and consistency to guard the self from the risk of any danger. However, in Lacan’s analysis of the *fort da* game, the sender constantly takes the risk of suffering to construct his/her self. The sender pursues a “distinct consistency” (1964, p. 61) in his/her manipulation of the object of desire. To go beyond the self-centered way of investment, Derrida proposes a *fort da* movement in a persistent disequilibrium. The sender is not the determiner of his/her own message. Instead, the sender is a mail carrier of his/her message, transmitting the message for alternative possibilities of reading.

From these three perspectives, I attempt to demonstrate the three issues I point out in the title of my thesis: “Detour, Deferral, and Différance: Epistolarity in *The Post Card*.” The three issues are inextricably interwoven into the constructions of the epistolary otherness, the epistolary writing, and the epistolary exchange.

In the construction of the epistolary otherness, the sender defers his/her desire for a final consummation with the absent receiver by objectifying the absent other as the object of desire. On the object of desire, the sender projects his/her desire to construct the self. The object of desire enables the sender to identify his/her own subjectivity, because through the other’s existence the sender becomes aware of his/her difference and specificity distinct from the other’s. The sender, as a result, goes in a detour through an interaction with the other to produce his/her identities. Instead of confirming his/her identities in self-isolation, the sender goes through a process of différance, in which his/her identities are persistently differentiated and deferred without reaching any determinacy.

The postponement of desire is similarly reflected in the process of writing letters.

Epistolary writing constructs a textual communication between the sender and the receiver, which also implies a failed encounter with the absent other in reality. As a supplementary mediation and compensation for the absence, epistolary writing simultaneously puts the mutual communication in the distance of detour and defers the desire for the absent other from expiring in the full satisfaction of proximity. Distance stimulates the sender's desire, whereas proximity brings the desire into the stasis of inertia. Distance situates the sender's desire in the economy of *différance*, in which the desire is recurrently triggered, represented, and destructed without resting on one singular determination.

The transmission of epistolary exchanges echoes the desire's economy of *différance*. The process of transmission involves the risks of "deviation and remaining" (*Post Card* 443, Note 17), which continually detain epistolary exchanges from arriving at the final destination. The epistolary exchanges detour away from a shortcut to the destination and therefore constantly defer the ultimate moment of completion. They participate in a *fort da* movement of *différance*, in which the temporal-spatial distance arouses variations in their effects and meanings. The epistolary exchanges remain indecisive in the process of transmission.

The effects of detour, deferral, and *différance* persistently posit the epistolary genre beyond its generic identity in literature. They constitute the epistolarity of the post card, in which the epistolary genre is valorized and examined in order that its generic identity may be deferred in the indeterminacy of difference. The valorization of and going beyond the epistolary genre are further enlarged in Derrida's intention of going beyond the linearity of the Western intellectual genealogy. This is my focus in chapter five "Epistolary Inheritance: Post Card of Intellectual Legacy." From the paradoxical relationship between dictator / scribe, sender / receiver, creditor / debtor to the role of *facteur* / mediator, I want to elucidate Derrida's way of deconstructing the logic of binary oppositions through speculations. The intellectual letter of inheritance also continually goes through the process

of différance, circulating in the economy of difference and deferral.

### **The Post Card**

Derrida combines the deconstruction of both the epistolary genre and the intellectual genealogy in the form of the post card. As the epistolary genre is generally assessed as “a secondary genre” (*Post Card* 62) in the intellectual genealogy of literature, the post card is similarly included in the epistolary genealogy of the letter as a nonessential form. Such an analogy based on the genealogical relationship highlights the post card as a participant in both the epistolary genre and the genealogy of literature without belonging to their law of identification. The post card serves as an epistolary form, but it is commonly neglected because of its easy exposure of the message to multiple readers. It is regarded as a form incapable of preserving secrecy. As a result, the post card is misrecognized as a kind of document that is easily intercepted and understood.

However, it is by means of such a prejudice that the post card becomes the dynamic and paradoxical mediation to deconstruct both the epistolary genre and the intellectual genealogy. The post card is not constrained by the law of genre and the law of inheritance. On the contrary, it puts the laws in its unrestricted form to challenge the legitimized destination and transmission in both the epistolary genre and the intellectual inheritance. The binary logic of oppositions between the origin and the destination is problematized and undermined in the indeterminate form of the post card with privacy in publicity, publicity in privacy. Derrida’s employment of the post card to interrogate the linear genealogy of the knowledge system is particularly inspiring, since the post cards collected in “Envois” are reproductions of the scene of reversal between Socrates and Plato.<sup>3</sup> When the post card exposes the message and in this way disturbs the guarded form of the letter, it simultaneously puts the genealogy of heritage in various kinds of observations and

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<sup>3</sup> Please refer to the picture in Chapter Five for reference.

interpretations. The genealogy of the letter and the genealogy of knowledge are interfered and even interrupted by the paradox aroused in the form of the post card.

The form of the post card is paradoxical because it is “half-private half-public” (*Post Card* 62), “neither private nor public” (185). Derrida explains his predilection for the post card:

What I like about post cards is that even if in an envelope, they are made to circulate like an open but illegible letter. (12)

What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address. Here, in my post card apocalypse, there are proper names, S. and p., above the picture, and reversibility unleashes itself [...]. (13)

The reversibility of the post card “neutralize[s] all the codes, [...] all the genres” (80). The generic characteristics of the epistolary genre are simultaneously valorized and substituted in the post card. On the one hand, the message on the post card may remain “indecipherable, the interior safe itself” (47) for non-addressed receivers. On the other hand, the openness of the post card makes it not confined within the monopoly of decipherability. The post card is an “intercepted letter” that “can never be enclosed,” that is “without value” and “it is as if it were at everyone’s disposition” (119). The post card is therefore susceptible to different ways of interpretations. Peter Schwenger discloses the paradox of the post card:

For any post card is part of a system of relays for carrying and delivering meaning. Addressed and signed, it assumes an identity at either end of the communication process: a “sender” and an “addressee.” [...] In this view the post card and the postal system, emblemize the very idea of logocentrism,



of a stable meaning which inhabits the letter. (166)

Yet in another view the post card is the emblem of that which resists logocentrism. [...] They multiply themselves – same image, different texts and disseminate themselves, for if the postal system is logocentric, it is also disseminatory; that letters or cards will go astray is always possible, and therefore for Derrida necessary. This is logically implicit in the nature of a postal relay itself. If the letter were not divisible, its destination and its origin would be one and the same. But with division comes the necessary possibility that a letter will not reach its destination. (166)

In its paradoxical deconstruction of the epistolary genre, the postal principle of the post card is inclined to go “beyond every genre” (*Post Card* 192). In this manner, the post card transforms the sealed privacy and unity of the form of the letter into “a letter that puts itself, at the very second of the pickup, *into pieces*” (67, Derrida’s emphasis). The post card is an epistolary form that does not remain intact away from other possible receivers’ interpretations in its transmission. It “open[s] generalities” (163) that define the epistolary form of the letter. It multiplies the form of the letter in going beyond the limit of every specific genre: “Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself” (48). The post card always implies derailment in its form to open the multiplicity. Derrida intends to disseminate the possibility of derailment in the act of writing *The Post Card*:

In several places I will leave all kinds of references, names of persons and of places, authenticable dates, identifiable events, they will rush in with eyes closed, finally believing to be there and to find us there when by means of a switch point I will send them elsewhere to see if we are there, with a stroke of the pen or the *grattoir* I will make everything derail, not at every instant, that would be too convenient, but occasionally and according to a rule that I will

not ever give, even were I to know it one day. (177)