

Chapter Two

Epistolary Otherness: The Object of Desire

In the epistolary genre, letter writing is characteristic of presuming an intended receiver as the addressee. To the intended receiver, the sender pours forth his/her intimate remarks in confidence. Moreover, the sender expects a response from the intended receiver. The expectation prompts the sender's desire to keep writing and exchanging messages. In this sense, the existence of the intended receiver makes letter writing possible. The relationship between the sender and the intended receiver is specific and particular.

Although the intended receiver makes letter writing possible, the act of writing is primarily controlled by the sender, who in the process of writing does not simply write to the intended receiver. As the sender in "Envois" confesses: "Who is writing? To whom? And to send, to destine, to dispatch what? To what address?" (*Post Card 5*). In addition to the identified intended receiver, the sender may simultaneously address his/her love, declare his/her love, and articulate his/her self. Therefore, both the sender's and the receiver's identities are not to be determined as stable and unchangeable. The process of exchanging letters endangers their formation of an invulnerable identity. As a result, the consummation of the identity is continually deferred, just as the distance that prevents the sender and the receiver from encountering each other.

The deferral creates a temporal and spatial distance for the sender to construct his/her self in relation to the absent receiver as the other. In this chapter, I want to apply Jacques Lacan's concept of the object of desire to examine the scope of the relation between the sender's self and the absent other in "Envois." In my application, the absent other not only plays the role of the intended receiver but also serves as the sender's "privileged object" (Lacan, 1981, p. 83) for the sender to project his/her desire. Through interminable projections on the other as the object of desire, the sender attempts to approximate the final

consummation of desire and the self. However, I also want to point out that the sender, who manipulates the object of desire, is too much indulged in his/her construction of the self. In my opinion, the emphasis of alterity constitutes the main difference between Lacan's assertion that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (1972, p. 53) and Derrida's claim that "a letter can always not arrive at its destination" (*Post Card* 33).

The Epistolary Addressee

The form of letter writing always necessitates the existence of the other as its addressee, that is, as its intended receiver. Whether the letter is to be sent or not, the sender requires an assumed receiver to prompt the act of letter writing, in which the assumed receiver is addressed as "you." This requirement demonstrates the sender's desire to solicit response from his/her intended receiver. The sender not only reveals his/her emotions and thoughts in letter writing but also expects a reply from his/her intended receiver. What the sender writes is not simply produced in solitary self-contemplation but contributed to his/her seduction of the intended receiver's reaction. Janet Gurkin Altman explains such a necessity of an intended receiver as a characteristic of the epistolary language:

It is the hallmark of epistolary language in general to make statements in order to elicit a response from a specific addressee. To write a letter is not only to define oneself in relationship to a particular *you*; it is also an attempt to draw that *you* into becoming the *I* of a new statement. (122, Altman's emphasis)

Altman confirms an epistolary contract, in which both the sender and the receiver are involved in the act of writing and the act of reading. The sender may be the receiver, and vice versa. The contract is established because of the desire for exchange, which Altman considers the main difference between letter writing and other modes of first-person writing:

What distinguishes epistolary narrative from these diary novels, however, is the desire for *exchange*. In epistolary writing the reader is called upon to respond as a writer and to contribute as such to the narrative.

[...] if there is no desire for exchange, the writing does not differ significantly from a journal, even if it assumes the outer form of the letter. To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact – the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent’s world. (89, Altman’s emphasis)

The epistolary pact resembles the acquiescent agreement in a dialogue, where both sides subscribe to the verbal way of communication in terms of their desires to exchange opinions. Mikhail Bakhtin observes that the requirement of an intended receiver analogizes epistolary exchanges with the verbal exchanges in a dialogue:

The epistolary form in and of itself does not predetermine the type of discourse. In general this form permits broad discursive possibilities, but it is best suited to discourse of the final variety of the third type, that is, the reflected discourse of another. A characteristic feature of the letter is an acute awareness of the interlocutor, the addressee to whom it is directed. The letter, like a rejoinder in a dialogue, is addressed to a specific person, and it takes into account the other’s possible reactions, the other’s possible reply. This reckoning with an absent interlocutor can be more or less intensive. (205)

The awareness of a specific other confines the scope of exchange within a unique kind of intimacy exclusively belonging to the sender and the intended receiver. The presumption of the absent specific other gives an impetus to the sender’s compulsive act of writing letters. One of the post cards in “Envois” reveals this kind of compulsion:

What impels me to write you all the time? Before I can even turn around to look, from the unique destination, unique you understand me, unnameable and invisible, that bears your name and has no other face than your own,

before I can even turn around for a question, at every moment the order to write you is given, no matter what, but to write you, and I love, and this is how I recognize that I love. (*Post Card 10*)

The intended other is the unique destination to whom the sender addresses. It is because of such a unique relationship with the other that the sender cannot disburden his/her responsibility of being the other's textual interlocutor. The sender consecrates the epistolary exchange as "all rights reserved" (63) between himself/herself and the intended receiver. Their epistolary exchanges are written exclusively for the intended other's understanding:

I repeat, my love: *for you*. I write for you and speak only to you. You are perhaps the only one to know it, but you do know it, and in any case better than anyone; and you have no reason to doubt it, no more than this card that you are reading now, that you are holding in your hands or on your knees.

(*Post Card 73*, Derrida's emphasis)

The intended receiver is confirmed by the sender to be the only one endowed with the rights to decipher the exchanged message and to most approximately touch the post card. This dual relationship provides the basis for the possibility of letter writing.

The Epistolary Object of Desire

Through letter writing, the specificity of the intended receiver makes it possible for the sender to compensate his/her anxiety about distance, which results from an incapability of direct contact in presence between the sender and the receiver. What the sender feels most intensely is the intended other's absence. In other words, presence is the primary concern for the sender, since it appears to be concrete and controllable. Absence, on the contrary, is the source of misgiving and distress. With this apprehension of absence in mind, the sender therefore relies on the letter as a mediation to bridge the distance that obstructs his/her encounter with the absent other. In this way, distance prompts the act of letter

writing with an aim to encounter the absent other's presence.

However, with such a possibility of an eventual fulfillment of presence, does letter writing merely serve as a temporary substitute to fill the lack of absence? Does it mean that once the real encounter or the consummation is carried out, both the sender and the receiver's desires for exchange could be fulfilled? My inquiry here attempts to interrogate the two hypotheses that may be concluded from a predilection for the value of presence. The two hypotheses in my inquiry ignore the effects and impacts aroused from the process of epistolary exchanges. In the temporal-spatial process of epistolary exchanges, the factor of distance stimulates changes in the act of letter writing. Letter writing is no longer simply used to supplement the gap of distance, but it furthermore becomes a way to "textualize the self" (Hu, 1998, pp. 62-63)¹ in order that the subject enables himself/herself to construct his/her self through the existence of the other. Moreover, the distinction between the value of presence and the value of absence cannot be simplified to be a hierarchical demarcation. Both presence and absence are unstably valorized and differentiated in the process of epistolary exchanges. They are not fixated values to be calculated with. The desire for exchange is not to be confined in an economy based on a singularly privileged value of presence or absence. What impels letter writing to ceaselessly carry on is not only the desire to exchange with the absent intended other but to a greater extent the desire to exchange for the construction of the self.

Jacques Lacan's concept of the *objet a* illuminates the mode of operation in the process of textualizing the self. In the following part, I want to elaborate on how Lacan's concept of the *objet a*, the other, is related to the source of the subject's desire, the Other,

¹ In 書寫自我：《譚郎的書信》中的書信形式 [Writing the Self: The Epistolary Form in *Letters of Tian-Lang*] (1998), Chin-yuan Hu proposes that the letter writer relies on the use of language to construct his/her self. Only through the textual narrative of language does the self recognize and create his/her connections with the world. The subject's self has no "ontological status" (62) to be rendered as being the transcendent (62). Rather, the self needs to be mediated (63) and articulated through the "textuality" (63) of language to be symbolically and imaginarily constructed. As a result, the self is not naturally given, but is textualized. Please see pp. 62-63 of Chin-yuan Hu's essay.

and becomes the object of desire. It is in the constructed process of this relation that the subject attempts to configure and approximate his/her self. Moreover, the process of constructing the self takes advantage of the mediation of language, which situates the self-construction in the context of textual representation. The concept of the textually constructed self replenishes the act of letter writing with a paradoxical kind of desire for both the “you” of the intended receiver and the “I” of the sender. The paradox of desire is the “jealousy” that “begins with the first letter” (*Post Card 14*), which remains indeterminate, inexhaustible, and even agonistic in the distance between presence and absence.

The Object of Desire and the Big Other

To develop the concept of the *objet a*, Lacan first questions the necessity of maintaining the totality of the subject: “People spend their time plaguing us about taking it [the subject] in its totality. Why should it be a whole?” (1955, p. 243). He disagrees with the idea of the subject in its totality and regards the subject in its undecided nature: “If we were whole, we would each be in our corners, whole, we wouldn’t be here, together, trying to get ourselves into shape, as they say. It is the subject, not in its totality, but in its opening up” (243).

The opening up of the subject refers to Lacan’s concept of the split subject, which results from the notion of the “fragmented body” (1977, p. 5) developed in the mirror stage. The notion of the fragmented body is perceived by the child through a contradiction between his/her specular image and his/her awkward coordination of body movements in his/her premature “age of six months” (2). In one aspect, the child gazes at his specular image in the mirror without being bothered by his/her incapability of flexible body movements:

Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he is by some

support, human or artificial [...], he nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image. (1977, p. 2)

For the child, the specular image is an ideal and intended presence of his/her self. The specular image appears “in a symmetry [...], in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him” (3). The image is held in the subject’s gaze, which immobilizes and preserves the image under the subject’s eyes of examination and in the scope of the subject’s imagination. The image is endowed with the quality of consistency.

In Lacan’s words, the specular image

[...] symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is still pregnant with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms that dominate him, or with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his own making tends to find completion.

(1977, p. 3, Lacan’s emphasis)

The subject, through his/her imaginary combination, intends to identify with an idealization of the self. The specular image in symmetry is the subject’s intended destination and completion of the self.

In the other aspect, however, the subject’s gaze at the ideal image of the self is disturbed by “a certain dehiscence at the heart of the organism, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of uneasiness and motor unco-ordination of the neo-natal months” (4). Due to the subject’s premature development of body movements in the mirror stage, the subject cannot harmonize his/her physical gestures to produce the symmetrical effects projected on the gaze of the specular image. Compared to the consistent specular image, the subject’s un-coordinated body appears “fragmented” (5). In this contrast to the other

imaginarily embellished self-image, the subject constantly “sees himself from the other side, in an imperfect manner” (1955, p. 244).

It is the contradiction between the subject’s idealized image of the self and his/her fragmented way of body coordination that “situates the agency of the ego” (1977, p. 2) and “generates the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego’s verifications” (5). The contradiction impels the subject to integrate his/her fragmented body into a unity to reach the destination of the symmetrical body. The ego of the subject emerges to go through the process toward the ideal completion of the subject. As Lacan explains:

Within this perspective, one would like the subject to aggregate all the more or less fragmented, fragmentary pieces of this thing in which he fails to recognise himself [*se méconnaît*]. One wants him in effect to gather everything which he experienced in the pregenital stage, his scattered limbs, his partial drives, the succession of partial objects [...]. One wants to allow this ego to gather its strength, to realise itself, to integrate itself the dear little thing. If this end is pursued in a direct fashion, if one focuses on the imaginary and the pregenital, one necessarily ends up in that sort of analysis in which the consummation of partial objects is achieved through the intermediary of the image of the other. (1955, p. 245)

To achieve the consummation of the self, the subject has to depend on his/her reconstruction of the images constitutive of the fragmented body. The process of reconstruction represents the partial objects of the un-coordinated body in their images, which are created for the purpose of attaining to their aggregation as the consummation. Every image of representation serves as the *objet a*, the other, which is created to project the subject’s desire for the completion that s/he lacks. Lacan emphasizes the significant connection between *the objet a* and the lack:

The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself,

has separated itself off as organ. This serves as a symbol of the lack, that is to say, of the phallus, not as such, but in so far as it is lacking. It must, therefore, be an object that is, firstly, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack. (1981, p. 103)

The *objet a* is an object presented in double expressions. On the one hand, it is the object that the subject involves in his/her creation to fulfill the completion of the self. On the other hand, the object as the other also reminds the subject of his/her lack, that is, his/her distance away from the consummation. The final consummation is where the subject's desire lies. Therefore, the *objet a* created to approach the consummation is "the object of desire," "the cause of desire" (Evans 125), which is "permeated and mobilised by lack" (Sarup 98). This object of desire not only "unleashes desire" (69) from the subject but also incessantly frustrates the subject's attempt at consummation by its own implication of lack.

The object of desire, as both a supplement to the absence of consummation and a substitution for the presence of the subject's representation, demonstrates a gap between the subject and his/her desire, that is, between the subject and the Other. The big Other, as Lacan puts it, "is already there in every opening, however fleeting it may be, of the unconscious" (1981, p. 130). In other words, "*the unconscious is the discourse of the Other*" (131, Lacan's emphasis). In Lacan's schema, "the unconscious is structured like a language" (203), since the unconscious is "the sum of the effects of speech on a subject, at the level at which the subject constitutes himself out of the effects of the signifier" (126). Based on this notion, the Other is "the locus of speech" (129), in which "is situated the chain of the signifier that governs whatever may be made present of the subject" (203).

In Lacan's explications of the unconscious and the Other, the subject cannot be considered in itself but needs to be presented through the effects of the signifier. Moreover, the subject may not establish a complete identity of itself through the accumulated effects from the chain of the signifier in the Other. This is because the effects of the signifier are

inexhaustible, under the condition that “a signifier is that which represents a subject for another signifier” (207). The identity of the subject cannot be realized in the interaction with the Other, where the subject believes to be the place of possible consummation. There is a “gap” (206) between the subject and the Other as his/her desire, which manifests a “circular” and “disymmetrical” (207) process:

Here the processes are to be articulated, of course, as circular between the subject and the Other – from the subject called to the Other, to the subject of that which he has himself seen appear in the field of the Other, from the Other coming back. This process is circular, but, of its nature, without reciprocity.

Because it is circular, it is disymmetrical. (1981, p. 207)

In the process of circulation between the subject and the Other, the Other becomes the inexhaustible origin and the unachievable destination for the subject to interminably instill his/her desire. The circulation is unbalanced, since the subject’s wish for consummation is persistently deferred and suspended. The gap cannot be eliminated through the representations of the object of desire.

The gap, as a result, illuminates the narcissistic aspect of the object of desire:

The *petite a* never crosses this gap. Recollect what we learned about the gaze, the most characteristic term for apprehending the proper function of the *objet a*. This *a* is presented precisely, in the field of the mirage of the narcissistic function of desire, as the object that cannot be swallowed, as it were, which remains stuck in the gullet of the signifier. It is at this point of lack that the subject has to recognize himself. (1981, p. 270)

Through the mediation of the object of desire, the subject attempts to conceive of possible approximations to the unreachable Other, that is, to the source of his/her desire. Desire can only be approached in the subject’s imaginary construction of the desire. The object of desire is therefore constructed and collected by the subject himself/herself to represent the

impossibly exhausted desire. In that case, the subject narcissistically creates the images of the object of desire and simultaneously repeats the lack of the object of desire to configure the contours of his/her self in relation to the irretrievable loss of the Other.

The Big Other as the Source of Desire

The contradiction between an idealized image and the reality, as being displayed in the mirror stage of the subject's development, similarly sketches the paradox of letter writing in "Envois." On the one hand, analogous to the child's identification with the wholeness of the specular image, the sender has a tendency to idealize the absent other as the final destination and consummation of his/her desire. The sender's tendency toward an idealization not only identifies a specific receiver in reality but also further transfigures the intended receiver into an incapably reduced Other. The Other is not limited in the specific identity of the intended receiver as the other. To a greater degree, the Other is such an idealized goal shaped in the sender's imagination that it becomes unobtainable. One of the post cards in "Envois" reveals the sender's intentional idealization of "you" away from any possible restraint of identity:

[...] every time I said "*arrive*," I was thinking of you, not in the sense of the accident that happens [*arrive*], of the event that happens [*arrive*], of the letter that arrives, or not, but of you. Not of what I expect *from you*, as if your coming were still an accident of yours, but of you, uniquely, you who arrive, who are what arrives, you who are for me what arrives, what comes to me from a single venue. (*Post Card 78*, Derrida's emphasis)

The sender thinks of "you" as the unique one, who cannot be completely interpreted and represented through those events or expectations related to "you." This "you," as the idealized Other, is the source of the sender's desire, which the sender exalts to the most eminent position of consummation. The sender reinforces the idealized "you" by claiming

the irreducible separation between himself/herself and the Other:

You are my only double, I suppose, I speculate, I postulate, [...] you are now the name, yourself, or the title of everything that I do not understand. That I never will be able to know, the other side of myself, eternally inaccessible, not unthinkable, at all [*du tout*], but unknowable, unknown and so lovable.

(Post Card 147)

The inaccessibility of the Other as the sender's desire reveals the other aspect in the paradox of letter writing—distance. Distance encumbers the sender's journey toward a final encounter with an enjoyment of his/her desire. The distance not only refers to the calculable time and space but also comprises the inexhaustible dynamics of desire. The temporal and spatial distance can be handled through the mediation of epistolary correspondence. The dynamics of desire, however, cannot be replenished by any means to stop its excess. Desire remains insatiable in its lack, as David Bruce McWhirter asserts: "Desire wants only to go on wanting, to preserve itself as desire (as abstract potentiality), and therefore resists the realization (the fulfillment) of any particular desire" (106). Desire cannot be simply reduced to a particularity on behalf of the desire. For the sender in "Envois," "[m]y desire is unacceptable, but living" (*Post Card 40*). The sender's desire longs for no settlement for its security and stability, but it only wishes to keep running without stop and therefore living in the ongoing state:

And everything would be done so that they might run: never oblige them to stop, except to catch their breath, for one desire is to leave them their breath, and life. And simultaneously, this is what leaves reliefs in the text, always more than you think. (*Post Card 78*)

The sender's desire, in its unremitting flying, recurrently induces life and opens space for revitalizing the textual dynamics in his/her letter writing.

Construction of the Self through the Object of Desire

How does the desire supplement the sender's writing? How does the sender attempt to approximate his/her unconsummated desire? As the subject in Lacan's analysis of the mirror stage, the sender chooses to approach the Other as desire through the myriad of his/her imaginarily contrived representations of the object of desire. According to Lacan, the subject goes through the mirror stage with different transitions of mental development:

The *mirror stage* is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity [...]. (1977, p. 5, Lacan's emphasis)

Frustrated by the insufficient ability to attain his/her anticipation of self-totality, the subject adopts a secure way to guard his/her anticipation by establishing the verifiable identity of the object of desire. Such an identity is alienated in the subject's imaginary construction, in which the identity can be confirmed and sustained. Confronted with the unobtainable Other as desire, the subject strives to captivate his/her desire in "the inexhaustible quadrature of the ego's verifications" (5). Despite the efforts, the subject's desire for self-totality is still rendered unrealizable, which continually defeats the intention imposed on the verifications.

The sender in "Envois," similarly being dissatisfied with his/her consummation of desire, endeavors to inherit the power of desire through manipulating the object of desire in his/her monopoly. The "jealousy" (*Post Card 85*) of the Other prompts the sender to entail the object of desire in self-reinforcement. The sender's desire is projected on the object of desire to find out a possible outlet for representing the unrealizable Other. The act of projection is practiced ceaselessly, just as the consumption of desire is inexhaustible. The

gap between the Other and the sender's projection cannot be transgressed through the mediation of the object of desire. What the sender contrives in the object of desire to represent the Other is therefore "narcissistic" (Lacan, 1981, p. 270). The sender's self thrives in this process evoked from the "poisoned gift[s]" (*Post Card* 85) of desire, which is untouchable and appetizing.

In this perspective, the self is not identified simply by the sender himself/herself. Instead, the sender's self is constructed in himself/herself through his/her connection with the other: "it is indeed to someone else that we address *ourselves*" (57, Derrida's emphasis). The sender relies on the other to express his/her images of the self, but meanwhile s/he cannot help exerting his/her power to manipulate the other to prove his/her autonomy as the self. Despite admitting the necessity of the other, the sender still defends his/her power of decision: "Your desire has always been mine" (133). The other's desire is bequeathed and interpreted under the sender's dictation. As a result, the sender in "Envois" interminably constructs and destabilizes his/her self in a paradoxical relationship with the other. The necessity of the other and the dictation of the other are ambivalently juxtaposed in the writing of post cards. In the transmission of the post cards, the intended receiver becomes the sender's object of desire, to which the sender both recognizes the receiver's specific identity and goes beyond the limitation of that identity:

And for me to go away content it would still be necessary that I be able to send it to you registered, this final total card (my absolute *pancarte*), that you be able to read it, hold it in your hands, on your knees, under your eyes, in you, that you inherit it and guard it, reproduce my pictures and caption and above all that in my absence you again be seduced in my confession to the point of dying for love. In the last analysis I do nothing that does not have some interest in seducing you, in setting you astray from yourself in order to set you on the way toward me, uniquely nevertheless you do not know who

you are nor to whom precisely I am addressing myself. But there is only you in the world. (*Post Card 68-69*)

The sender first attributes the validity of his/her card writing to the intended receiver's registration. Then, s/he returns the power based on the epistolary contract of exchange to his/her own privilege and precedes the necessity of the other to wield his/her power of seduction. The intended receiver is inversely interpellated and seduced by the sender's self. The receiver's specific identity is absorbed and conquered under the Other of the self, under the sender's desire. In this way, the other's identity and absence are objectified for the sender's self-construction and presence. The sender becomes the articulator for the other and primarily for his/her self:

You understand that whoever writes must indeed ask himself what it is asked of him to write, and then he writes under the dictation of some addressee, this is trivial. But "some addressee," I always leave the gender or number indeterminate, must indeed be the object of a choice of object, and chosen and seduced. "Some addressee" winds up then, to the extent that the approach, the approximation, the appropriation, the "introjection," all progress, no longer able to ask anything that has not already been whispered [*soufflé*] by me. Thereby everything is corrupted, there is only the mirror, no more image, they no longer see each other, no longer destine each other, nothing more. Do you think that this exhaustion is happening to us? We would have loved each other too much. But it is you I still love, the living one. Beyond everything, beyond your name, your name beyond your name. (*Post Card 143-144*)

The sender admits that s/he must write on behalf of the existence of some addressee, that is, a certain intended receiver. However, the intended receiver is chosen, seduced, and loved by the sender beyond his/her singular identity. The intended receiver remains indeterminate, while such an indeterminacy depends on the sender's resolution. In this

self-investment, the epistolary contract no longer functions precisely to destine the sender toward his/her intended receiver. Rather, the intended receiver becomes the object of desire for the sender to make his/her self destined under his/her own way of construction. The absent other as the object of desire is used to partially reflect the formation of the sender's self and is even imaginarily sacrificed in the sender's exercise of strategy:

A normal pathology, of course, but for me this is the only *meurtrière*: one kills someone by addressing a letter to him that is not destined to him, and thereby declaring one's love or even hatred. And I kill you at every moment, but I love you. And you can no longer doubt it, even if I destroy everything with the most amorous patience (as do you, moreover), beginning with myself. [...] If I address myself, as it is said, always to someone else, and otherwise (right here, again), I can no longer address myself by myself. Only to myself, you will say, finally sending me all those cards, sending me *Socrates* and *Plato* just as they send themselves to each other. (*Post Card* 112, Derrida's emphasis)

The sender's construction of the self by means of letter writing is the pathology that unbalances the reciprocity of the epistolary contract. On the one hand, the sender benefits from the epistolary contract to acquire his/her necessity of the other. On the other hand, the sender requires himself/herself to breach the equivalent exchange with the other so as to ensure his/her space of self-development. The sender imaginarily kills his/her intended receiver to satisfy his/her desire for self-autonomy. The post cards, though being sent to the receiver, are wishfully returned to the sender's control. The sender has a secret wish to send himself/herself all the post cards written by himself/herself in order to send back the constructed self s/he craves for:

I also thought that upon reading this sorted mail [*courrier trié*] they could think that I alone am sending these letters to myself: as soon as they are sent

off they get to me (I remain the first and last to read them) by means of the trajectory of a “combined” emitter-receiver. By means of this banal setup I would be the earpiece of what I tell myself. And, if you are following closely, *a priori* this gets to its destination, with all the sought-after effects. Or further, which amounts to the same, I find the best means to find myself *a priori*, in the course of awaiting or reaching myself, everywhere that it arrives, always here and there simultaneously, *fort und da*. So, then it always arrives at its destination. Hey! this is a good definition of “ego” and of fantasy, at bottom. But there it is, I am speaking of something else, of you and of Necessity.

(*Post Card* 199, Derrida’s emphasis)

Although the sender exerts his/her fantasy to manipulate the other for the sake of his/her self-construction, the sender cannot obliterate his/her recourse to the necessity of the other. The sender might conceive “the trajectory of a ‘combined’ emitter-receiver” (199) in his/her convenience, but the journey of reaching such an equivalence between the departure point and the destination actually requires a detour round the absent other’s reception. Even if the roles of the sender and the receiver are overlapped and manipulated by the sender, the sender still receives his/her own message from the other point. The message returns to the sender’s hold through a detour and this is where the difference lies. The necessity of detour corresponds to what Lacan says, “the sender [...] receives from the receiver his own message in reverse form” (1972, pp. 52-53). The sender cannot confirm the power of his/her message unless the message is returned through the other’s participation in the transmission.

The sender’s construction of the self hence relies on the difference induced from the process of detour. In epistolary correspondence, the difference is produced in the act of writing letters. It is through the writing effects that the sender extends the temporal and spatial distance to deal with the subject-object relationship before reaching the

consummation with the other. The sender goes through this process of textualizing his/her self before endowing himself/herself with a defined identity. Nevertheless, both the consummation and the defined identity would not be reached through the ongoing process of textual formation of the self. As Linda Kauffman reminds us: “The subject-object division divides each of us from ourselves as well as from each other; like language itself, each of us is irreparably self-divided” (1992, p. 108). Both the self-division and the division between the sender and the receiver help create the sender’s self as “a writing subject” (91). The sender has to keep writing to compensate, transgress, and complete the gap of division.

The division traces the two “values of *différance*”: to “differ” and to “defer” (Derrida, 1982, p. 18). To differ means “to be not identical, to be other, discernible, etc.” (8). To defer refers to “the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’ or ‘will,’ and equally effects this suspension in a mode that annuls or tempers its own effect” (8). The values of difference and deferment simultaneously demonstrate the sender as a writing subject. The sender differs himself/herself from others through an interaction with the intended receiver. This relation to the other makes the sender attempt to identify his/her self by recognizing the distinction between the self and the other. Moreover, the distinction cannot be securely identified to define the sender’s self. Various kinds of distinctions will be evoked and therefore suspend the possibility of fulfilling the sender’s construction of the self. The sender’s self is constantly deferred away from his/her complete autonomy. The difference and deferment of the consummated self impel the sender to become a textualized “subject-in-process” (Kristeva 136).

The Gaze at the Object of Desire

To explicate a step further the sender’s construction of his/her self through the other

as the object of desire, I want to elaborate on the concept of the gaze. Lacan connects the gaze with the *objet a* by asserting “[t]he privilege of the gaze as *objet a*” (1981, p. 79). In his explanation of the gaze, three elements predominates fantasy, suspension, and misrecognition:

[...] the object on which depends the phantasy from which the subject is suspended in an essential vacillation is the gaze. Its privilege and also that by which the subject for so long has been misunderstood as being in its dependence derives from its very structure.

[...] From the moment that this gaze appears, the subject tries to adapt himself to it [...]. Furthermore, of all the objects in which the subject may recognize his dependence in the register of desire, the gaze is specified as unapprehensible. That is why it is, more than any other object, misunderstood (*méconnu*) [...] in the illusion of the consciousness of *seeing oneself see oneself*, in which the gaze is elided. (1981, p. 83, Lacan’s emphasis)

The object of desire, at which the subject gazes, is privileged by virtue of the subject’s fantasy. The object of desire is misrecognized by the subject’s fantasy to be what the subject certainly wants to encounter with. The subject suspends the object in his/her gaze in order that s/he might replenish the gap between himself/herself and the object of desire.

The subject’s replenishment means for the purpose of integrating with the object of desire, that is, the unconsummated part of his/her self. However, it is impossible to eliminate the gap, since the subject relies on the gap to objectify the object of desire under his/her power of representation. The subject constantly keeps a distance from the object of desire so that s/he may project his/her desire on the privileged object. Consequently, the subject projects his/her self on the object maneuvered at his/her will. In this process, the object of gaze remains suspended and unmoved under the subject’s manipulation for his/her convenience.

The suspension in the subject’s gaze corresponds to Gilles Deleuze’s analysis of

masochism. In her reading of Deleuze's elucidation of masochism, Chin-yuan Hu points out that the masochist "freezes into postures that identify her [the ideal mother] with a statue, a painting or a photograph" (Hu, 1999, p. 243; Deleuze 33).² In letter writing, the sender similarly plays the role of masochist and freezes his/her intended receiver into the object of desire. The sender objectifies and suspends the intended receiver in his/her fantasy, in which the sender may project his/her wishful image of the other on the object of desire. Such an image of the other is idealized in the sender's fantasy. The image is created not so much for the intended other as for the sender's self. Nevertheless, the sender needs to construct the ideal of his/her self by using the other as a subterfuge. In this way, the sender's self can be incessantly created and reinforced as a result of the other at a distance. Deleuze explains such a paradoxical "split that occurs in fetishism and the corresponding double 'suspension'": "on the one hand the subject is aware of reality but suspends this awareness; on the other the subject clings to his ideal" (33). In the act of letter writing, the sender similarly suspends the intended receiver's identity to exert his/her power of idealization.

The sender's suspension of the object of desire under his/her gaze can be observed in the epistolary novel *The Portuguese Letters* (1669). The sender, Mariana, is abandoned by her French lover: "Alas, my eyes have lost the only light that gave them life; they have nothing now but tears, and I use them only in incessant weeping since I have learned that you are determined upon this separation which I cannot bear, which will yet be my death" (Guilleragues 403). Although Mariana is aware of the fact of separation, she cannot

² In 母親, 妳在何方? 被虐狂、女性主體與閱讀 [Mother, Where Are You? Masochist, Female Subjectivity, and Reading] (1999), Chin-yuan Hu applies Sigmund Freud's and Gilles Deleuze's concepts of masochism (239-240) to analyze the relationship between the masochistic subject and his/her ideal image of Mother. The masochistic subject pursues the ideal of integrating with the Mother by freezing the Mother into a static condition (243). In this condition, the masochistic subject creates the fantasy of combining with the Mother through fetishism, but s/he also continually delays the final consummation with the Mother in terms of the distance created by his/her fantasy. This is the masochist's paradoxical desire for a combination with his/her ideal image of the Mother, and in my application, is similarly the sender's ambivalent desire for a real encounter with the absent receiver. For the analysis of the masochistic desire, please see pp. 239-245 of Chin-yuan Hu's essay.

immediately cut her emotional attachment to her lover. Instead, she suspends the awareness of loss and keeps writing letters to her lover as the intended receiver. The act of letter writing is Mariana's way to continue her love, to analyze her love, and then gradually to face the end of her love. Mariana needs a process to interpret her loss of love and eventually to gain her construction of the self.

In this process, Mariana's French lover as the intended receiver no longer predominates over her love. Instead, her lover becomes the object of desire, to whom Mariana reiterates her love, sacrifice, and complaint about the lover. In her descriptions, Mariana repeats that she can sacrifice her happiness to accept the pain that her lover arouses in her love:

How can I ever again be without pain as long as I do not see you? But I bear it without a murmur since it comes from you. Tell me, is this my reward for loving you so much? But it matters not; I am resolved to adore you as long as I live, and never to see anyone else. (404)

I remember, however, that sometimes I did say that you would make me miserable ... but these fears were soon dissipated, and I took pleasure in offering them to you as a sacrifice, in giving myself up to the enchantment and deceit of your protestations. (407)

Mariana claims her adoration and sacrifice for her lover, even though her lover betrays her love. Yet, concomitant with her expressions of self-devotion, Mariana also accuses her lover of unequal return of love to her:

I deceived myself it is so clear now when I expected you to act in better faith than is usual in these situations; for the depth of my love seemed to lift me above any sort of suspicion, and to call for more than the usual degree of faithfulness on your part. But your inclination to betray me is so great that it overpowers the gratitude you owe for all I have done for you. (406)

However, Mariana's accusations against her lover are not determinately relentless in the former four letters. The accusations remain irresolute, since she still expects that her love might be paid back one day. She contradictorily reveals her intention to justify for her lover on behalf of her love:

But no, I cannot bring myself to think so harshly of you; I am too deeply interested in justifying you. I do not wish to believe that you have forgotten me. (404)

I do not say all this to make you feel obliged to write me. Feel no compulsion. I wish nothing of you that does not come of your own free will ... [...] If you find pleasure in not exerting yourself to write me, I shall find pleasure in seeking out excuses for you. My desire to forgive all your faults is great. (408)

That the least excuse is enough for you, I know very well; but even when you do not trouble to give me one, my love is so unshakably on your side that I accuse you for only one reason, that I may have the pleasure of justifying you myself. (414)

In her reiterative accusation and justification of her lover's abandonment, Mariana finds space and time for her own interpretation of her love. The space and time for her articulation of love are produced in her suspension of her own awareness of the loss. Owing to the distance and deferment in suspension, she exercises her power of interpretation to understand the formation of her love. Her lover is frozen and idealized as the object of desire, on which she can project all her anticipations. Her lover as the object of desire has no right to refuse, since in the process of writing Mariana no longer adheres her happiness and sorrow to the specific lover far away in France. What she cultivates and invests in the act of writing is her love. It is to her love that she keeps loving and suffering, as she asserts:

[...] my love no longer depends upon the way in which you treat me. (408)

In every way it would have been a milder torment for me to continue to love you, despite your coldness, rather than to give you up forever. I discovered that it was not so much you as my own passion to which I was attached; it was remarkable how I suffered while struggling with it even after you had become despicable to me through your wretched behavior. (423)

Through letter writing, Mariana's passion of love gradually overwhelms her subordinate state of being the deserted woman. She does not have to force herself to give up her passionate love to retrieve her loss of the self in love. Instead, she transforms her lover into the object of desire under her self-construction, which makes her assert that "I write more for myself than for you. I need some release" (421). It is her love constructed by herself that counts most significantly for Mariana.

Mariana's way of constructing her self³ reveals one of the characteristics in letter writing—the sender has a tendency to submit the identity of the intended receiver under the wielding of his/her desire and self-construction. This is why the sender in "Envois" questions the identity of his/her intended receiver:

and when I call you my love, my love, is it you I am calling or my love?
You, my love, is it you I thereby name, is it to you that I address myself? I don't know if the question is well put, it frightens me. But I am sure that the answer, if it gets to me one day, will have come to me from you. You alone, my love, you alone will have known it.

[...]

when I call you my love, is it that I am calling you, yourself, or is it that I am telling my love? and when I tell you my love is it that I am declaring my

³ For a more detailed discussion of Mariana's construction of her self through letter writing, please see Chin-yuan Hu's essay 戀人對語, 女人獨語:《葡萄牙修女的情書》中的書信形式 [Lovers' Dialogue, Woman's Monologue: Epistolary Form in *Lettres portugaises*] (2000).

love to you or indeed that I am telling *you*, yourself, my love, and that you are my love. I want so much to tell you. (*Post Card 8*, Derrida's emphasis)

The sender is perplexed about the interlocutor whom s/he addresses. The sender may address the intended receiver or his/her love for the absent other in his/her writing. Even when the sender tells his/her love, s/he also doubts whether s/he speaks to the intended receiver or s/he declares their love to others. The sender in "Envois" constantly remains indeterminate in the paradox of both objectifying and rejuvenating the absent other's existence:

Sometimes I tell myself that you are my love: then it is only my love, I tell myself interpellating myself thus. And then you no longer exist, you are dead, like the dead woman in my game, and my literature becomes possible. But I also know [...] that you are well beyond what I repeat as "my love," living, living, living, and I want it so, but then I have to renounce everything, I mean that love would come back to me, that turned toward me you let me even hear what I am saying when I say, say to you or say to myself my love (*Post Card 29*)

To accomplish his/her writing as literature, to interpellate his/her self in his/her elaboration on love, the sender objectifies the absent other in his/her game of playing the object of desire. The absent other waits for the sender to bequeath life to him/her in the letter writing. On the other hand, the sender also intends to render the absent other as incomprehensible and beyond his/her manipulated game. If the other is not completely manageable in the sender's scope, then the sender has to renounce his/her constructed images of the other to approach the unreachable other. However, the renunciation is simply practiced in the sender's strategy of controlling the other's meaning to himself/herself. Confronted with the possibility of loss, the sender is capable of reinforcing his/her manipulation of the other in his/her gaze at the object of desire. The absent other keeps resting at a distance. What

predominates between loss and return is the sender's desire for the construction of the self.

The predominance of the sender's desire for the Other consequently makes the Other the primary receiver of the sender's message. Slavoj Žižek highlights the Other as the sender's destined receiver by giving the case of a letter without a receiver as an instance, such as "a message in a bottle thrown into the sea from an island after shipwreck" (10):

This case displays at its purest and clearest how a letter reaches its true destination the moment it is delivered, thrown into the water its true addressee is namely not the empirical other which may receive it or not, but the big Other, the symbolic order itself, which receives it *the moment the letter is put into circulation*, i.e., the moment the sender "externalizes" his message, delivers it to the Other, the moment the Other takes cognizance of the letter and thus disburdens the sender of responsibility for it. (10, Žižek's emphasis)

Žižek's analysis proposes that the letter, once sent forth, will reach its true destination, now that the letter is dictated and written under the sender's desire. This proposition reinforces Lacan's assertion that "a letter always arrives at its destination" (1972, p. 53). The sender sends his/her letter not only in terms of the intended receiver but also predominantly for his/her own proper way of constructing the self in accordance with his/her desire. The sender's letter is presumably delivered to approach and fulfill the destination and consummation of his/her desire.

The Epistolary Otherness in Alterity

Although the sender in "Envois" exerts his/her power of desire by manipulating the absent other as the object of desire, s/he does not engulf himself/herself in the narcissistic imagination of self-construction. In addition to framing his/her "amorous discourse"

(Kauffman, 1986, p. 26)⁴ to construct his/her subjectivity, the sender in “Envois” further attempts to challenge the border of self-construction. Instead of ensuring the self in the self-centered imagination, the sender endeavors to endanger his/her wishful projection on the object of desire. This endeavor corresponds to Drucilla Cornell’s observation that Derrida is concerned about “how to adequately address the ‘real’ alterity of the Other” (195). The articulation of the alterity of the Other intends to “disrupt[s] the specific itinerary of the destination of desire given to us by Lacan” (195). Lacan’s concept of the object of desire limits the self to the Other as the absolute loss (196). Cornell proposes that Derrida wants to breach the self’s absolute restraint under the loss by suggesting the possibility of an “excess of the dichotomy of either present or absent” (196). This possibility is the movement of *différance*:

[...] we must conceive of a play in which whoever loses wins, and in which one loses and wins on every turn. If this displaced presentation remains definitely and implacably postponed, it is not that a certain present remains absent or hidden. Rather, *différance* maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence. (Derrida, 1982, p. 20; Cornell 196)

The construction of a presentation is persistently displaced and postponed without reaching a definite stability. What is presented remains incompletely understood. Presence or absence cannot be valorized to solidify its absolute determination of meaning. The

⁴ Linda Kauffman defines a specific mode of “amorous discourse” in the epistolary genre, in which the heroine “transform[s] herself in the process from victim to artist” (1986, p. 26) in the act of writing letters. The heroine devotes herself to the act of letter writing, without being interrupted by the factual absence of her lover. She constructs events in her writing instead of being limited in the determination of the fact. I analogizes the sender’s self-indulgent construction of the self in “Envois” with the act of self-devotion in writing in the amorous discourse.

Kauffman describes the characteristics of the amorous discourse: “To reiterate, then, the genre I shall question is epistolary; the mood is amorous and elegiac; the situation is the aftermath of abandonment. The heroine’s discourse is meant as a performance to be spoken, a letter to be read; she utters her desire in the absence of the beloved. The narrative consists of events reported by the heroine to the lover; it is oblique and elliptical because we frequently see only the repercussions of events that, like the love affair itself, are never narrated. Other acts of communication are enacted rather than reported in the narrative: the heroine’s writing reenacts seduction, confession, persuasion, and these constitute what ‘happens’ in the text” (1986, p. 26).

movement of *différance* eludes the polarity that regulates presence and absence in its limited scope.

With the attempt to address the alterity of the Other beyond the limit of self-supremacy, the sender in “Envois” chooses to preserve the self in destruction. The sender keeps telling his/her receiver to burn the received cards, because the sender believes that preservation of love maintains in destruction:

If you had listened to me, you would have burned everything, and nothing would have arrived. I mean on the contrary that something ineffaceable would have arrived, instead of this bottomless misery in which we are dying. [...] to burn in order to save. Nothing has arrived because you wanted to preserve (and therefore to lose) [...]. (*Post Card 23*)

[...] nothing that has deserved, or allegedly deserved, preservation. And if we do not destroy all the traces, we are saved, that is, lost (*Post Card 32*)

The sender’s way of preservation of love aims at destroying the constructed tokens of love exchanged in the form of the post card. As the token of love and the object of desire, the post card can be accumulated to demonstrate the proportion of love. Although the intensity of love cannot be quantified in material calculation, love requires its fetishes to give lovers chance to approximate the unrealizable love. Similarly, desire requires “the metonymic displacement of desire” (Kauffman, 1986, p. 25) as the mediation for its pursuer to configure its existence. The inclination to preserve love in accumulation is an indispensable way to keep loving and writing.

Nevertheless, the sender in “Envois” attempts to feel the love beyond preservation, in which love and writing are stable and protected. The sender wants to experience the love and writing confronted and reinitiated with the desperation in destruction. The sender writes, “Our only chance for *survival* [...] would be to burn everything, in order to come back to our initial desire” (*Post Card 171*, Derrida’s emphasis). To go back to the initial

desire is such a risky but tempting anticipation. It might mean to renounce all the constructed demonstrations of love, but paradoxically this seemingly pure desire is what the sender wishes for preservation. “I can’t love you unless I give you up” (Salecl 189).⁵ Similarly, forgetting also becomes a way to love instead of making the love fall into oblivion: “I forget you in order to fall in love, with you, from the very next second. This is my condition, on the condition that one loves” (*Post Card* 180). The sender is interminably avid for the most intense desire and love at the moment. The sender cannot confine himself/herself in a fixed coordinate of time and space. The sender’s self is continually circumstanced in the risk and excitement of desire.

The sender’s way of preservation in destruction pushes the alterity of the Other to contain multiple kinds of possibilities. The Other is still the impetus that prompts the sender to write, but the Other is no longer simply subsumed under the sender’s self-predominance. The Other is characteristic of its multiplicity in relation to the myriad of representations of the other. Barbara Johnson explicates this multiplicity in the Other by asserting that “‘Otherness’ becomes in a way the letter’s sender” (1977, p. 249):

The message I am reading may be either my own (narcissistic) message backward or the way in which that message is always traversed by its own otherness to itself or by the narcissistic message of the other. In any case, the letter is in a way the materialization of my death. (1977, p. 249)

According to Johnson, the Otherness is not simply manipulated by the sender who reads his/her message returned to himself/herself. The Otherness may also possibly refer to the other side of the message itself or of the receiver. In other words, the Otherness of the sender needs to connect with other relations of Otherness. The sender has to go beyond his/her own confined way of interpreting the Otherness so that his/her Otherness may be stimulated to generate its alterity. In this perspective, each time the sender sends a message,

⁵ Renata Salecl quotes this remark from Edith Wharton’s novel *The Age of Innocence* (1920).

s/he does not hence guard his/her self better in his/her control. Instead, once the sender sends, his/her presentation of the constructed self is displaced and forced to embark on a differentiated process of construction. The sender's self thus goes through an interminable distancing away from the moment of consummation. The sender constructs his/her self not only through the intended receiver as the object of desire but also in the mediation of multiple others. The Other, for which the sender desires, no longer plays the role as the singularly predominant presence in lack. Rather, the Other lies in its alterity, in its exceeding the absolute polarity between presence and absence. In terms of the excess, the sender's self, though still being constructed within the sender himself/herself, is not limited in the imaginary scope of self-realization. The sender can even overflow his/her self to underscore the alterity of the Otherness:

You can always run after the proof: as if I were saying to you, here it is, it is I who am speaking, and I am speaking to you, uniquely, each time that I write "you," it is that I am addressing myself authentically to you, with full and true speech, presently. When I say "all of you" [*vous*], when I pluralize, it is that I am addressing myself less seriously to you, that my letter is not really destined to you, that it is not destined to arrive at its destination, for you are, yourself, my unique, my only destination. When I have the appearance of overflowing you and of speaking to the others somewhat as I do to you, it is that I am overflowing myself. (*Post Card 136*)

The sender repeats the intended receiver as his/her only destination by not only exclusively addressing the absent other but also involving other possible receivers in his/her interpellation. The involvement of other receivers does not mean to deny the intended receiver as the addressee of the sender's message. Rather, the interference of other receivers further reinforces the particular relationship between the sender and the intended receiver. Moreover, this particularity is not singularly maintained in its closure of the

private space. It is rendered significant when the publicity of alterity of the Otherness is entailed in its operation. The sender's self, who participates in the ciphered epistolary exchanges, is therefore not confined in his/her simulated boundary of self-construction. In connection with the Otherness, the sender overflows his/her constructed restrictions on the self. The sender's self can become susceptible to unregulated multiplicity. This multiplicity is evoked from the paradox of the "pathology of destination" (*Post Card* 112):

I am always addressing myself to someone else (no, to someone else still!), but to whom? I absolve myself by remarking that this is due, before me, to the power [...] to be remarked, precisely, to be repeated, and therefore divided, turned away from whatever singular destination, and this by virtue of its very possibility, its very address. It is its address that makes it into a post card that multiplies, to the point of a crowd [...]. No, not even, no return, it does not come back to me. I even lose the identity of the, as they say, sender, the emitter. And yet no one better than I will have known how, or rather will have loved to destine, uniquely. This is the disaster on the basis of which I love you, uniquely. You, toward whom at this very moment, even forgetting your name I address myself. (112)

The sender is not willing to make the relation between his/her self and the intended receiver embedded in a "determination" (57). Contrarily, the sender constantly remains agitated and unappeased as soon as any form of bond is joined. The sender is interminably disturbed by his/her desire to initiate the reserved desire in destruction. This is his/her perverse way of expressing fidelity: "I am still dreaming of a second holocaust that would not come too late. Know that I am always ready, this is my fidelity. I am a monster of fidelity, the most perverse infidel" (24). The holocaust refers to the burning of the post cards. It is in such a violent form of death that the sender is impelled to keep forwarding and constructing his/her self, as Derrida asserts:

The most difficult because everything we say or do or cry, however outstretched toward the other we may be, remains *within us*. A part of us is wounded and it is with ourselves that we are conversing in the travail of mourning [...]. Even if this metonymy of the other in ourselves already constituted the truth and the possibility of our relation to the living other, death brings it out into more abundant light. So we see why the breaking of the mirror is still more necessary, because at the instant of death, the limit of narcissistic reappropriation becomes terribly sharp, it increases and neutralizes suffering [...]. (1989, p. 31, Derrida's emphasis)

The instant of death, the moment of destruction, keeps leading the sender away from the consummation of his/her self involved with the absent other. Furthermore, it is due to the deferral of the consummation that the sender may reserve his/her desire in a differentiated way of preservation in destruction. This is why the sender in "Envois" ceaselessly risks sending his/her post cards in the possibility of "a straying of the destination": "Even in arriving (always to some 'subject'), the letter takes itself away *from the arrival at arrival*. It arrives elsewhere, always several times" (*Post Card 123*, Derrida's emphasis). The sender's post cards are sent not to finish the exchange and transmission at one station of destination. Instead, they are sent to reiterate the sender's unconsummated desire and self in a differentiated text of writing. And the journey will continue to go back and forth.