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Introduction

In Nabokov’s Lectures on Literature, he writes:

Literature was born not the day when a boy crying wolf, wolf came running out of the Neanderthal valley with a big gray wolf at his heels: literature was born on the day when a boy came crying wolf, wolf and there was no wolf behind him. That the poor little fellow because he lied too often was finally eaten up by a real beast is quite incidental. But here is what is important. Between the wolf in the tall grass and the wolf in the tall story there is a shimmering go-between. That go-between, that prism, is the art of literature.

But Nabokov may be better known for the quote: “Style and Structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash.” Perhaps, he was a bit disingenuous about the ideas being “hogwash,” but clearly what engaged Nabokov about the texts that engaged him were both style and structure. His essay on Flaubert’s Madame Bovary is probably one of the most sterling examples of that, though, one could make the argument that his lectures on “Structural Matters” in Don Quixote could rival that.

Regardless, I have taken Nabokov’s approach to these texts as a point of departure for this collection and added Benjamin’s essay dealing with the “Commodification of Art and the Notion of Aura” in his Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction since the “aura,” as I perceive it, is uniquely related to notions of style and structure and is the initial essay in the collection. In addition, there is a unique relationship between and among all of the texts I’ve chosen to use. Notions of style and structure link all four of the prose pieces (i.e., Beckett, Smart, and Turgenev) through key structural components related to a particular prose style unique to the writer.

To my way of thinking, Laclos is kind of a “literary bridge” between the prose writers and the dramatists in that what is unique about Laclos’ writing in Les Liaisons Dangereuses is that the epistolary novel is, in its own way, a highly dialogous text since the letters have unmistakable “voices” to them that individualize each of the characters. For example, no one would mistake Sofia’s voice for de Merteuil’s voice whether in French or English and that’s a tribute to Laclos’ mastery of the form. In that way, Laclos’ dialogue bridges the prose narrative writers with the dramatists (i.e., Ibsen and Strindberg) by virtue of the dialogous components each of them uses and in the manner in which they structure those dialogous components. Just as there is a unique narrative structure in the prose works, there is a unique dialogous structure in the dramatic works...
and though they are reflective of different genres, they are not altogether different when it comes to their structural underpinnings.

In a way, all of these essays are a kind of *homage* to Nabokov not only because of his perfervid interest in style and structure, but as a *maestro* of the written word and though he was primarily interested in how style and structure relate to prose, they can easily be applied to drama as well. I’ve attempted to do both.
1
Narrateur, Narratrice: Polyphonia in Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*

**Abstract:** After reading the first four letters of Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* the reader is struck with the remarkable number of polyphonic nuances that are clearly present. What Bakhtin has mentioned about Dostoevsky in Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics—that there is “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin, 6) is characteristic of Laclos’ poetics as well. What is specifically novel about *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is not only the epistolary method that Laclos uses, but the multiplicity of voices that he creates which all but nullify Laclos’ own voice. Unlike Prévost’s monophonic tones, Laclos structures his characters’ voices so that they reflect not only the character’s character, but also, syntactically, his/her manner of being.

**Keywords:** poetics; polyphonia; voice

After reading the first four letters of Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* the reader is struck with the remarkable number of polyphonic nuances that are clearly present. What Bakhtin has mentioned about Dostoevsky in *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*—that there is “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices” (Bakhtin, 6)—is characteristic of Laclos’ poetics as well. In the first four letters, three distinct voices are heard: Cécile, the Marquise de Merteuil, and Valmont. What is specifically novel about *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* is not the epistolary method that Laclos uses, but the multiplicity of voices that he creates which all but nullify Laclos’ own voice. Unlike Prévost, whose characters rarely have a range of syntactic or emotive expression and who generally speak in monophonic tones, Laclos structures his voices so that they reflect not only the character’s character, but also, syntactically, his/her manner of being.

**Letter 1:** Cécile de Volanges to Sophie Carnay at the Ursuline Convent of—

You see, my dear Sophie, I am keeping my word. Frills and furbelows do not take up all my time; there will always be some left over for you. Nonetheless, I have seen more frippery in the course of this one day than I did in all the four years we spent together; and I think our fine Tanville is going to be more mortified by my next visit to the convent (when I shall certainly ask to see her) than she could ever have hoped we were by all those visits of hers to us en grande tenue. Mamma has consulted me in everything; she treats me much less like a schoolgirl than she used to do. I have my own maid, a bedroom and closet to myself, and I am sitting as I write at the prettiest desk to which I have been given the key so that I can lock away whatever I wish. Mamma has told me that I am to see her every morning when she gets up. I need not have my hair dressed before dinner, since we shall always be alone, and then every day she will tell me at what time she expects me to join her in the afternoon. The rest of the time is at my disposal, and I have my harp, my drawing, and my books—just as at the convent, except that Mother Perpetue is not here to scold me, and, if I choose to be idle, it is entirely my affair. But, as I have not my Sophie to chat and laugh with me, I had just as soon be busy. (Laclos, 23)

Cécile’s concerns are apparent: bonnets, pompons clothes, her pretty writing table, her hair, her harp. The possessions indicate her being and what makes her happy; but in addition to those things which seem to establish who she is as a person, the syntax Laclos uses supplements that. In the first paragraph alone Cécile uses “I” no fewer than 16 times. Such a preoccupation with the pronoun tends to reinforce who she is as a person. In other words, Cécile’s whole manner of being is incontrovertibly
egoistic which would naturally be the case for a girl her age. Even without knowing her age, the fact that there is an abundant use of “je” in juxtaposition with personal “things” should announce to the reader that Cécile is either a child or childlike.

In addition, the use of imbedded clauses such as her abrupt transition from a sentence like “Mamma has consulted me in everything; she treats me much less like a schoolgirl than she used to do” to “I am sitting as I write at the prettiest desk to which I have been given the key so that I can lock away whatever I wish” only augment her innocent, childlike tendency to move from one thought to another without any apparent cause.

In contrast, the discourse of the Marquise de Merteuil, in writing to Valmont in Letter 2, is decidedly different:

LETTER 2: The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont at the Château de—

COME back, my dear Vicomte, come back: what are you doing, what can you possibly do at the house of an old aunt whose property is all entailed on you? Leave at once: I need you. I have had an excellent idea and I want to put its execution in your hands. These few words should be enough; only too honoured by this mark of my consideration, you should come, eagerly, and take my orders on your knees. But you abuse my kindness, even now that you no longer exploit it. Remember that, since the alternative to this excessive indulgence is my eternal hatred, your happiness demands that indulgence prevail. Well, I am willing to inform you of my plans, but swear first that, as my faithful cavalier, you will undertake no other enterprise till you have accomplished this one. It is worthy of a hero; you will serve Love and Revenge; and in the end it will be yet another rouerie to include in your memoirs—for one day I shall have your memoirs published, and I take it upon myself to write them. But let us leave that for the moment and return to what is on my mind. (Laclos, 25)

Laclos has the Marquise use “I” only six times in the first paragraph, but the quantitative use of the pronoun is of less importance than the qualitative use of it since she is less concerned with the actions of the pronoun relative to things, than she is with the activity of the pronoun. In other words, for Cécile, life is “I have” (i.e., what she has [tangible objects]) which reflects upon who she is; but for de Merteuil the pronouns carry activity (i.e., what she wants [intangible objects]): “I need you”; “I want to put its execution in your hands”; “I shall have your memoirs published”; and “I take it upon myself to write them.” These phrases are all oriented
toward another person; that is, the “I want” is self-reflexive in that what she wants will satisfy who she is, but only if the activity is carried out by someone else.

Likewise, the words and phrases de Merteuil uses reflect her character in much the same way that Cécile’s syntax described Cécile: “COME back, my dear Vicomte, come back: what are you doing, what can you possibly do at the house of an old aunt whose property is all entailed on you? Leave at once: I need you” and “you should come, eagerly, and take my orders on your knees” are commands. She speaks of “my projects” and “my faithful cavalier” all of which seem to connote a military sensibility which, as we discover, is the platform on which Laclos manipulates the sexes. Likewise, the intangible objects she desires (e.g., honor, vengeance) are not the tangible objects Cécile desires.

Moreover, one sees from the syntax in the first paragraph that de Merteuil has a single-mindedness of purpose, since the construction disallows the kind of digression, the youthful disconnections, which are apparent in Cécile’s letter. De Merteuil’s writing is terse and to the point, and it allows for no imbedded clauses which could be construed as arbitrary asides nor does it, to any great extent, digress. Because of the sentence structure, the feeling it gives the reader is one of anxiety. This idea of anxiety seems to be supported by the fact that Cécile’s discourse revolves around “externals” and de Merteuil’s around “internals.” That is to say, Cécile seems to be preoccupied with surfaces, with objects that tend to make one attractive to someone else. These don’t cause her much anxiety; on the contrary, they give her pleasure. De Merteuil, on the other hand, is interested in destroying the constituents of Cécile’s internal psychological being (e.g., honor) which will, of course, eventually manifest themselves externally. De Merteuil’s preoccupation, however, isn’t as calmly attenuated as Cécile’s and for that reason, her discourse appears to be frenetic. Cécile is enchanted with her objects of desire; de Merteuil is possessed by them.

As a transition, Laclos sets up the fourth letter in the third. The letter only reinforces Cécile’s naiveté:

**Letter 3: Cécile de Volanges to Sophie Carnay**

I KNOW nothing yet, my dear. Mamma had a great many people to supper yesterday. In spite of my interest in examining them, the men especially, I was terribly bored. Everybody, men and women alike, looked at me a great deal and then whispered in each other’s ears; and it was obvious they were whispering about me, which made me blush. I could not help it. I wish I had
been able to. I noticed that when the other women were looked at they did not blush. Or else it is the rouge they use that prevents it being seen when they colour with embarrassment, because it must be very difficult not to blush when a man stares at you.

What made me feel most ill at ease was that I did not know what they were thinking of me. I think I heard the word “pretty” once or twice; “gauche” I heard very distinctly, and that must really be true about me because the woman who said it is a relation and friend of my mother’s. She seems to have decided of a sudden to be my friend as well, and was the only person who spoke to me a little the whole evening. We are to have supper with her tomorrow. (Laclos, 27)

The letter once again augments her innocent character—“What made me feel most ill at ease was that I did not know what they were thinking of me. I think I heard the word ‘pretty’ once or twice; ‘gauche’ I heard very distinctly, and that must really be true about me because the woman who said it is a relation and friend of my mother’s”—but acts as a pivotal letter strategically placed between the letters of de Merteuil and Valmont. It reflects an innocence that is situated between the subjects of evil. The letter reinforces Cécile’s character, her gullibility, which will obviously play a key role in the drama, but is also balanced by allowing for a crucial insight into Cécile’s adult world through her suggestion that “I assure you the world is not nearly as amusing as we used to imagine it was.”

In Letter 4, the tone shifts once again.

LETTER 4: The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil in Paris

Your orders are charming; your manner of giving them still more delightful; you would make tyranny itself adored. This is not, as you know, the first time I have regretted that I am no longer your slave. Monster though you say I am, I can never remember without pleasure a time when you favoured me with sweeter names. I often wish, too, that I might earn them again, and that, in the end, I might give, with you, an example to the world of perfect constancy. But larger concerns demand our attention. Conquest is our destiny: we must follow it. Perhaps at the end of the course we shall meet again, for, if I may say this without offending you, my dear Marquise, you follow close at my heels: indeed, it seems to me that on our mission of love, since we decided to separate for the general good and have been preaching the faith in our respective spheres, you have made more conversions than I. I know your zeal, your fiery fervour. And if our God judges us by our deeds, you will one day be the patron of some great city, while I shall be, at most, a village saint. Does my idiom astonish you? But for a
In response to de Merteuil’s seemingly plaintiff “Come back, mon cher, Vicomte, come back,” Valmont writes, “Your orders are charming; your manner of giving them still more delightful; you would make tyranny itself adored.” Compared with de Merteuil’s writing, Valmont’s is very well-cadenced; his words are measured, as are his phrases. If de Merteuil is a creature of passion, Valmont is a creature of thought. Both scheme, but not in the same way, at least rhetorically. Valmont reveals himself as the perfect charmer; and though his phrasing isn’t saccharine, there is a tang of sweetness to it which is seen when he writes: “This is not, as you know, the first time I have regretted that I am no longer your slave. Monster though you say I am, I can never remember without pleasure a time when you favoured me with sweeter names.” Valmont appears as the refined gentleman: “Conquest is our destiny: we must follow it.” Like the gentleman he is, he respectfully declines de Merteuil’s offer by saying: “And if our God judges us by our deeds, you will one day be the patron of some great city, while I shall be, at most, a village saint. Does my idiom astonish you? But for a week I have not heard or used any other, and it is because I must master it that I am obliged to disobey you.”

Each of Valmont’s sentences is well-balanced; they have a rhythm to them which seems to move from clause to clause without any fragmentation. Laclos’ constant use of semi-colons rather than periods maintains this flow, illusory as it is, from one point to the next until Valmont’s final “refusal” of de Merteuil’s orders.

Neatly, Letter 5 prepares us for the eventual introduction of La Présidente de Tourvel, who will prepare us for Madame de Volanges. In Letter 5 we get an image of Tourvel mediated by de Merteuil.

LETTER 5: The Marquise de Merteuil to the Vicomte de Valmont

Do you know, Vicomte, that your letter is most extraordinarily insolent and that I might very well be angry? It proves clearly, however, that you are out of your mind; and that, if nothing else, spares you my indignation. Ever your generous and sympathetic friend, I shall forget my injuries so as to devote my whole attention to you in your danger. However tedious it may be to reason with you, I yield to your present need.

You have the Présidente de Tourvel I. But what a ridiculous fantasy this is! How characteristic of your perverse heart that longs only for what appears to be out of reach. Come, what is there to this woman? Regular features, if you like, but so inexpressive; a passable figure, but no grace and always
so ludicrously ill-dressed, with those bundles of kerchiefs on a bodice that reaches to her chin! I tell you as a friend: you will not need two women of that sort to lose you your reputation. Have you forgotten the day when she took the collection at Saint-Roch and you thanked me so delightedly for having afforded you the spectacle? I can see her still, on the arm of that great spindleshanks with long hair, ready to collapse at every step, forever burying someone’s head in five yards of pannier, and blushing at every genuflection. Would you have believed then you would one day want this woman? Come now, Vicomte, you must blush yourself and return to your senses. I shall keep the secret, I promise. (Laclos, 30)

De Merteuil attempts to undermine whatever impressions Valmont has of Tourvel’s wife as she also attempts to goad Valmont and disturb the balance between them; to attempt to out-maneuver his plans. To regain that balance, Valmont returns in kind with Letter 6 in which we get Valmont’s image of Tourvel.

**LETTER 6: The Vicomte de Valmont to the Marquise de Merteuil**

No, she is not of course one of your coquettes with their deceptive looks that are sometimes seductive, but always false. She does not know how to disguise an empty phrase with a studied smile; and, although she has the most beautiful teeth in the world, she only laughs when she is amused. (Laclos, 33)

This image is set up so that by the time we get to Letter 7 we get Tourvel talking about herself and Valmont. We know from the word choice that Tourvel is always stressing the positive, happiness: “félicité”, “heureux”, and “meilleure” are repeated. She even tends to speak well of Valmont even though she isn’t quite sure about him: “I used to know him only by a reputation which left me with little desire to know him better: but I think he is worth more than people think” (Laclos, 37).

At this point the reader has had a chance to “hear” from all of the main characters: de Merteuil, Valmont, Cécile, and Tourvel and we know about adjunct characters such as Danceny, Rosemonde, the Chevalier de Belleroche, Gercourt; to hear the letters themselves, which are expressions of the characters who write them, their language and content; and to see the general construction of the novel as a whole. One has read how Cécile babbles in a very conversational style with thoughts arranged by an association of ideas rather than a logical subordination of events. We’ve seen how Tourvel’s vocabulary, which is clearly 18th century, employs expressive images in contrast to Mme. Volanges’ common ones.
And we've seen the romantic agony that Danceny goes through in his correspondence.

But the true framework of the novel belongs to de Merteuil and Valmont who write a total of 55 letters (21 from de Merteuil to Valmont and 34 from Valmont to her) which make up approximately one-third of the entire novel, and it is their correspondence which actually shapes the novel and gives it the tone. The truth of the novel is revealed in their letters and generates the other letters. And their tone toward each other sets the tone for the entire work. Throughout the text the tone rarely varies except in critical situations, as in Letter 125.

As previously mentioned, Laclos often resorts to the metaphors of battle and war in relation to how the sexes relate to one another. In this letter, after he has seduced Tourvel, Laclos allows Valmont to express himself in an unfettered way in relation to those metaphors. The letter is replete with such words and expressions as vaincue, résistance, triomphe, vaincre la défense provocante, démarches éclatantes, une simple capitulation, savantes manoeuvres. He then recounts the entire scene with dialogue emphasizing his triumph and continues, unabated, to explore all the metaphors available to him in relation to the “mother of all wars,” that of the war between the sexes. Stylistically, it is an extraordinary letter, and yet, in a way, it undermines all that Laclos set out to accomplish by trying to write an epistolary novel with polyphonic dialogue since Valmont repeats word for word what transpired between him and Tourvel during the seduction. That appropriation of the dialogous method tends to be in conflict with the nature of letters he has established and calls attention to itself as being something other than a veracious account of what transpired since it begs the questions: How could he remember their entire dialogue intact? Does the recapitulation of the dialogue capture the actual voices of the participants in a way that parallels the letters?

But even with that apparent weakness in the novel's construction, it is clear that Laclos has a preoccupation with form and style that is unlike any of his contemporaries except for the possibility of Xavier De Maistre. One would be hard-pressed to find a better structured and more organized novel in 18th-century French letters. Though the content of the letters expresses the individual character's thoughts and feelings, the context, through its syntax and rhythm, complements the character. Ironically, the title can be applied equally to the narrator-reader relationship as well as the character-character relationship, since the
reader might do well to avoid any presuppositions on his/her part that
the author may be any one particular character. Indeed that would be a
“dangerous liaison” to engage in. And though there are certain passages
in which de Merteuil appears “to speak” for Laclos, especially in matters
of language and style, it would do the reader well if s/he searched for
other more obvious liaisons in which to discover textual inconsistencies.

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