

Interfaces in narrative research: letters as technologies of the self and as traces of social forces

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the use of letters in narrative research in the social sciences. Taking Gwen John's love letters to Auguste Rodin as an exemplar of epistolary analysis, I raise questions around the ontological and epistemological nature of epistolary narratives, particularly focusing on openness as a force generating meaning, challenging conventions in classical narratology and destabilizing discourses around the constitution of the social and the subject. Further drawing on Kristeva's notion of intertextuality I propose an analysis of epistolary narratives along the axes of subject-addressee and text-context. In this light I trace connections between 'real life letters' and the genre of the amorous epistolary novel, highlighting the need for interdisciplinary approaches in the analysis of letters in narrative research.

Key words: amorous discourse, desire, epistolary narratives, Gwen John, dialogism, intertextuality, love letters, power, technologies of the self.

You have given me so much encouragement, Ursula you seem to agree with my decision to live as much as I can in a way that I have collectedness of thoughts ... As to whether I have anything worth expressing that is apart from the question. I may never have anything to express, except this desire for a more interior life.¹

In September 1912, this is how Gwen John (1876-1939), a Welsh artist who mostly lived and worked in Paris, was expressing her 'desire for an interior life', to her friend and fellow student at the Slade School in London, Ursula Tyrwhitt. I was immediately drawn by the textual inscription of this desire, but not in the way research in John's life and work has highlighted and discussed it. Janet Wolff (1994), for instance, has drawn on John's letters to interrogate the possibility of the flâneuse, the wandering female figure of the urban spaces of modernity that has fuelled many heated discussions among feminists.² Wolff has cited epistolary extracts that Mary Taubman (1985) has selected for her monograph on Gwen John. In this context an isolated line from John's letters, 'my room is so delicious after a whole day outside, it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room,'³ has become a key phrase in Wolff's argument about the primacy of the private sphere in fin-de-siècle women's spatiality.

I too got interested in this epistolary extract, as an explicit spatial articulation of John's self-realization, which—as it seems—is directly related to an interior space: her room.

However, while working in the archives of the Rodin Museum I was surprised to read the rest of this sentence and was puzzled by its omission. 'It seems to me that I am not myself except in my room *and in my master's studio*', John writes. In further linking existential consciousness to both her room and Rodin, she adds: 'My Master is the centre of my Paradise'.⁴ The whole letter was written in fact upon returning home at the end of a long tiring day: 'I was posing for the whole day! For Mrs Smidt in the morning and Miss O'Donnel in the afternoon. I had lunch outside, in a restaurant and it seems to me that I didn't have time to be anything else than a machine for the whole day.'⁵

Working as a model was indeed John's way to make ends meet and it was actually as a model that she had met Rodin in the first place. Her letters often depict her disillusionment and frustration about having to work as a model, with the exception of course of her sessions with Rodin. Indeed, many of her letters to him are signed as 'your model, Marie.' It is here interesting to note how she recognised and indeed signed herself as 'Marie, the model' when writing to Rodin: 'My master, I am not an artist, I am your model and I want to remain your model for ever'⁶ and as 'Gwen' the artist when writing to her friends in the UK.

In bringing together a cluster of themes in John's epistolary discourse, my point is that a chopped extract from a letter written at the end of a very long day can certainly take up a variety of meanings and interpretations, but it cannot encompass the essence of who its author 'really' was, how she felt or what she thought. As Karen Barad has so influentially argued, 'individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating' (2007, ix) and epistolary narratives I will argue are just particles of this entanglement. This partial but also interconnected nature of letters and indeed of any texts in life history research and beyond raise some interesting questions vis-a-vis their use as 'data' in qualitative research methods. They certainly shake the grounds of unproblematic connections between the self and the epistolary text, the idea that the analysis of letters open up windows to a better understanding of 'the real self'.⁷

What I therefore suggest is that although John's letters cannot reveal any single or final 'truth' about 'who their author is', they do open up a series of interesting questions and issues around their use and analysis as 'documents of life' (Plummer 2001) in narrative research, a burgeoning area in qualitative approaches in the social sciences.⁸ There are three main areas that the discussion of this paper revolves around: a) epistolary narrativity, or simply put the question of whether letters can be considered and analysed as narratives, b) interdisciplinary approaches in narrative research and more specifically intertextual connections between the genre of the epistolary novel and 'real life' correspondences and c) letters as textual inscriptions of forces of desire that intervene in the constitution of the social and the subject herself. These three analytical strategies as delineated here have shaped the structure and discussion of this paper but have also underpinned authorial decisions vis-à-vis the presentation and discussion of particular epistolary extracts from the archive of the research.⁹ It is thus within the limitations and restrictions of the theoretical and methodological interpretive strategies that I will further present and discuss, that John's 'self' emerges through her epistolary texts.

Letters as nomadic narratives

As Liz Stanley (2004) has instructively shown, there is a great deal of discussion around the use of letters as useful ‘documents of life’ (Plummer, 2001) in auto/biographical research. Responding to Plummer’s suggestion that the overwhelming, fragmentary, unfocused and idiosyncratic nature of letters cannot really provide useful sources for sociological analyses, Stanley counterpoises the argument that letters and particularly correspondences can create rich fields of auto/biographical insights in sociological research. In this light she creates three analytical planes on which epistolary narratives can be deployed: the dialogical, the perspectival and the emergent (2004, 202-204). Letters are dialogical, argues Stanley, opening up channels of communication and reciprocity not only between the correspondent parts, but also between the writer of the letter and any reader. (202) Their perspectival aspect means ‘that their structure and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time’ (203). Finally, in having emergent properties, letters evade ‘researcher-determined concerns’ (203) and instead display ‘their own preoccupations and conventions and indeed their own epistolary ethics.’ (203)

While Stanley (2004) has urged for a robust analytic approach to the use of letters in auto/biographical research in the social sciences, Elizabeth MacArthur (1990) has tackled the question of whether letters should be analysed as narratives, pointing out that epistolary narratives do not adhere to the Aristotelian imperative of the end: ‘Critics from James, Sartre, and Benjamin up through the structuralists and Frank Kermode have stressed the importance of endings in giving shape and meaning to stories’, MacArthur notes. (3) But notwithstanding its importance, should we really accept that ‘closure’ is a sine-qua-non condition of narratives? Pointing to the particularities of the epistolary mode of writing and drawing on ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ collections of letters, MacArthur has instead turned her attention to the analysis of the dynamics of the epistolary form and has argued that such a conceptualization can move us towards ‘a richer and more complicated definition of narrative.’ (13)

Written to the moment, epistolary narratives create meaning by narrating the present without knowing what the future of this narrated present will be, how it will ultimately become past. Thus the anticipation of closure, the end, cannot impose meaning and order in the overall structure of the narrative. However, as MacArthur notes, a present that unfolds is narrated differently than a present that has already ‘chosen its course.’ (1990, 8) This difference however and particularly the inability of the epistolary mode to orient the narrative towards ‘the end’, deploys a series of *narrative technologies* (Tamboukou 2010a) that are particularly interesting. Rather than imposing an overarching meaning derived from a central organizing narrative authority or character, epistolary narratives ‘provide multiple perspectives on the same event’ (14) and thus reveal multiple layers of meanings and complex ‘regimes of truth.’ (Foucault 1980)

As I will further discuss, instead of being a defect of the narrative mode, the openness of the epistolary form has the possibility of diverting the analysis from the obsession of classical narratology with coherence and closure (Hyvärinen et al, 2010), to the process of how stories create meanings as they unfold. Narrative sense in this context emerges as an agglomeration of fragments, stories that are incomplete, irresolute or broken. Yet when brought together, these fragmented narratives create a milieu of communication where the silenced, the secret and the unsaid release forces that remind us of the limits of human communication, the inability of language and representation to express the world. But how can these fragmented narratives be brought together?

In addressing this question I will draw on a rich body of literature revolving around the epistolary novel as a narrative genre.¹⁰ (MacArthur, 1990) In the context of this literature Jean Rousset (1962) has noted that ‘the epistolary method forces the narrative into discontinuity, it fragments it and disperses it among several writers who don’t know its totality; only the book reader is in a position to reconstitute it.’ (cited in MacArthur 1990, 9-10) Rousset refers here to the reader since his object of analysis is the epistolary novel. MacArthur however has made interesting connections and juxtapositions between the analysis of novelistic and real life correspondences. In interrogating clear cut boundaries between ‘real correspondences’ and fictional letters, MacArthur criticizes the assumption that as opposed to fiction, letters are ‘pure, undistorted reflections of life’ (1990, 117) For MacArthur, ‘both “real” and “fictional” letters are mediated constructions’ (118), an argument that has been long put forward in the literature of autobiographical narratives (Smith and Watson 1988); the recognition of mediated construction is further a well-established argument in the post-narratological tradition. (See Gibson 1996) Thus when writing letters correspondents inevitably become components of ‘narrative phenomena’ (Tamboukou, 2010b), they enter storyworlds (Herman 2002) and start creating plots and characters, ‘they become co-authors of a narrative’, as MacArthur aptly puts it. (1990, 119) Now the overall structure of these narratives is offered to the reader of the epistolary novel, but what about ‘real’ correspondences: can there be a narrative structure with them as well and who can have access to it? This is where the role of the researcher becomes crucial: as an external reader,¹¹ the researcher can have access to bodies of correspondences and consequently the overall narrative that they have generated. It has to be noted here of course that real life correspondences like all auto/biographical narratives are always incomplete, unfinished or dispersed. As I have written elsewhere (Tamboukou, 2010b) the letter in the archive has to be read with the letter that was lost or burnt in mind. But this applies to all life narratives of course: they are full of silences, secrets and gaps; they are stories that respond to the world, rather than represent it. (Tamboukou, 2010a)

Following these lines of thought, I will therefore argue that John’s letters can be analysed as narratives, but their narrativity emerges if they are theorized ‘as units, within a unity’. (Altman 1982,167) In this light, narrative sense emerges as an effect of the exploration and indeed juxtaposition of wider collections of letters and bodies of correspondences, what Stanley (2004) has theorized as ‘the epistolarium.’ Janet Altman’s configuration of ‘the letters as unit and the letter as unity’ is crucial for my analysis as the latter draws on John’s individual letters but is situated in the context of two bodies of correspondence:

her letters to her lover Rodin and her friend Tyrwhitt. However, the consideration of the context should not override the analytic attention to each individual letter, subsuming its singularity into the demands of a supposedly overarching structure of the whole. The 'unity' itself, the epistolarium in Stanley's conceptual vocabulary, can take different forms. As Stanley (2004, 218) has charted them:

The idea of the epistolarium can be thought about in (at least) three related ways, with rather different epistemological complexities and consequentialities: as an epistolary record that remains for *post hoc* scrutiny; as 'a collection' of the entirety of the surviving correspondences that a particular letter writer was involved in; and as the 'ur-letters' produced in transcribing, editing and publishing actual letters (or rather versions of them).

Stanley has performed a meticulous examination of 'the different epistemological complexities and consequentialities' emerging from the analysis of the three versions of the epistolarium as delineated above. What is interesting in her theorization is her conclusion that despite the epistemological, ontological and ethical problems emerging in their analysis, collections of letters do have a narrative structure and offer useful and rare insights in the life of the auto/biographical subject. (2004, 221)

Of course as I have already pointed out, working with letters as documents of life in narrative research raises a quite complex spectrum of questions around representation, context, truth, power, desire, identity, subjectivity, memory and ethics, questions that are now well identified and richly explored in the field of auto/biographical narratives. (See Smith and Watson 2001) However epistolary narratives have their own take on these questions and indeed demand ways of analysis that are particularly oriented to the specificities of their ontological and epistemological nature.¹² It is, I suggest, by working within specific contexts that methodological problems in analyzing epistolary narratives can best be addressed and it is John's love letters to Rodin that I will now discuss as exemplars of the analytical approach I propose. In doing this I will first create a cartography of the research milieu I will be drawing on.

Mapping the research archive

My analysis mainly draws on archival research I carried out with Gwen John's two extended bodies of correspondence: a) her love letters to Auguste Rodin housed in the Archives of the Rodin Museum in Paris,¹³ and b) her letters to her friend and fellow student at the Slade, Ursula Tyrwhitt housed in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.¹⁴ The letters were contextualized within a wider body of literature around John's life and work that includes two biographies, (Chitty 1987, Roe, 2002), two exhibition catalogues (Langdale and Jenkins 1982; Jenkins and Stephens, 2004), a catalogue raisonné (Langdale, 1987), two critical appreciations of her work (Taubman, 1985; Foster 1999), a range of biographical accounts of 'significant others' in her life, as well as a series of academic essays. (See Tamboukou, 2010a)

John was born and grew up in Wales and her talent for painting was supported by her middle class family. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Arts in London, but lived and worked in Paris and the nearby Meudon from 1904 till the end of her life. She met Auguste Rodin while posing as a model for a monument to Whistler and fell in love with him. During the ten years of their affair (1904-1914) and beyond it, till Rodin's death in 1917, she wrote passionate letters twice and sometimes three times a day. Their length varies between one and three pages, although there are some very long letters that recount John's adventures of looking for her lost cat.¹⁵ Most of these letters are undated but their date can be drawn from the addresses they have been written from. As a young artist John lived in a series of studio apartments in the Montparnasse area, which were usually the epistolary places her letters were written from. Rodin was already famous when John met him with a wide circle of artists from all over Europe and the States working in his ateliers under his guidance. His influence and aura has become the object of many biographical accounts including this of German Rainer Maria Rilke (2006) who worked as his secretary for a short period during which he also got to know John. Although Rodin lived with his life-long companion Rose Beuret whom she married shortly before he died, he also had a number of affairs with young women in his circle, mostly artists.¹⁶ John's affair with Rodin has been overstated in the discourses weaving around her life and art, although totally marginalized in Rodin's biographies. Notwithstanding these distortions and dissonances however, John's love letters to Rodin are extremely interesting both in content and in form. They offer rich insights in the minutiae of a young woman artist in the urban spaces of modernity and throw light in the ethics and aesthetics of the constitution of the female self in art. (See Tamboukou, 2010a) There are only sixty letters from Rodin to John in this body of correspondence: they are short notes, written mostly to arrange modeling sessions and amorous meetings as well as to give advice about John's well being and housing conditions for which he offered financial support. Although content, context and form cannot be separated in narrative analysis, the focus of this paper is not on the content or context of these letters but rather on methodological strategies in their analysis as narratives, which can contribute to a social analytics of becomings. I am drawing here on a rich body of literature on postmodern approaches to narratives and particularly the Deleuzian take on narrative as force (Gibson 1996) and Cavarero's notion of the narratable self (2000). As I have extensively discussed elsewhere (Tamboukou, 2008) a take of narrative as force turns the focus of the analysis from narrative coherence to narrative process, while Cavarero's notion of narratability perceives the self as the effect of the desire to listen to one's story within a reciprocal relation of interdependence. However the narratable self is not reducible to the content or discourses of the story: it is not merely textual or performative. Narratability revolves around the I/you relationship, which is also central in the epistolary relation, to which I will now turn.¹⁷

Drafting the self: openness in the analysis of epistolary narratives

My dear Master, I am sad that I cannot write to you in a beautiful language. Sometimes I am like a poor spirit always being around and trying to be loved without being able to speak—mute like the birds. I hope that one day I will find

beautiful and eloquent words that will attract your attention and then I will be able to stay with you more often. But maybe I will never find them [...]'¹⁸

In the letter above, John cannot find eloquent words to express her love. Love is 'solitary because incommunicable' Kristeva (1987, 3) writes and 'even the love letter, that innocently perverse attempt to revive or subdue the game, is too much engulfed in the immediate fire' (3) to say anything about what is at stake between the lovers. However it was not only the poetics of love that John was worried about. There were basic grammar and syntax problems that were preoccupying her. John never felt comfortable writing in French; copying her letters and proof reading them would become part of her daily epistolary practices: 'I have copied a letter that I wrote yesterday but I didn't give it to you, since I saw that there were spelling mistakes and a fever came down to me which prevented me from copying it yesterday'¹⁹ As a matter of fact, she would often copy her letters 'several times' before sending them as revealed in a postscript to an undated letter: 'Sometimes I copy my letters several times because of my bad writing.'²⁰ Through her letters, John was in dialogue with Rodin, but this was a dialogue not just between lovers but also between languages. The realization of this double dialogue would make her hesitant about the possibilities and limits of representation itself. The desire for 'the master' would thus be transposed into a desire 'to master her master's language'²¹ and this discursive desire of mastering language would also go beyond 'the master', as I will further discuss below.

John's letters were therefore always incomplete. She was continuously drafting them and even when they were sent, there were always oscillations, ambiguities and regrets: 'I have just read the letter that I wrote on Thursday morning [...] and after reading it I realized that this letter has not said anything that I have tried to make it say. It says almost nothing.'²² The anxiety of never finding 'beautiful and eloquent words' and the frustration of a letter 'that says nothing' leaves John's narratives open and irresolute. As already noted above, openness is a mark of the epistolary discourse and a theme much discussed in the theorization of the epistolary novel, wherein 'the chain of actions and consequences is perceived as unending, the circuit of communication is never closed, [...] frames are constantly broken, and even closural gestures have inaugural implications. (Altman 1982, 163) Moreover, openness is not only a quality of the epistolary novel, but also of letters drawn from life, both as units and as parts of larger correspondences.

Being a characteristic of the epistolary discourse either in 'real' or 'fictional' letters, the question still arises as to why openness is still considered as a problem in narrative theory. As MacArthur has pointed out, 'the fascination with closure [...] can be linked to a fear of deviance and a desire of stability [...] and might represent an attempt to preserve the moral and social order, which would be threatened by endlessly erring narratives.' (1990, 15-16) Clearly, John's open and irresolute letters expose her 'deviance' not only to her lover, and friends as recipients and 'internal readers' of her letters, but also to art critics, historians, biographers and even feminist analysts as external readers of these letters. In this light not only do they spectacularly fail to preserve the moral and social order of her times, but they are also 'troubling letters' even for our own times, 'they are not such as a feminist altogether wants to read' as Lisa Tickner has ironically put it (2004, 35). As

MacArthur has suggested however ‘the openness of the epistolary form might indicate an interest in the actual process of creating meaning and a desire to put into question the moral and political status quo.’ (1990, 19) This desire for making trouble to segmentarities of all kinds and all times is indeed a repetitive theme in John’s irresolute and incomplete letters.

Openness is thus a characteristic of the epistolary narrative, both ‘fictional’ and ‘real’, a force that keeps the dialogue open, the correspondence going and ultimately generates the narrative itself. As MacArthur has persuasively argued it thus becomes possible ‘to consider open-ended narratives not as an aberration but as one of several variations within the larger realm of narrative works’ (1990, 32) In this light, John’s irresolute and incomplete letters and create meaning for her life by turning it into a story or rather a series of novellas or short stories; her letters are also actions, technologies of shaping her relationships with her lover and her friends and it is this theme that I will now take up.

Letters as technologies of the self

‘I hope you have a nice fire this evening, I lit mine, it’s been some time, but I am still cold [...] I am going to read a little now, the books that you have given me.’²³ John used to write to Rodin every day and sometimes twice or three times a day; she would usually write at night, before going to bed as a farewell to the day and the beloved. In this light, her letters were both love messages and short diaries, narrative modes of reflecting upon her thoughts, feelings and deeds at the end of the day. This diaristic practice of letter writing inevitably brings in mind the Stoic tradition of self-examination through daily correspondence. In tracing the genealogy of *the care of the self*, Foucault has influentially theorized this Stoic technique of meditation in the 1982 Vermont seminar on *Technologies of the Self* and the 1981-1982 Collège de France lectures on *the Hermeneutics of the Subject*.

Mapped on the plane of *the care of the self*, the letter in Foucault’s analysis is ‘a way of presenting oneself to one’s correspondent in the unfolding of everyday life.’ (1997, 218) Here is an indication of John’s daily activities being unfolded to ‘the Master’: ‘My dear Master, I draw in the afternoons and when it gets very dark I go for a walk and I draw again after dinner.’²⁴ In inscribing the daily in her letters to ‘the Master’, John looks back into herself in a process of self-examination, a line that also runs through her extended correspondences to her friends. As Foucault (218) has noted, health reports are often included in the Stoic tradition of correspondence, and are intrinsically related to other themes in *the care of the self*. In the following letter a report about a cold initiates a discussion around the importance of work that was at the centre of Rodin’s philosophy of life:

My Master,
[...] I caught a cold and didn’t feel like eating today or yesterday [...] Two nights before, I was standing by the window so that I could see the full moon that was so beautiful and I stayed there for long in my night gown and that’s how I got the cold

[...] However, I work all the same [...] since I think that this is a way to bring me closer to you, My Master—doing everything regularly [...] It seems to me that our work is most important as a way to perfect our souls.²⁵

What is particularly notable in the letter above is the importance of establishing a rhythm in one's life and ensuring that it is followed despite and against the odds. A report of a cold is also related to the problem of food and diet, another important strand in the tradition of *the care of the self*.²⁶ John's indifference to the importance of a healthy diet was a recurring concern for her friends and lover. As a matter of fact her health and diet were constant themes of the very few letters that Rodin wrote to her between 1906 and 1915: 'you should eat well, because it seems to me that you neglect it.'²⁷

What emerges as an important continuity within the Stoic tradition in the above letters is that they refer to bodily states and practices and not to thoughts or emotions. Clearly, John's practices of letter writing would be a fusion of the historically different traditions in *the care of the self* that Foucault scrutinized in his later work. (1987, 1990, 2005) While constantly writing about micro practices and casual events, John would also interrogate their importance as themes of epistolary interest, reflecting on and ultimately defending her desire to write about them:

My dear Master,

[...] I have brought you a letter, but now I am not going to show it to you, since it only talks of my room and the things that I bought on Saturday. These are very little things to be related, but all these little things have a charm for me and to do even the smallest little thing is so interesting.²⁸

There is a remarkable epistolary mode here—a letter about the letter that has been withheld—but also an interesting connection between the economy of epistolarity, and the significance of little things in life. In problematizing the content of her letters, John dissects her epistolary practice and in so doing she looks introspectively into herself: in the letter above, it is not her deeds, but her thoughts and desires that are under scrutiny. Still the letter remains the medium par excellence of this examination.

As already noted above, in reviewing her daily activities in her love letters to Rodin, John would highlight the importance of a rhythm in life, the life of the body, but also the artistic and intellectual life, the life of the mind. In this light, reflections and thoughts on her readings were constant themes of her letters: 'I am going to finish the tragedy of Orestes tonight. The scene that I find most touching is the one where the two friends [...] are walking together towards the Greek assembly where the decision of whether they should live or die is being debated.'²⁹ John's letters to Rodin, and her friends reveal that she was interested in a wide range of readings: literary, philosophical and even scientific. She was in constant conversation with Rodin, who encouraged her to develop a critical mind: 'This night I tried to critique Euripides, whose tragedy I have read, as you have told me to think upon everything that I read. I am not satisfied of what I have written [...] but I am going to write it here and one day I hope to write more interesting letters for you'.³⁰ Despite its apologetic introductory tone, the letter unfolds an interesting

discussion on Euripides' aesthetics and politics of writing. John finds him 'more courageous and less hypocritical' than other writers and underscores the emotional force of his characters and his disposition of taking life to the full, 'the sentiment that you also have, my Master'.³¹ Euripides' philosophy of life thus becomes a connecting thread between a literary discussion and the lover's discourse.

But it is not just ancient tragedies and philosophical ideas that John's letters discuss. John was also deeply influenced by the mode of the epistolary novel. As she reveals in one of her letters to Tyrwhitt, written on July, 30th, 1908, she was enticed by *The Letters of the Portuguese Nun*, an influential reading in the amorous epistolary literature that Rainer Maria Rilke deeply admired and had enthusiastically recommended to her: 'I have met lately a German poet—he has lent me a book of love-letters of a Portuguese *religieuse*, come down to us from several centuries ago, they are very beautiful, and simple like a bird singing. Unhappy love, *naturellement*.'³²

Apart from the influences of the epistolary novel, the above extract introduces another characteristic of John's writing. Consider the metaphor of the 'bird' which, as I have shown above, John also used in her letters to Rodin in order to express the ineffability of her feelings: 'Sometimes I am like a poor spirit always being around and trying to be loved without being able to speak—mute like the birds.'³³ The metaphor of the bird is thus employed in John's epistolary discourse to denote different and contradictory states: the lover as letter-writer can be 'beautiful and simple like a bird singing' or 'unable to speak—mute like the birds. These connections and juxtapositions in John's amorous discourse, indicate an affinity with Julia Kristeva's notion of *intertextuality*. The latter has become a critical tool in my analysis as I will further show.

Considering intertextuality in John's letters

In coining the term of *intertextuality*, Kristeva (1985, 217) famously declared that 'every text is from the outset under the jurisdiction of other discourses which impose a universe on it.' Here she has drawn on Bakhtin's emphasis on the social and historical context of the novel, and 'his conception of "the literary world" as an intersection of textual surfaces.' (Kristeva 1986, 36) Bakhtin's focal point in the *Dialogic Imagination* (2002) is that when we write, we are always in dialogue with other texts preceding and succeeding our own. In this light his concept of *polyglossia* often reminds us that 'we are never fully ourselves in our utterances. What we make or say is always somewhat alien to us, never wholly ours, as we ourselves are not wholly ours [...] We are outside ourselves and that "outsidedness", "extralocality" creates the tragedy of expression.' (Morson 1983, 242)

But how can Bakhtin's notion of *dialogism* as reconfigured in Kristeva's analytical trope of *intertextuality*, illuminate the analysis of John's love letters? Kristeva (1986, 36) has identified 'three dimensions or co-ordinates of dialogue': the writing subject, the addressee and the exterior texts, connected on two axes: the horizontal axis along which the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee, and the vertical axis along which the text 'is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus.' (36) The

horizontal axis (subject-addressee) and the vertical axis (text-context) correspond to two important Bakhtinian notions, those of *dialogue* and *ambivalence*; they are not clearly distinguished in Bakhtin's analyses, but there is a reason for their fusion that crystallizes an important insight of Bakhtin's literary theory: 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.' (37) In this light, Kristeva (37) argues, 'the notion of *intertextuality* replaces that of intersubjectivity and poetic language is read as at least *double*.'

I want to consider Kristeva's suggestion of reading the poetic language as at least *double*, raising the question of whether and how this 'doubleness' can stand for the language of life writing and more specifically for the epistolary narrative. An important transposition that should be considered here is the notion of the addressee. The subject-addressee axis of poetic language refers of course to the 'discursive universe' of any literary work: the addressee 'fuses with this other discourse, this other book, in relation to which the writer has written his own text.' (37)

Although embedded in the discursive universe of her times and geographies, the addressee of the epistolary narrative is grounded, embodied and specific. As already discussed above, the very order of the epistolary discourse is shaped by the I/you relationship, the addressee who will read and respond to the letter. 'The letter writer simultaneously seeks to affect [his] reader and is affected by [him]', notes Janet Altman (1982, 88), stressing the importance of the *epistolary pact*: 'To a great extent, this is the epistolary pact—the call for response from a specific reader within the correspondent's world.' When the reader of the letter is also the absent beloved, the I/you relationship of the epistolary discourse becomes even more complicated, saturated and driven as it is by forces of desire and in the case of women letter writers, gendered power relations.

Indeed the passionate letter of the deserted woman has shaped the genre of the amorous epistolary novel since Ovid's *Heroides*.³⁴ As Linda Kauffman (1987, 17) has influentially noted, Ovid's epistles repeat and configure a pattern of themes that has almost become a template for the love letter of the deserted: 'the heroine challenges the lover to read her letter; rages against forces that separated them; recalls past pleasures; speculates about his infidelities; laments his indifference and finally discusses the sole act that engages her in his absence: writing.' This last point, the writing of a letter, is actually the act that subverts the previous passions: writing becomes an expression of love, a response and a revolt; the heroine writes both in order to make sense of what has happened but also and perhaps more importantly, she writes to become other. The act of writing further bridges the gap between presence and absence, and is actually, as Kauffman (24) pithily notes, 'one means of creating the illusion of presence' in the amorous relationship that is re-enacted through the love letter. Within the subject-addressee relationship then, not only is the 'Woman Who Waits' being transformed into the 'Woman Who Writes' (25) but also the absent beloved becomes a conversational figure, fictional and yet crucial in the performance of the erotic dialogue.

But there is another crucial dimension to be considered in the subject-addressee axis in the context of John's letters: the significant *You* is not just a lover but also a mentor, 'the

Master' for John but also for a wide international circle of young artists that would flock in Paris at the time. I want to look closely into how the master/lover position of the addressee bends the function of the subject-addressee axis within the context of intertextuality.

The Master, the lover and the artist

Foucault has highlighted the crucial role of the master in the cultural tradition of the care of the self: 'Hail, my sweetest of masters' was Marcus Aurelius' favoured opening of his daily letters to his teacher and mentor Fronto. The figure of the master was closely related to the concept of *pedagogical eros* and *philosophical love* in classical antiquity and the hellenistic and imperialist periods. In this light, the relation to 'the master' was complicated, since it was not simply spiritual, but involved sexual intercourse and in this light it was arranged upon highly hierarchical structures of power between the lovers. As Foucault has succinctly commented, in Plato's *Symposium*, the classical philosophical text on *Eros*, the love relation is ultimately structured as a relation to truth. (1987, 222)

'My dear Master' is the salutation that John used to address Rodin: it is a phrase that has aroused a lot of suspicion and has fuelled heated debates whenever I have presented my work on her epistolary narratives at conferences, seminars, symposia or workshops. Rodin of course was addressed as 'the Master' by his circle. He was already a celebrated artist when John met him and quite conscious that he had secured his position in the pantheon of the great masters in the history of art. Rainer Maria Rilke, also addressed him in his letters as 'Mon Cher Maître'³⁵ and would praise his prominence in the world of art as in the following letter written in August 1902:

My Master,

[...] I wrote you from Haseldorf that in September I shall be in Paris to prepare myself for the book consecrated to your work. But what I have not yet told you is that for me, for my work (the work of a writer or rather of a poet), it will be a great event to come near you. Your art is such (I have felt it for a long time) that it knows how to give bread and gold to painters, to poets, to sculptors: to all artists who go their way of suffering, desiring nothing but that ray of eternity which is the supreme goal of the creative life.³⁶

The unbearable heaviness of Rodin's existence as 'the Master' was often felt in his circle of artists and friends to the point of rendering them speechless in front of him. John's letters that describe herself as 'mute, like the birds' can thus be juxtaposed with Rilke's letter below, written in September 1902. Like John, Rilke would prefer to write letters in the solitude of his room as the best way of communicating with 'the Master':

My dear Master,

It doubtless seems somewhat strange that I am writing you, since (in the greatness of your generosity) you have given me the possibility of seeing you so often. But always in your presence I feel the imperfection of my language like a sickness that

separates me from you even at the moment when I am very near. Therefore in the solitude of my room I spend my time preparing the words I want to say to you next day, but then, when the time comes, they are dead and, beset by new sensations, I lose all means of expressing myself.³⁷

Rilke's letter above confirms the Richardsonian insight about the primacy of writing over speaking, given the time of deliberation that writing inevitably allows for, as well as being uninterrupted by the immediacy of the oral discourse. (Kauffman 1986, 124) The epistolary narrative further unfolds as a mediation over Rodin's influence upon other lives and illuminates his constitution as 'the Master' of the young artists in his circle, since Rilke's fascination with Rodin extend to the master's influence on his wife Clara, who was also a sculptress and Rodin's student.

You are the only man in the world who, full of equilibrium and force, is building himself in harmony with his work. [...] It was not only to do a study that I came to be with you, it was to ask you: how must one live? And you replied: by working. And I well understand. I feel that to work is to live without dying. I am full of gratitude and joy.³⁸

According to Foucault, 'How must one live' is the question par excellence addressed to the master in the tradition of *the care of the self* and the master's guidance is indispensable in the art of living: 'there is no care of the self without the presence of the master.' (2005, 58) While in classical antiquity the master's role would end when the disciple became a citizen, in the Stoics' era it had been expanded to cover the life-long project of learning how to live. (Foucault 1990, 48)

There is nothing to suggest of course any sign of amorous relationship between Rodin and Rilke. In John's letters however, 'the Master' is not just a mentor, but also and perhaps more importantly, the beloved. In this context, the epistolary salutation 'My dear Master' can also be framed within the discourse of love and passion and it thus enters a field of intensities, where power, knowledge and desire dance together. (See Tamboukou, 2010a)

Power and desire in epistolary technologies of the self

Drawing on Stanley's influential concept of the 'epistolarium' (2004) and MacArthur's theorization of letters as 'extravagant narratives' (1990) in this paper I have looked into Gwen John's love letters to Rodin and have considered them as open narratives, offering rich insights in the constitution of the female self in art. John's love letters have thus been analyzed as *epistolary technologies of the self* in the philosophical tradition of *the care of the self* as discussed and theorized in Foucault's later work.

In further looking into the form of John's love letters I have drawn on the Bakhtinian notions of *dialogism* and *ambivalence* as redeployed in Kristeva's intertextual analytics. In this light the letters have been considered along the two axes of reader-addressee and

text-context, while transpositions have been traced in how these two axes may function in real-life epistolary narratives. In doing this, I have particularly focused on the figure of the master as a powerful subject position in *the care of the self* and as an embodied addressee in the dialogics of the epistolary relationship.

In the context of intertextuality, John's letters point to a significant element of the amorous discourse: the forceful interrelation between reading and writing. Reading inspires writing and further creates planes of communication beyond the realm of the correspondence, the novel becoming an index and a frame of reference. Even if the love letter might not be read, let alone responded, it is always already an event of the *dialogic imagination*: it has been written to be sent and to be read and thus 'the act of reading becomes a pervasive part of the narrative.' (Kauffman 1986, 36) John's letters about her reading was not only a way to exchange thoughts about literary creation, but also a way to reflect upon herself, through a critical reading of the ethics and morality of the textual characters. In this context, the literary tradition of the epistolary novel has been charted as the narrative matrix of John's amorous discourse. This proposition creates the need for more interdisciplinary inquiries in narrative research in the social sciences. Indeed as narrative scholars have pointed out disciplinary fields in narrative research often appear to ignore each other. Looking into the history of 'narrative turns' in literary studies, historiography and literary studies, Matti Hyvärinen (2010) has particularly pointed to the need for more interdisciplinary connections. It is to this quest that my suggestions in this paper respond. As social scientists in narrative inquiries we need to give more attention to how reading other stories and particularly epistolary novels—in the case of this paper—can throw light into what narrators write—or say in the case of oral narratives—how they create their plots or characters including themselves.

Interwoven in a narrative fabric in which presence and absence trigger strong emotions and affects, John's letters carry traces of how she experiments with *Eros* as force, disrupting the order of the present, a process of living through what can only be experienced in fractured moments of being—the moment of writing. As tales of love these letters further create an assemblage of episodic, fragmented and incoherent narratives to unfold. Although inconclusive, John's story of the love affair takes up meaning and through the letters becomes recognized and registered. The letters offer opportunities for the lover to bend forces of the outside and transform her suffering and confusion into a passionate expression of a self in the process of becoming other. Through narrative repetition, pleasure and desire are re-enacted and the practice of letter writing becomes an active intervention in the moulding of the self,³⁹ but also an epistolary practice of intervening in the constitution of the social. As Deleuze and Guattari have influentially argued, we should turn our attention into how desire and affective forces a social analytics of becomings, a project that brings together antagonistic power/knowledge relations, uneven economic and gendered structures in a state of flux and forces of desire: this is indeed a milieu for making connections between "the libidinal economy and the political economy, desire production and social production" (Fuglsand and Sørensen 2006, 1).

Taken as open narratives and as *epistolary technologies of the self*, John's love letters stage struggles between the lover and the beloved but also open up channels of communication between 'the Master' and the woman. In this sense, notwithstanding their immersion in power/knowledge relations and disciplinary practices, these letters should also be considered as events intervening in the constitution of the social and the subject herself and opening up the future to unforeseen possibilities and forces of life.

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¹ NLW MS 21468D, ff.72b-73.

² See amongst others, Nesci 2001, Parkhurst-Ferguson 2000, Parsons 2000, Wilson 1991, 1995, Woolf 1990, 1994.

³ Taubman 1985, 18, also cited in Wolff 1994, 116 and Tickner 2004, 37.

⁴ MR/MGJ/B.J4, my emphasis.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ MR/MGJ/B.J5.

⁷ See Tamboukou, 2010b, for a discussion of the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition 'The Real Van Gogh: The Artist and his letters'.

⁸ A number of scholars have influentially discussed 'the narrative turn' in the social sciences. See amongst others, Denzin 2000, xi, Riessman 2008 and Hyvärinen 2010, while Stanley and Temple have edited a special issue on narrative methodologies in *Qualitative Research* in 2008.

⁹ See Tamboukou, 2010a for a discussion of how the archive of the research is being constituted.

¹⁰ Janet Altman's (1982) work has been influential here. See also MacArthur 1990 for a rich overview of this literature.

¹¹ Altman makes the distinction between the internal reader who reads a letter addressed to him/her and the external reader who reads letters addressed to others. (1982, 880)

¹² See Stanley 2004, Jolly and Stanley 2005.

¹³ Around two thousand letters in five boxes in French and unpublished. The translations are mine.

¹⁴ Sixty-eight letters that have also now been published in Lloyd-Morgan 2004.

¹⁵ See Tamboukou, 2010a for a discussion of these letters.

¹⁶ Rodin's stormy relationship with the sculptress Camille Claudel has been widely discussed and analysed by biographers and art historians

¹⁷ Cavarero's notion of the narratable self as both ontologically and politically constituted through the act of storytelling, has affinities but also significant differences with a rich body of poststructuralist feminist literature (see, St. Pierre and Pillow 2000), the discussion of which goes well beyond the limitations of this paper.

¹⁸ MR/MGJ/B.J3, undated.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

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- ²¹ See Kaufmann's analysis on the amorous epistolary discourse (1986, 38)
- ²² MR/MGJ/B.J3, undated.
- ²³ MR/MGJ/B.J3, undated letters.
- ²⁴ MR/MGJ/B.J5, undated letters.
- ²⁵ MR/MGJ/B.J3, undated letters.
- ²⁶ Foucault discusses *dietetics* at length in Chapter One of Part Two in *The Use of Pleasures*. (1987, 95-139).
- ²⁷ MR/NLW, 22310c.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² NLW MS 21468D, f.26, emphasis in the text.
- ³³ MR/MGJ, B.J3, undated letters.
- ³⁴ In Ovid's *Heroids*, fifteen heroines write verse letters to the beloved who has deserted them. There is a debate as to the exact dating of this work as of Ovid's corpus in general, but her lived between 43 BC and AD 17. See, Harold Isbell, *Introduction* to the Penguins edition of 2004.
- ³⁵ See, Rilke and Sabatier 2002.
- ³⁶ Rilke 1945, 76.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 87.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 88.
- ³⁹ See Tamboukou, 2010a for a detailed discussion of how Gwen John constitutes herself through her letters and self-portraits as a nomadic narratable subject.