LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Putting the Epistolary Novel in Place: Remarks on Place-Representation in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*

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As a devotee of long-form narrative I have always been intrigued by the way conversation can be used as primary means through which to convey character, plot, and setting. Extended use of conversation—whether in so-called prestige television of our times or in multi-volume 18th century epistolary novels—creates a sense of urgency and heightened realism because two-way dialogue must unfold in the present-tense moment. In recent years, the TV show *Succession* brilliantly demonstrated that a complex story may be related almost exclusively through conversations, including those 'virtual' conversations held over the phone.

Perhaps the novel that best realizes the potential of 'all talk, all the time' format to create a documentary-like 'reality effect' is the voluminous *Clarissa (*1748/1962*)*[1]*,* regarded as the longest English novel. Here the novel's epistolary conversations may be regarded as 'virtual' because they unfold between correspondents separated by space and time. Such 'intervening' space directs our attention to the locations where the epistolary conversations are conducted. Those confined places acquire a felt presence and significance through being associated with the character's identity. One standard claim of eighteenth-century empiricism is that people's minds are to be associated with the places in which they conduct their thoughts and reveal

their secrets (Pasanek 2015). We can turn this around and say that a place can also become associated with the human life that occurs within it. Thus epistolary fiction, which reaches its peak in *Clarissa*, articulates scenes of writing with a dramatic suggestiveness yet spareness of detail that encourages readers to situate themselves imaginatively alongside the characters.

Told exclusively in letters, with occasional 'editorial' insertions in the form of footnotes and parenthetical insets, the novel is narrated through interlocking pairs of correspondents: Clarissa and her loyal but sharp-tongued friend Ana Howe, and libertine *extraordinaire* Robert Lovelace and his confidant and later turncoat John Belford. Told in present tense though free indirect discourse, the narrative which emerges organically from their correspondence may be schematically outlined in terms of stages of an archetypal homecoming journey: Clarissa Harlowe's estrangement from family, her suffering and eventual rape at the hands of her nemesis Lovelace, and finally a symbolic return to a reconstituted home-place.

As the primary spatial domain, the home-place subsumes the novel's other significant places functions, as variations on a theme. The novel's first half is situated in the Harlowe family household, a domestic place that slowly becomes experienced as a prison. The second half is set in a London brothel which reveals itself over time as a sinister, mock-household. The family estate is honeycombed into a series of sub-places that reflect the dramatic trajectory of Clarissa's gradual ostracism from each family member, and the growing prohibitions on her freedoms, including freedom to correspond. Interior places like parlour room (Lipsedge 2005) the dairy-house (Lipsedge 2009), the garden (Butler 1984), and the ivy-clad 'summer-house' (Lipsedge 2006) represent some of the important areas through which she moves as she seeks a place from which to pursue her forbidden correspondence with Lovelace and Ana Howe.

Critics have identified the significance of these sites with Clarissa's independence, especially the ivy house that her grandfather had built especially for her. However, the spatial trajectory of Clarissa's narrative suggests a different interpretation: her progressive estrangement from her family starts with her banishment from the parlour room where her father presides, followed by a subsequent drifting into the utilitarian, service areas, like the garden. This movement is accompanied by a gradual narrowing of perspective, a shrinking of spaces that reflects the narrowing of her choices. Her flight with Lovelace through the garden door brings the logic of her spatial enclosure to its conclusion.

At times, the epistolary form brings attention to setting when its conventions push against the limits of believability. This happens when characters write long letters to each other while living under the same roof or are separated by nothing more than a door. As Clarissa is gradually compelled to do all her writing in the garden, she finds herself corresponding with Lovelace who, hiding in an 'ivy-cavern,' drenched in mud, stands on the other side of the garden door. The reader's attention shuttles back and forth between the two places on opposites side of the same door, each a distinct scene of writing. Propelled by an inevitability familiar from tragic drama, the fateful moment occurs when Clarissa unbolts the garden-door during an arranged meeting with Lovelace and is 'tricked away' from her father's house. Her preparations for this event reflect Richardson's perennial fondness for images relating to keys, key-holes, the illicit unlatching of doors.

> I am afraid to ask you, my dear, what you would have done, thus situated. But what I have done, I have done. In a word, I wrote, "That I would, if possible, give him a meeting to-morrow night, between the hours of nine and twelve, by the ivy summer-house, or in it, or near the great cascade, at the bottom of the garden; and would unbolt the door, that he might come in by his own key. (Richardson: I, 317)

In such a dialogic manner, Clarissa's communicates her agonized state of mind and also draws attention to geography of the garden, to the physical boundaries of her world and of her spatial predicament. The violation of the domestic space—'the sin of a prohibited correspondence' (I, 176)— signals a turning point in the narrative, the 'crossing of the Rubicon.' The inextricability of her decision to 'fly the house' continues to sound like a mournful bell throughout the rest of the novel.

When not skulking around the edges of the estate, Lovelace dispatches his letters from a 'a little alehouse, they call it an inn…The White Hart,' about five miles from the Harlowe estate. His first scene of writing, identified with public anonymity, also becomes associated with his seduction of the owners' 'pretty little smirking daughter,' (Vol I, 170) Rosebud, in an ironic parallel with the primary seduction theme. As such, we are to understand this place alongside a series of other public lodgings as sites where family dynamics get twisted and parodied in progressively more troubling ways.

After her escape from the family estate we move into an urban world of public lodgings. This juxtaposition of public inn against the private house is repeated and expanded in a series of analogous parallels, such as that between the Harlowe estate and the public inn in at St Albans where Clarissa and Lovelace briefly reside under the pretense of being brother and sister. And in the culminating ironic parallel of the home-place we have the abysmal brothel-lodgings in London where Clarissa's confinement, and the scene of her Passion, truly begins.

Richardson does not typically use the kind of lavish expository details associated with omniscient narration of nineteenth-century high realism, like Charles Dickens. His places are conveyed with a spareness of detail that do not stimulate a fully-formed sensory impression in readers. Place representation, often through second-hand reporting, is achieved circumstantially in the context of what sounds like naturalistic conversation.

> Your drawings [writes her sister Arabella] and your pieces are all taken down; as is also your whole-length picture, in the Vandyke taste, from your late parlour: they are taken down, and thrown into your closet, which will be nailed up, as if it were not a part of the house, there to perish together: For who can bear to see them? (II, 170)

The startling metaphor and the spare details suffice to evoke a distinct sense of place. We see how the identity of family members is bound up in the identity of the house, and vice versa. Arrabella and, by extension, the Harlowe family's identity is clearly that of a status-conscious eighteenth-century gentry, the socio-historic crucible that gave birth to domestic realism.

In London, Lovelace reigns supreme. Clarissa's ignorance of the city allows Lovelace to use fake and misleading letters to construct an alternate London geography—representing

a seedy neighborhood as safe for a lady's lodgings—to exploit her disorientation. The effect is to create an illusion that the brothel on Dover Street, run by the bawd Mrs. Sinclair, is a genteel lodgings house. Yet even while Clarissa remains there, a façade of domesticity is preserved, as she is given her own private room with a lock. From her bedroom she dispatches letters to her captor on the other side of the door. Her strategic use of 'sullen silence,' her refusal to answer letters, or open doors, puts Lovelace on the defense.

Without an omniscient narrator, epistolary novels will represent places through a character's perspective, represented, even entirely as figments of their imagination. As Dorothy Ghent writes, *Clarissa* 'converts external forms of life . . . into subjective quality and spiritual value' (Ghent 1953: 41). In such manner, the Dover Street brothel becomes for Clarissa a demonic parody, an infernal simulacrum of order and family. The 'wretched' Mrs. Sinclair holds sway in the role of 'mother', with Lovelace as the patriarch, and the 'nymphs' who assist in the rape of Clarissa in the role of 'servants' and 'kinswomen.'

Perhaps the most striking object-place that appears near the end of her trials is the coffin which functions as the symbolic and literal completion of her homeword trajectory. Having managed to escape the second time, she finds sanctuary in a room above a glove shop. Here she designs and orders the construction of her own coffin, complete with elaborate devices and inscriptions upon its lid. After it is brought into her room, it takes the form of a writing desk, a kind of synecdochic basis for all epistolary conversation: 'It is placed near the window , like a harpsichord, though covered over to the ground; and when she is so ill that she cannot well go to her closet, she writes and reads upon it, as others upon a desk or table' (IV, 271). In addition to functioning as a writing desk, the coffin also symbolically stands for the novel's archetypal place, the house-place. This final transmutation is achieved in Clarissa's 'allegorical' letter to Lovelace that uses the metaphor of returning to her celestial 'father's house' to describe the arrival of her coffin – 'I am setting out with all diligence for my father's house' (IV, 157) – a message which Lovelace interprets as a literal home-coming. The transformation of the coffin into 'her father's house' represents a termination of her earthly displacement and signals a transcendental emplacement.

Long-form narrative that privileges dialogue, whether through letters or face-to-face conversation, achieves a remarkable reality effect and brings about an awareness of situational location. Unlike previous epistolary novels, *Clarissa* does not unfold in retroactive narration but in a highly urgent 'in the moment' narration. This creates a sense of immediacy and intimacy because it relies on the artifice that characters will record their exact thoughts as quickly as they have them. Despite some of the disadvantages of this convention, the primary advantage of the epistolary form in literature is, as Ian Watt claims, that 'letters are the most direct material evidence for the inner life of their writers that exist' (Watt 2001 [1957]: 191). Finally, the epistolary form achieves place consciousness when the place of writing becomes identified with the writer and vice versa.

Notes

[1] In this essay I use Everyman's Edition of *Clarissa* published in four volumes in 1962, corresponding to the novel's second edition of 1751.

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