

A Jakobsonian Reading of the Epistolary Strategies of Communication in Fontane's *Effi Briest*

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In a 1979 interview John Barth, explaining the process of creation of his novel *Letters*, said:

[A] reader of the nineteenth-century continental fiction is not really dealing with Anna Karenina or Emma Bovary; he is dealing with a sentence on a page. When I was re-reading Richardson, Fielding, Smollet and the rest, I was impressed with that spookily "modern" awareness they had that each novel was a document. They manifestly were aware that a novel wasn't life itself. It was an imitation, a convention for imitating life and, especially, in their case, a convention for imitating life's documents. (3)

In this context of imitating "life's documents" we place Theodor Fontane, who for his novel *Effi Briest* (1895) took a document from real life: a scandal that appeared in the press, involving adultery and a duel in Bonn in 1886. Fictionalizing this real event, he portrays the life of a Prussian girl reflecting all social conventions that reduced nineteenth-century women's scope for freedom and self-expression to an enclosed public realm. Among Fontane's many devices to convey the portrait of "life," the use of the epistolary technique within the novel is, in my opinion, his best contribution to the realist novel as it excels the possibilities of a simple literary tool.

Letters in *Effi Briest* form a motif that recurs in one way or another in twenty-five of the thirty-six chapters of the novel. However, the mention of letters in *Effi Briest* has traditionally been associated with the famous appearance in chapter twenty-six of "ein kleines Konvolut von Briefen . . . mit einem roten Seidenfaden umwickelt" (505). Innstetten, Effi's husband, finds by accident this written proof of the adulterous relation that Effi and Major Crampas had six years before.

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Stanley Radcliffe in his chapter "Effi Briest and the Crampas Letters" considers this the most important turning point in the novel that re-evaluates all characters' attitudes and precipitates the end of the story. And thus it happens: Innstetten challenges Crampas to a duel and kills him. Effi, outcast and abandoned by everyone, goes to Berlin, until her parents decide to forgive her and let her return home where, sick with disease and loneliness, she dies. Although there is no question that those letters have a relevant and strategic narrative function within the novel, the use of the epistolary genre cannot simply be evaluated by that punctual event or its implications. In my opinion, Effi's correspondence stands out with more significance than the rest of the letters in the novel; her letters withstand independently as a crucial self-contained entity to the extent that it is possible to follow the main conflict with Effi's letters as a guideline to the story. My study observes her letters as an example of a complex linguistic process that reflects in its form and content Effi's physical and spiritual downfall; it proves that the communicative process she attempts to establish with the exterior public world progressively shatters, the linguistic factors of the process being clear indicators of her loss of speech.

The letters provide a linear sequence that reorders the reconstruction of reality, re-evaluating incidents or telling facts unknown to the reader. They trace Effi's growth from the energetic adolescent who happily exercises at the beginning of the novel to the woman who dies at the end of the book, an outcast from all social contact and self-aware of her change. Letters become direct evidence of her enclosure within a rigid society where all of Effi's movements depend upon her husband. The only two activities that her husband cannot control are Effi's attempts to create an alternative life as a rejection of her social enclosure—in the form of the Crampas affair—and the outburst of self-expression in the letters she writes. The letters become her source of self-expression: a movement of freedom from the inside to the outside in the attempt to manifest her private self in the public realm.

However, this communicative process—her mother being the main receiver of the letters—progressively weakens and stumbles along the novel to the extent that, ultimately, the communicative elements are destroyed along with Effi's voice. The changes that occur in her life—her arrival at Kessin, her isolation in a big house, her exposure to the

gossip and superficial society—are given visible and textual form in the changes that similarly affect the linguistic elements of the letters, as I try to prove in my analysis.

Roman Jakobson in *Fundamentals of Language* analyzes some laws that control the science of language through the study of language disturbance, in the form of aphasia. "To study adequately any breakdown in communications," he says, "we must understand the nature and structure of the particular mode of communication that has ceased to function" (55). The structure of the particular mode of communication that concerns us—the letters—is supported by the six elements that Jakobson uses to define any verbal act of communication, described in the following pattern: the addresser sends a message to the addressee; this message requires a context comprehended by the addressee, either verbal or capable of being verbalized; addresser and addressee need to fully or partially share the code, and use a physical or psychological contact that enables both of them to enter and stay in communication.

In the letters Effi writes to her mother or receives from other characters at the beginning of the novel, these constitutive elements are in place and produce a dynamic process of communication. Yet, a progressive transformation of the linguistic elements becomes the textual testimony of the change that is taking place in Effi's inner self. In his study, Jakobson concentrates on the consequences of similarity and contiguity disorders to evaluate the effects of what he calls "language in dissolution" (56). The study of Effi's letters confirms the presence of another "language in dissolution" that we could label "writing in dissolution." The role of Effi as encoder, addresser, and writer is affected by external circumstances, that precipitate the downfall of the whole communicative process. Effi's final letters represent—using Jakobson's words—"the total loss of the power to use or apprehend speech" (74). But whereas Jakobson is studying a physically and psychologically inherent incapacity of the decoder and codifier that he calls *aphasia universalis*, I will analyze how the impossibility of communication through Effi's letters responds more to the pressure of outside circumstances than to an inherent deficiency. Thus, Jakobson's pattern of linguistic similarity and contiguity disorder takes place at a metaphorical level in Effi's failed attempt to communicate. Once more, linguistic and poetic paradigms prove to be deeply entwined.

At the beginning of the novel, Effi is an addresser with the re-

quired qualifications. Her active and open desire for communication is revealed in the details and comments of the relevant group of letters in chapter six. Effi recounts to her parents the first events that take place during her honeymoon. The first bit of news arrives only three days after the wedding, indicating Effi's need to share her overwhelming impressions. On a linguistic level, all factors are present for the success of communication: the message is received, the addresser/writer expresses her state of mind referring to a third element; the encoder wants to influence the decoder, and there is comment on the meaning of what is being said. The sincere letter shows Effi's mixed feelings of fear and admiration towards Innstetten as she is already aware of his superiority: "Er ist überhaupt sehr aufmerksam. Freilich ich muß es auch sein, namentlich wenn er was sagt oder erklärt. Er weiß übrigens alles so gut, daß er nicht einmal nachzuschlagen braucht" (324).

Up to this point, her mother—receiver of the letters—is in good standing as a competent decoder. The "speech event" described by Jakobson is only efficient as long as both participants share the same code. In this case the letters, the "written event," prove their efficiency: Effi's mother is not only able to decode the essential information of the letter—a list of the tourist spots visited by the married couple—but she also can detect her daughter's lack of happiness and freedom. Her comments, once the letter has been read, represent the correct response to what Effi has expressed. With these qualifications Effi's mother has avoided the receptive aphasia studied by Jakobson as "similarity disorder" which causes incommunication as the study of Goldstein's patients proved when they "grasped the words in literal meaning but could not be brought to understand the metaphoric character of the same word" (69). Frau von Briest's ability to decode Effi's letter on two levels assures the success of the communication. In this sense, it is easy to understand how Effi's use of letters becomes a need when she arrives in Kessin, as the place provokes in her sad feelings of dullness and displacement, recalling in a way a similar situation in other realist protagonists, such as Emma at Yonville-l'Abbay in *Madame Bovary* or Ana Ozores at Vetusta in *La Regenta*. Like them, Effi needs an escape from her state of anxiety, and letters become a source of communication as well as a way to retain memories from her childhood and past happiness. In fact, not only does she write letters, but she re-reads them in a clear attempt to rediscover her identity, once she realizes that in Kessin's milieu, her identity has been

reduced to her being the wife of the governor. The code used in the letters openly reveals this situation: letters by Effi's mother have a simple, familiar, and warm tone, whereas the invitation she receives from Gieshübler to meet the singer Maria Tripelli, addressed in extremely formal terms, places Effi in a majestic and isolated context of dependence on her husband.

Her alienation is obvious in the next letter to her mother, which appears in chapter twelve. This letter can be considered the turning point in Effi's evolution. It indicates the incipient difficulties that Effi is confronting in expressing herself, marked by the temporal distance of several weeks since she last wrote her mother (382). Nevertheless, the mere act of reconstructing events is set aside in favor of an open declaration of her sufferings. The length of the letter—the longest in the book—indicates how Kessin's pressure is affecting Effi. The context that surrounds the writing of the letter is highly indicative: she writes it on New Year's Eve, before leaving for the Club Ball, where, as the narrator of the story ironically points out, it was possible "endlich einmal die Ganze Stadtflora beisammen zu sehen" (382). Her disenchantment is obvious; she writes: "überhaupt, soviel Ursache ich habe, zu danken und froh und glücklich zu sein, ich kann ein Gefühl des Alleinseins nicht ganz loswerden" (382). The letter gives evidence of Innstetten's influence on her. Her pregnancy, one of the main themes in the letter, is viewed as an escape from her dull life and as a reason for her inferiority towards her husband:

Wie glücklich ich selber im Hinblick darauf bin, brauche ich nicht erst zu versichern, schon weil ich dann leben und Zerstreuung um mich her haben werde oder, wie Geert sich ausdrückt, ein "liebes Spielzeug." Mit diesem Worte wird er wohl recht haben, aber er sollte es lieber nicht gebrauchen, weil es mir immer einen kleinen Stich gibt und mich daran erinnert, wie jung ich bin und daß ich noch halb in die Kinderstube gehöre. Diese Vorstellung verläßt mich nicht (Geert meint, es sei krankhaft) und bringt es zuwege, daß das, was mein höchstes Glück sein sollte, doch fast noch mehr eine beständige Verlegenheit für mich ist. (383)

The letter adopts the nature of almost a confession of her fears, together with a sense of clandestineness which, from the point of view of the communicative act, still presents Effi's mother with the neces-

sary requirements to represent an excellent recipient-confident. Effi is aware of this as she says: "Aber das schreibe ich nur Dir. Innstetten darf nicht davon wissen" (383). In this, her first attempt to escape and rebel from the world in which she feels trapped, Effi indirectly and dramatically is reaching out for a concrete way to escape, later incarnated in the numerous letters she writes home and in her meeting with Major von Crampas, whom she sees as a "Trost- und Rettungsbringer" (388).

Effi's attraction to Crampas is a result of his apparent detachment from the world in which she is trapped. Their affair, though not specifically described, ends by means of a letter. Effi, locked in her room, writes an unaddressed, clandestine and very significant letter: "Vergessen Sie das Geschehene, vergessen Sie mich" (475). As a writer, she is also aware of her manipulation of the language, as she encodes this final message to Crampas with special criteria for the selection of words that perfectly fits her purpose. This awareness of the choice of elements within the communicative act is even recorded by the narrator: "Sie überflog die Zeilen noch einmal, am fremdesten war ihr das 'Sie'; aber auch das mußte sein; es sollte ausdrücken, daß keine Brücke mehr da sei" (475).

With this letter, Effi crosses the point of "no return" and no longer can be the same. In Berlin, Effi sees her mother, but ironically, the direct contact that had been maintained through distant letters has suddenly disappeared now that they are together. Frau Briest is unaware of the recent changes that have taken place in Effi, and does not realize the tangible distance between them, as proven by their dialogues: "Effi, du bist so stürmisch. Ganz die alte." "Ach nein, Mama. Nicht die alte. Ich wollte, es wäre so. Man ändert sich in der Ehe" (478). Effi's mother, thus, has suddenly been deprived of the skills to be the decoder that Effi needs. And so, this lack of a real recipient to whom she may send her letters isolates her more in Berlin than her staying in Kessin had done.

Alone again in Berlin with Innstetten, Effi creates a world for herself without connection to the outside. She does not feel the pressure of Kessin anymore, but neither does she experience any sense of freedom. Her voice in the letters is less and less audible as the narrator's voice takes control, interpreting her situation: "In jeglichem, was sie tat, lag etwas Wehmütiges, wie eine Abbitte, und es hätte sie glücklich gemacht, dies alles noch deutlicher zeigen zu können. Aber das verbot

sich freilich" (493).

Effi is a victim now, in a metaphorical sense, of what Jakobson denominates "contiguity disorder," a type of encoding aphasia that leads to the degeneration of communication. Caused by the inability of individuals to combine simpler entities into more complex units, the "contiguity disorder," Jakobson explains, diminishes the extent and variety of sentences (agrammatism), gives rise to "telegraphical style" and produces the deficiency to propositionalize. This disorder on a linguistic level finds its parallel in Effi's loss of words, in the impossibility to combine willingly her real feelings into a special code to express herself in the outside world: Effi's inner self has collapsed and with it, her ability to communicate through letters; her real thoughts will hardly be expressed anymore. In fact, her last letters from Ems—"glückliche, beinahe übermütige Briefe" (511)—seal her possibility of openness in chapter twenty-six.

From this point on, there are no more letters in the book written by Effi. A message is fruitless, Jakobson points out, if regardless of the temporal or spatial distance the symbols are not shared. In Effi's situation, there is no possibility of sharing signs, so the action takes a rapid and radical turn: letters by other characters take control of the incidents, presenting the hypocritical attitude of the society facing Effi's affair. The contrast between presence and absence of voice at the end of the novel reaches its peak with the combination of Effi's silent death at home within the rise of multiple voices from other characters.

The letters, thus, are the perfect device to indicate the movement from a voiced to a voiceless character that progressively takes shape throughout the novel. Either by eradicating the decoder's capacities or by having the encoder's abilities shattered, the verbalization of ideas disappears and the communicative process disintegrates. Once Effi loses the one tool she has for self-affirmation—letters as a possibility to communicate—defense is impossible and at that point, like so many other heroines of the nineteenth-century novel, she dies.

Nevertheless, Effi does not have the traits of a subversive voice. In fact, Effi only presents facts, but does not rebel against them. She surrenders to the situation as she bows to the "established system," proclaiming before dying that her husband "in allem recht gehandelt. In der Geschichte mit dem armen Crampas—ja, was sollt er am Ende

anders tun?" (581). The story closes then, adopting the comfortable position that Effi's father has recurrently used to close any argument through the novel with his famous sentence: "das ist ein zu weites Feld" (583). So, although Effi's example is reduced to portraying the anxious desire of self-expression within a hermetic environment, her expressive and complex letters point her out as one of the innovators in the search of the female voice within the epistolary genre, elevating the "written event" into an active and expressive act of dynamic communication.

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