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'A man's letters…are only the mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives'.[1] In the light of this statement, examine the use and reliability of subjective, first-person narration within the epistolary novel.

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The eighteenth century was, according to Watt, an age of 'transition from the objective, social and public orientation of the classical world to the subjective, individualist and private orientation of the life and literature of the last two hundred years'.[2] Within this eighteenth-century climate of individualism, epistolary fiction became the vogue. Renouncing the third-person narrative form that had previously characterised the 'novel', epistolary novelists presented first-person, subjective narratives written through private letters. These letters would act as an 'immediate imitation of individual experience',[3] allowing the reader to examine the writer's individual consciousness, or: 'the totality of the impressions, thoughts, and feelings, which make up a person's conscious being'.[4] As a form of private communication between the letter-writer and a trusted recipient, the letter has a confessional quality, due to its associations with candour, spontaneity and intimacy of familiar speech. The letter acted, for Samuel Richardson, as a 'short-cut…to the heart';[5] however, the 'subjective realities'[6] presented in letters are, by nature, subject to error, embellishment or purposeful alteration. Focusing on Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Burney's *Evelina* (1778), this essay will examine both the purpose and the reliability of subjective, first-person narration within the epistolary novel.

By writing about personal experiences, the letter-writer's 'experiencing self' is brought into conflict with his 'narrating self.[7] Since there must, logically, be an interval between the letter-writer's experience and his recording of that experience, the writing process can be said to split the writer into two distinct selves. Stanzel defines these selves as 'the older, matured and more sensible "I" as narrator and the "I" as hero, still completely engrossed in his existential situation'.[8] This reasoning is fundamentally flawed, however: the narrator would only be older, matured and more sensible if he chose to write after a lengthy interval. Stanzel's definition would effectively deny the existence of a narrating self in *Pamela.* Pamela's 'to-the-moment' account is written 'in the height of present distress, the

[1] Samuel Johnson to Mrs Thrale, Litchfield, October 27, 1777, in *The Works of Samuel Johnson, LL. D.*, ed. Arthur Murphy, ESQ (New York: Alexander V. Blake, iv, 1840), p. 519
[2] Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (London: Pimlico, 1957), p. 176
[3] Watt, p. 32
[4] 'consciousness, n.', *OED Online* [OUP: December 2011] <http://oed.com> [accessed 17 January 2012]
[5] Watt, p. 195
[6] Ruth Perry, *Women, Letters and the Novel* (New York: AMS Press, 1980), p. 114
[7] Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 17
[8] Franz Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative,* trans. C. Goedsche (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 82

mind tortured by the pangs of uncertainty':[9] she has not matured in the small interval required to write her letter. Whilst Stanzel's definition would limit Pamela to her experiencing self alone, what Richardson actually aimed for was *equilibrium* between the two selves, in order to give the reader instantaneous descriptions *and* reflection. It is only through the spontaneity of her narration that Pamela grants the reader an 'intimate imitation of individual consciousness': she invites us, at once, to actively participate in her sufferings and to observe the workings of her mind. If Pamela were to have narrated the pain of her trials after marrying Mr B, the fear that governs her mind throughout the novel would be absent, since the knowledge of her fate would inevitably interfere in her narrative. Whilst Pamela's instantaneous narration was the perfect device for psychological analysis, by choosing for Pamela to narrate in such an unrealistic way, I believe that Richardson sacrifices the plausibility of his heroine as a recognisable, three-dimensional character. It is highly unrealistic that Pamela could write down her experiences at the moment of experiencing them; her letters are too structured to be spontaneous outpourings of the mind; her language is too studied to be that of a young, country girl — in short, Richardson's 'invisible' authorial hand is all too present in Pamela's letters. Altman believes that 'the epistolary present is caught up in the impossibility of seizing itself':[10] Richardson gets tangled up in this impossibility, focusing so much on making his heroine a paragon of moral conduct that he forgets to make her real. In fact, it is the public reader (acting as Carvers[11] of the text) — not the heroine herself — who is the subject of the novel. Pamela's letters serve as a moral conduct-book, aiming to educate the public reader by involving him/her in 'instructive mock encounters'[12] with dilemmas they may encounter in their own lives. Pamela herself is merely an imagined ideal and her letters like passages from scripture. In attempting to unite Pamela's narrating self with her experiencing self, Richardson lost the realism he sought from the epistolary form.

Although Evelina does not pretend to write 'to the moment', the relationship between her two selves is also fraught. Although, like Pamela, her narrating self is not an 'older, matured and more sensible "I"', there *is* an acknowledged time lapse between the moment of experience and the moment of narration – an altogether more realistic notion of letter-writing than we witness in *Pamela.* However, it is due to this interval that Evelina often finds it difficult to articulately express the confused emotions of her experiencing self. As a novel of sensibility, *Evelina*'s heroine displays a characteristic inability to convert strong emotions into thoughts. Evelina, displaying a human fallibility that Pamela never shows, is unable to manage 'her own constructing power'.[13] Concerning Lord Orville's unannounced visit to herself at Holborn, Evelina tells Mr Villars that she was overcome by myriad emotions, however: 'all these thoughts, occurring to me nearly at the same time, occasioned me more anxiety, confusion, and perplexity, than I can possibly express'.[14] Thus, whilst her experiencing self is subject to the keen rush of sensibility, her narrating self is insufficiently 'mature' to translate these emotions into words — just as we might expect from a young girl

[9] Samuel Richardson, 'Preface' in *Clarissa; or the History of a Young Lady comprehending the most Important Concerns of Private Life and particularly Shewing the Distresses that may attend the Misconduct both of Parents and Children in relation to Marriage* (London: Harrison and Co., 1985), p. iv
[10] J.G. Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1982), p. 127
[11] Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 25 February 1754, in *Selected Letters of Samuel Richardson,* ed. John Carroll (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p. 296
[12] Tom Keymer, *Richardson's* Clarissa *and the Eighteenth-Century Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. xviii
[13] Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angelica: women, writing and fiction 1660-1800* (London: Virago, 1986), p.16; quoted in Bray, p. 96
[14] Frances Burney, *Evelina or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 240

unaccustomed to such social situations. Whilst Pamela's letters seem too wise for her years and her background, Evelina's letters are a credible reflection of her youth, social status, country education, and limited social interaction. Her ability to make sense of her past sensations improves gradually over the course of her letters, however. At the Hampstead assembly with Madame Duval and Mr Smith, she declares: 'all my thoughts were occupied in re-tracing the transactions of the two former balls at which I had been present…Oh how great the contrast!'[15] Just as her experiencing self learns, with every experience, how to regulate itself in public situations (for example, learning not to reject one dance partner only to accept another), Evelina simultaneously learns to better command her narrating self, asking less and less for Mr Villars' approbation for her thoughts and actions. Evelina's experiencing self and narrating self, despite difficulties, are in equilibrium: she is, at one and the same time, 'both the hero and already someone else'.[16]

Keymer believes that the 'epistolary narrative can be read as a wholly candid undressing of the soul, a wholly designing address to its reader, or anything between these two extremes along a scale of conscious and inadvertent misrepresentation'.[17] In order to ascertain *Pamela a*nd *Evelina*'s position on this scale, we must decide whether their letter-writing is a means to an end or an end in itself. Used as a form of communication, letters are usually a means to an end. Many critics believe that Pamela uses her letters as a means to deceive her parents into believing that she is a virtuous angel and Mr B a cunning devil — the opposite being the truth. Such readings of *Pamela* focus on the unreliability of subjective narration: since her account of events is all that we hear, it is easy to distrust it. However, I believe that both Pamela and Evelina's writing is an end in itself. Pamela writes her original letters candidly with no more design than to communicate her fears to her parents. No longer sure that her parents will receive her letters, however, Pamela laments: 'Let me write and bewail my miserable hard Fate, tho' I have no Hope that what I write will be convey'd to your Hands!'[18] She now writes a journal to vent her uncontrollable emotions, since she has no power (as both woman and servant) to voice them in public. By noting down her emotions in careful detail, it helps Pamela to make sense of her experiences. Pamela's whole self is under constant threat from Mr B: by raping her, he would rob her of her virtue and marital prospects; by forcibly seizing her letters, he would steal her innermost thoughts and feelings. Since Pamela's letters are often concealed within her dress, the two acts become equated. Her untainted, private thoughts and her virginity are her most treasured attributes – they may be wilfully shared (as they later are), but not forcibly taken.

Pamela's journal is important not only for her present self, but also for her future self. It is only by rereading her letters that Pamela can be sure of her identity; by keeping a record of her trials, she constantly reminds herself of her familial roots and of God's grace in protecting both her and Mr B from sin. Whilst Pamela managed to stay true to herself earlier by wearing her country clothes, she must give these up on becoming Mr B's wife. Catapulted into a world of wealth and luxury, Pamela *needs* her journal as a reminder of her true self. Griffin Wolff argues that Pamela's letters are an adaptation of the Puritan diary form: 'The Puritan kept a record of his trials in order to discover the hidden components of his personality…his diary was often a detailed, obsessive catalogue of the dangers he encountered, along with a careful record of his success or failure in resisting them'.[19] The religious significance of the journal form again reveals Richardson's authorial hand writing through Pamela to morally educate the public reader. Whilst this poses a further attack on

[15] Burney, p. 225
[16] Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. J.E Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 218
[17] Keymer, p. 24
[18] Samuel Richardson, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 98
[19] Cynthia Griffin Wolff, *Samuel Richardson and the Eighteenth-Century Puritan Character* (Connecticut: The Shoe String Press, 1972), p. 60

Pamela's plausibility as a three-dimensional character, it does indicate that Pamela's letters had more reason to be candid than deceitful. Pamela writes both to discover herself (in the act of writing) and to re-discover herself (in the act of reading): this is only possible if she is utterly honest.

Whilst any design in Pamela's journal-letters would be futile, since they will probably never reach the recipient, the same cannot be said of Evelina. The recipient of the majority of Evelina's letters, Mr Villars (her guardian), represents Evelina's source of permission. Thus, her letter-writing is 'a synecdochic gesture: it stands…for the tenuous and danger-fraught communication process…between the empowered and the powerless'.[20] Evelina's first letter, asking permission to go to London, exudes ambivalence: 'I am not *very* eager to accompany them…I shall be very well contented to remain where I am, if you desire that I should…I hope you will be able to permit me to go!'[21] Her tone is submissive, yet the affection she professes reads like *affectation*. She cries: 'Adieu, my most honoured, most reverenced, most beloved father!' and praises his 'goodness', 'bounty' and 'indulgent kindness'. Cajoling Mr Villars into giving his permission, Evelina's plea abounds with manipulations, though of an innocent nature. Benefiting from the interval between her experience and her narration of that experience, Evelina deliberates over her writing more than Pamela does. Epstein names Evelina 'a storyteller with an ulterior motive',[22] carefully self-editing and distorting the truth. Indeed, if we compare the letters written to Mr Villars and those written to her best friend, Maria, we can discern a careful, deliberate editing process within those addressed to the former. When writing to Maria, Evelina's tone is unguarded and colloquial. For example, she implies that she has begun to fall in love: '"Good God, is it possible? — am I, then, loved by Lord Orville?" But this dream was soon over'.[23] Unlike Epstein, I do not see Evelina's silence to Villars on such subjects as deceitful; I see it as a struggle for independence. Villars has not educated her in social etiquette; therefore, she must learn for herself. He wants to keep her inexperienced: 'I need not say how much more I was pleased with the mistakes of your inexperience at the private ball, than with the attempted adoption of more fashionable manners at the ridotto'.[24] Fearing his criticism, she conceals her love for Lord Orville. When she tells him, he patronises her for her weakness and naivety, choosing to think the worst of Orville due to the forged letter Evelina received from Sir Clement (in Orville's name). Whilst Mr Villars is morally static, judging situations by moral doctrine, Evelina learns by experience, gradually beginning to trust her own judgement, and in the end, it is she who is right about Orville.

Her letters conceal a quest for self-determination — 'concealed' since young ladies were not supposed to make decisions for themselves. Evelina's letters become more selective over time: no longer writing solely for his advice, her letters take on journalistic quality. Like Pamela, Evelina seems to write for herself — forced, as a woman, to be reticent in public, she writes to exercise her critical faculties; to unburden herself of the feelings she is forbidden from voicing; to retain her individual identity in a society of men who seek to own her. Doody notes: 'the novel shows us how the restrictions upon women's speaking create a certain degree of doubleness in most women'.[25] The timidity Evelina must display in public shrouds her true, private self, which is perfectly capable of the shrewd observation and judgement that men believed eluded women. *Evelina* becomes, as such, almost a feminist

[20] Julia Epstein, *The Iron Pen: Frances Burney and the Politics of Women's Writing* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1989), p. 95
[21] Burney, p. 25
[22] Epstein, p. 99
[23] Burney, p. 258
[24] Ibid., p. 57
[25] Margaret Anne Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 47

novel of education. Burney showed, through Evelina's letters, that women could be as intellectually astute as men.

Any answer to the question — can we trust the letter? — must always be entirely subjective. In these two novels, we have no way of knowing whether we are given a true depiction of events, since Pamela and Evelina's version is all that we hear. There is no opportunity to gain distance or perspective, due to the absence of an authorial voice commenting on their 'subjective realities'. Whilst this has led many critics to deem Evelina and Pamela's letters untrustworthy and deceitful, this conclusion depends upon the letters having been written as a means to an end — as a 'designing address to its reader', which I dispute. I believe that Pamela and Evelina write largely to discover themselves and to exercise the freedom that they are denied, as women (and for Pamela, as a servant), in public. As an 'emblem of the private',[26] the letter exposes the duality between a woman's public and private self. Writing as a mode of self-expression and self-discovery, self-misrepresentation would be futile for Pamela. Writing as a mode of self-determination and -empowerment, Evelina writes candidly, yet selectively, to her guardian. The extent to which the two heroines fulfil these goals is entirely dependent on how well they manage the tension between their experiencing and narrating selves. Whilst Evelina has much difficulty in expressing her emotions, Pamela has too little. Both Richardson and Burney aimed for equilibrium between the two selves of their heroines, but both fell short. In an attempt to provide a minute psychological and moral analysis of a virtuous woman, Richardson adopts an unrealistic 'to-the-moment' style, which leaves Pamela flat on the page, rather than giving her life — she remains an example, not a reality. Pamela's self-discovery is not, in fact, for her own benefit; it is for the public reader's benefit. Evelina's two selves are more balanced than Pamela's, and yet, even in her quest for self-determination, she is woefully short of self-control. She often cannot make sense of her experiences, but that is what makes her a more human character than Pamela. Her letters are those of any eighteenth-century woman, no longer content with being passive, silent and controlled.

[26] Elizabeth Heckendorn Cook, *Epistolary Bodies: Gender and Genre in the Eighteenth-Century Republic of Letters* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 6

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