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Edgar Landgraf

Bowling Green State University, elandgr@bgsu.edu

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EDGAR LANDGRAF
Bowling Green State University (Ohio)

Romantic Love and the Enlightenment: From Gallantry and Seduction to Authenticity and Self-Validation

Today, the adjective “romantic” has lost much of its luster. Although still used in popular culture to sell books and movies, romantic ideals carry little more than a sentimental value. Long gone are the days of romantic suicides. In our age, romance at best makes us smile. Indeed, since Harry met Sally, passion appears to have found its most suitable representation in the “romantic comedy,” an emotionally charged yet uncommitted genre whose humor thrives on the protagonists’ sentimental stance towards their sentimentality. This is not to downplay the persisting significance of the concept of love, so apparent in the seemingly endless repetition of this topos both in high and popular culture. Love has remained the primary medium for the expression and experience of the modern self. In love, we wish to express ourselves authentically and find ourselves acknowledged and appreciated for who we are. Or, to follow a more precise formulation by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann: “Was man [heute] in der Liebe sucht, was man in Intimbeziehungen sucht, wird somit in erster Linie dies sein: *Validierung der Selbstdarstellung*.”¹ Under the aegis of self-validation, the concept of love came to subsume an ever increasing multitude of emotional, sensual, sexual, and even intellectual practices which--as long as they promote the experience and authentication of one’s self--has challenged many of the traditional social norms and ideals which have guided romantic interactions for many centuries.² While the quest for self-validation has broadened the standards for acceptable romantic interactions, the reliance on “authenticity” has increased. Lovers today are expected to adhere to

an ideal of communication which emphasizes genuineness, truthfulness, and originality.

Although it is rarely contemplated whether authenticity is indeed desirable or even possible, for the purpose of self-validation it appears to be indispensable. This is notable considering that the demand for authenticity contradicts traditional definitions of “passion” where the self experiences itself outside of itself. As a brief glance at Denis de Rougemont’s seminal work on *Love in the Western World* indicates, the change from “passion” experienced as a loss of self to the emphasis on self-validation is largely a post-WWII phenomenon. In 1940, de Rougemont defines the goal of modern love still in terms of the “man of passion” who seeks “to be defeated, to lose all self-control, to be beside himself and in ecstasy.”³ In 1982, only forty years later, de Rougemont concludes in the preface to his now classic work that a new “ethic of love” may be emerging, “having as a goal the full and authentic freedom of a real person: *the control, not of others, but of oneself.*”⁴ But I would argue that this new “ethic of love” that becomes the dominant paradigm after WWII emerged long before, during the Enlightenment. The association of love with authenticity and the validation of one’s self-portrayal, which has led us away from the idealization of such attributes of romance as passion, sensibility, and chivalry, evolves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, culminating in the literature of Romanticism. In the second half of the eighteenth century, Romantic love (the adjective must now be capitalized) discovers and explores in new depths notions of subjectivity and individuality. The evolution of Romantic love takes shape first and foremost as a literary phenomenon. Although love has always been a favored theme of literature, it was only in the second half of the eighteenth century that literature itself became the favorite site for the expression and the experience of love. In the German context, this shift finds its emblematic articulation in Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*

and the famous "Klopstock!" exclamation where the evocation of a literary figure appears to determine Werther's love experience.⁵ More generally evident is the increased significance of literature with regard to the experience of love in the new popularity of the epistolary novel. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Europe discovers the literary letter as the primary medium for the communication of love.⁶ The letter of the epistolary novel appears to provide the first discursive matrix for the coupling of love with self-validation. Drawing on the rhetoric of sensibility, the literary letter's unique mediation between self-reflection and ideals of authenticity and immediacy becomes the model for a new discourse on love which experiences love as a heightened form of self-actualization and self-expression.

The new preference for authenticity and immediacy--the precondition for today's quest for self-validation--stands in stark contrast to the conversational aptitude and social savvy, the requisite ability to dissimulate, to charm, please, enchant, persuade, and ultimately seduce which characterizes earlier aristocratic expressions of love. In Germany, the rejection of aristocratic notions of love in the name of new bourgeois ideals of love is most pertinent in the literature of the Enlightenment, especially in the bourgeois tragedy and in the epistolary novel of the period. I will examine two literary texts from the period which elaborate this development: Lessing's *Miß Sara Sampson*, written in 1755 and considered to be the first *bürgerliche Trauerspiel*, and Sophie von La Roche's *Geschichte des Fräulein von Sternheim* from 1771, one of the most successful German epistolary novels of the eighteenth century. In both texts, the heroines struggle against intrigue and seduction. This struggle is not waged in the name of passion or even in the name of romantic feelings; rather, both texts' main task is to find modes of communication which will secure the authenticity and sincerity of the characters involved. In *Miß Sara Sampson* the quest

for authenticity and self-validation supercedes the actual love affair: the tragedy focuses primarily on Sara's relationship with her father. Likewise, *Fräulein von Sternheim's* quest for love is void of any true passion but rather signals her desire to preserve her virtue while establishing herself as wife and mother. In the process, I wish to argue, the search for authentic communication is important both aesthetically--it attributes new significance to literature--and socio-politically. As an important precursor to Romantic and modern notions of love, the ideal of authenticity erected in these texts continues to guide our (private) social interactions and to support the (patriarchal) social order and gender-specific hierarchies of the Enlightenment. This claim appears to contradict the commonly held belief that the age of sensibility and especially the *Sturm und Drang* must be understood in opposition to the Enlightenment and its rationalistic (and moralistic) ideals.⁷ The second part of my paper will focus on the tension between Enlightenment figurations of love and their reception in the most important love novel of the eighteenth century, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther*. Goethe's epistolary novel, which no doubt breaks new ground with regard to love's ability to validate the self, both follows closely and rewrites the codes and ideals of the Enlightenment literature on love. Although it transforms sentimental paradigms and discovers new discursive fields for the exploration of subjectivity,⁸ *Werther*, I contend, continues to rely on the ideal of authentic and immediate communication which first found its artistic possibility in the literature of the Enlightenment.

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The tension between aristocratic and bourgeois notions of love is featured prominently in both Lessing's *Miß Sara Sampson* and in La Roche's *Fräulein von Sternheim*. In Lessing's play, Sara, the young single child of bourgeois upbringing, runs off with Mellefont, an aristocrat with a past.

Both spend several weeks in a cheap hotel, waiting--at least this is the pretense for Mellefont's hesitation--for an inheritance matter to be resolved so that Mellefont can marry Sara. Sara's father finds the two refugees and is willing to forgive his daughter and even accept Mellefont if he finds proof that Sara's intentions and her remorse are sincere. At the same time, however, Mellefont's past catches up with him in the form of his prior lover, the demonized Marwood. What follows is a tangled plot where father and daughter try to secure and regain each other's trust while Marwood uses deception and intrigue in her attempt to win back Mellefont and finally resorts to the most devious of weapons, poison, to get rid of Sara. A similarly problematic world of intrigue and seduction is encountered by Sophie von LaRoche's Fräulein von Sternheim. Her goal of preserving the values and virtues of her father is challenged by the aristocratic circle which she is forced to enter. Although she is able to resist the everyday temptations presented to her, she falls victim to the very persistent aristocratic suitor Derby who applies all tricks of the trade to win von Sternheim's affection--only to drop her coldly once he has succeeded.

In both texts, the two seducers, Marwood and Derby, are familiar with all the strategies and rhetorical ploys frequently discussed and documented in seventeenth-century aristocratic circles. Marwood and Derby focus on paradoxical proclamations of passion. They attempt to conquer through surrender, proclaim the desirability of their suffering, claim to see by being blinded, to find freedom in their emotional coercion, etc. In fact, Marwood and Derby demonstrate great intellectual savvy while discussing openly different strategic options for their plans of seduction. Marwood, in preparation for her first meeting, asks her maid for advice on how best to approach Mellefont: "Wie soll ich ihn empfangen? Was soll ich sagen? Welche Miene soll ich annehmen? Ist diese ruhig genug?"⁹ Derby in turn is interested in Sternheim only

for the challenge. In both cases, the approach is “strategic” in its general orientation toward conquest, rather than understanding or self-validation, particularly in its orientation toward assumed expectations. The aristocratic suitor sees love as a game in which the suitor caters to the expectations of the opponent. Derby, for example, is very meticulous in researching Sternheim’s expectations and in arranging for her to find him “coincidentally” fulfilling these expectations:

ich will diese Familie aufsuchen, und ihr Gutes tun, wie Engländer es gewohnt sind, und dieses, ohne mich merken zu lassen, daß ich etwas von ihr [Sternheim, E.L.] weiß. Aber gewiß werde ich keinen Schritt machen, den sie nicht sehen soll. Durch diese Wohltätigkeit werde ich mich ihrem Charakter nähern, und da man sich allezeit einer gewissen zärtlichen Neigung an die Gegenstände seines Mitleidens und seiner Freigebigkeit heftet: so muß in ihr notwendigerweise eine gute Gesinnung für denjenigen entstehen, der, ohne ein Verdienst dabei zu suchen, das Glück in eine Familie zurückrufen hilft.¹⁰

In Sternheim’s case, the challenge resides in her virtue which makes her a “ganz neue Art von Charakter,”¹¹ that is, for Derby the challenge lies in what to expect and how to cater to it. In Lessing, the “game” becomes more intricate because Marwood’s primary opponent, the aristocratic Mellefont, knows what to expect. Double contingency enters the exchange: Marwood’s actions are contingent on her expectations of his expectations of her expectations. Throughout their encounters, Marwood attempts to adjust her behavior accordingly, alternately playing the victim, uttering threats, and letting calm reasoning be followed by scenes of emotional surrender. What ensues is a (potentially) highly playful exchange between both parties

which--although demonized by these very Enlightenment texts and never fully realized by the innocent daughter-heroines--is nonetheless explored for its intellectual appeal.

Today we tend to enjoy these books more for their devious characters than for the naive and innocent daughter-heroines they project. For that reason it is still possible to turn such novels--for instance, Choderlos de Laclos' *Les liaisons dangereuses*--into successful Hollywood movies.¹² *Within* all these texts, however, the aristocratic approach to matters of the heart is clearly demonized. Evil intentions and insincerity are equated with superficial, corrupt, and inauthentic forms of communication. *Miß Sara Sampson*, for example, takes issue with double contingency not only on Marwood's side, but also on Sara's. Sara is interested in acting in the best interest of her father--who she presumes has her best interest at heart. But despite her noble intentions, her attempts to act in the best interest of her father lead to paralysis. For Sara, accepting her father's forgiveness would mean to accept her father sacrificing his happiness for hers:

Meine Beruhigung wäre alsdann diese, daß bei einem gewaltsamen Zorne kein wehmütiger Gram Raum haben könne und daß sich jener endlich glücklich in eine bittere Verachtung gegen mich verwandeln werde. Wen man aber verachtet, um den bekümmert man sich nicht mehr. Mein Vater wäre wieder ruhig, und ich dürfte mir nicht vorwerfen, ihn auf immer unglücklich gemacht zu haben.¹³

Sara sees herself confronted with a paradox: acting in her own self-interest, that is accepting her father's forgiveness and hence acting according to the stated interest of her father, would be against what she considers to be the best interest of her father; consequently, from her perspective she would need to act against the stated interest of her father in order to act in his

best interest. Sara subsequently does not act at all. In the middle of the play, a highly dramatized scene describes Sara's fruitless attempt to respond to her father's letter. The implications of the failed dialogue between father and daughter are clear: strategic exchanges, even if acted upon in the best interest of the other party, are condemned. Corruption is not merely a result of bad intentions; it is inherent to the aristocratic mode of discourse which relies on expectations and the reciprocal expectation of expectations.¹⁴

It is against this backdrop that the new discourse on love evolves, propagating authenticity, immediacy, and openness. The corruption seen as inherent in the aristocratic modes of communication is to be overcome through affirmations of authenticity and immediacy. Consequently, the ensuing claims of immediacy rely on a new rhetoric, a rhetoric of inwardness and transparency. This rhetoric, as Derby's success in seducing the "ganz neue Art von Charakter" demonstrates, is itself very susceptible to imitation and simulation and hence to further intrigue and seduction. In other words, the emphasis on authenticity and immediacy brings with it an even bigger danger: communication itself becomes an increasingly suspect endeavor. Threatened by constant intrigue and seduction, the rhetoric of sensibility and immediacy increasingly realizes the impossibility of safely communicating true intentions or feelings. It becomes clear that the necessary transparency of one's discourse cannot be realized within language.

Both texts, therefore, struggle to find or define means of communication which conform to the newly found ideal. Indeed, the very existence and justification of the bourgeois family's prerogative hinges on the possibility of securing uninhibited and open communication. In *Miß Sara Sampson*, this is most apparent when Sara's father's willingness to forgive his daughter and

welcome her back into the family is dependent on proving the authenticity of her response to his forgiveness. The letter he sends to his daughter asking for her forgiveness is accompanied by his servant Waitwell, who is instructed to pay close attention and see whether Sara's response to the letter is indeed authentic. This is surprising considering that the father is assuming all possible guilt and it is not even clear in what exactly Sara's authentic response to his letter is supposed to consist. Nevertheless, the proof of authenticity, which is subsequently located in Sara's speechlessness, is of utmost importance. When in turn Sara wants to address a letter to her father expressing her sincerity, she is unable to write a single word. Authenticity, both scenes indicate, can no longer be ascertained through the immediate communication of two parties, rather it must be "witnessed" by a third party. Although we find moments when tears and monologues allow the audience to distinguish authentic from inauthentic speech, on stage the expression of authenticity is relegated to speechlessness, which in turn must be communicated by a third and presumably impartial party. Lessing, it appears, uses Waitwell's testimony to escape the paradox that haunts the Enlightenment's discourse on love: lovers (in this case, the loving daughter) need to communicate incommunicability in order to attest to the authenticity of their emotions.¹⁵

A similar concern for authentication marks La Roche's *Fräulein von Sternheim*. The better part of the first half of the book is dedicated to Sternheim attempting to find proof of authenticity for Derby's love declarations. Derby, of course, knows that speaking for himself will not allow him to establish (i.e. successfully pretend) the sincerity of his intentions. And indeed, Sternheim believes to find proof of his sincerity only where Derby appears not to speak for himself, in his "secret" deeds (Derby reports that Sternheim, finally willing to marry him, told him: "Sie könne an meiner Edelmütigkeit nicht zweifeln, weil sie solche mich schon oft gegen

andere ausüben sehen”¹⁶). Derby finally wins her hand when he provides Sternheim with false letters which inform her of the intrigue surrounding her and which put him in the position of presumably being able to rescue her from imminent harm to her reputation. Derby succeeds where he does not speak directly for himself but instead has circumstances and letters speak for him. He thus cannot speak for himself precisely when he wants to be perceived as truly speaking for himself. At least verbally, the eighteenth-century suitor cannot establish his or her authenticity.

Before moving on to the aesthetic dimension of this paradox, let me briefly address some of its political implications. According to Friedrich Kittler, the bourgeois tragedy is a genre that does not merely reflect the social struggle of the bourgeois class against the aristocracy or express bourgeois ideas and ideals, but rather must be understood as a *semio-technique* which helps to establish the family as both the ideal and definitive social category.¹⁷ Kittler does not attribute much significance to notions of romantic love for this process. He acknowledges the importance of *parental* love as a means of cultural appreciation; he rejects, however, the possibility that romantic love can serve as grounds for the establishment of the new family. In my view, Kittler’s surprising disregard for the importance of love in this process stems from a somewhat uncritical definition of love as a strategy for the acquisition of the beloved person.¹⁸ By reducing love to strategic and rhetorical questions, Kittler employs a notion of love appropriate primarily to seventeenth-century aristocratic circles and hence misses the opportunity to map the genealogy of Romantic love within the emergence of the bourgeois family ideal. In contrast to Kittler, I argue that the ideals of authentic and immediate love are closely linked to the new family structure which hinges on and demands uninhibited, intimate, and open

communication. Furthermore, this ideal of uninhibited and open communication clearly favors the assertion of patriarchal authority. Intrigue and seduction not only threaten the innocence of Sara and Fräulein Sternheim, but--because communication itself becomes a suspect and inherently unreliable undertaking--they also threaten the very foundation of the Enlightenment: reason and civility. This perceived threat is then used to justify the patriarchal assertion of power. In both works, it is the voice and authority of the father which restores authentic speech and with it reason, order, and civility.¹⁹ To put it more bluntly: the rhetoric of inwardness and immediacy is closely linked to the establishment of a new social order which is intrinsically patriarchal.²⁰ The enslaving effect of this new symbolic order on women is evident in the demonizing of Marwood, for example, a woman who commands a high degree of independence and authority compared to such idealized female figures as Sara and Sternheim. The problem is less that demanding authentic, immediate, and disinterested speech is itself open to further intrigue than that the perceived threat of such intrigue opens up the possibility for the paternal voice to exert its authority in the name of reason and civility. In Sara and Sternheim the surrender to the paternal voice which demands virtue, reason, sensitivity, and the willingness for self-sacrifice is celebrated. Hiding its will behind allegedly objective ideals of virtue and love, the voice of reason silences its subjects and banishes the inherently destabilizing effects of rhetorical aptitude.

Love in the literature of the Enlightenment thus signals the silent surrender of the lover to the authority of a real or ideal paternal voice. Due to the bourgeois father's new role as guardian of family virtue and intimacy, the father's authority, his affirmation of social norms and ideals, achieves a new kind of intrusiveness. Through the father, social norms can claim an increased hold on family members who are held to a high degree of "openness" and intimacy. It is no

coincidence that this effect was first noted by feminist readings of the role of women in the Enlightenment period. Gail Hart, to mention only one recent example, finds that beyond the legal and economic control, sentimental patriarchs gain “a powerful psychological hold over the women they control.”²¹ In my view such a claim understates the constitutive role that changes in eighteenth-century discourse play in defining both gender and the humanistic ideals which must precede the call for emancipation. Assuming the prevalence of enlightened humanistic ideals independent of their socio-historical (and hence political) articulation entails a certain risk: the risk of ignoring how humanistic ideals do not simply abolish hierarchies but rather redistribute and refine an ever-changing economy of power. With Foucault one can argue that the susceptibility of the intimate discourse to proclamations of authority played a crucial role in the Enlightenment’s ability to abolish overtly authoritarian or dogmatic gestures and replace them with new humanistic ideals of compassion and understanding.²²

Let me address a possible objection to the association of the bourgeoisie with sensibility. Because so many champions of sensibility were indeed aristocrats, Peter Uwe Hohendahl challenges the idea of an immediate causality between the rise of the bourgeoisie and sensibility as too general and imprecise. Instead he claims sensibility in the name of a more general humanistic ideal which can at least potentially be viewed as anti-bourgeois, i.e. as rejecting social or political hierarchies and authoritative assertions of power.²³ Hohendahl argues convincingly that eighteenth-century ideals of sensitivity, tolerance, equality, freedom, etc., cannot exclusively be ascribed to a single class. However, this fact does not necessarily confirm the Enlightenment belief that humanistic ideals exist, develop, or assert themselves independent of any social and political structure or interest. It bears examination whether new ideals of sensibility and romance

and the individualization and perhaps the “humanization” of intimacy are indeed private affairs or whether they are intricately involved in the articulation of new social hierarchies and inequalities.

So far, my Foucauldian reading has favored the latter, the idea that sensibility and its prime representative--the modern understanding of love--are articulations of a new social order rather than eternal human “truths.” Yet, I believe that Hohendahl’s challenge to the idea of an immediate causality between the rise of the bourgeoisie and sensibility is historically correct and should not be ignored. Hohendahl’s objection points toward an important conceptual problem, highlighting the inadequacy of a social theory which follows Enlightenment ideology and situates the individual and his rights as principally outside or prior to their social articulation. In other words, a socio-historical perspective toward the notion of Romantic love and its role in the modern subject’s self-validation challenges one to rethink an ideological tradition which since the eighteenth century was inclined to situate the individual and his rights in opposition to society. To break with this tradition, I want to draw on Niklas Luhmann’s adaptation of systems theory. Specifically, Luhmann’s theory of functional differentiation allows one to understand the evolving discourse of sensibility and subjectivity and the rise of the bourgeoisie in the context of a more fundamental change in the structure of society and its semantics, that is, without having to assume any immediate causality between the rise of the bourgeoisie and sensibility. In a nutshell: Luhmann sees eighteenth-century Western society as marked by the transition from stratification to functional differentiation. The stratified social order of previous centuries is first challenged and then replaced by social subsystems which increasingly demand independence. They demand the authority to self-authorize and self-determine the functions which enable their auto-poiesis.

Historically, this drive toward self-determination can be observed with regard to a number of social subsystems, the justice system, the economic system, the sciences, the educational system, the art system, and with limited success the political system. Concerning my argument, the important consequence of this structural change is its effect on the semantics of individuality. In a stratified society, the identity of the individual is defined socially by a limited and fairly binding set of factors such as blood, rank, or profession. Functional differentiation necessitates much greater social mobility. Increasingly, the position, significance, and identity of a person is defined within the context of specific social subsystems rather than by name or profession. This increase of individual freedom, however, is also perceived as a fracturing of the individual's identity. The individual is no longer sufficiently defined by any single social subsystem nor can it easily synthesize the multiple identities it has in various subsystems. Paradoxically then, modern society leads the individual to believe that it can no longer find its identity inside the social order. It perceives itself as intrinsically *eccentric*.²⁴ This creates the need, but also the freedom, for a discourse in which the individual can find, identify, and validate itself. I contend that such discourse is explored first and foremost by the epistolary novel. Personal letters and literature become the primary discursive fields where the *eccentric subject* can search for and find self-identification and self-validation. Whereas the aristocratic suitor of the seventeenth century has no need to define or validate his persona through love, the eighteenth-century modern individual chooses love as the primary source for self-validation.

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The general structural change from stratification to functional differentiation may help us to understand the need to find new modes of self-validation. It does little, however, to explain the

initial preference for literature in this process or the particular insistence on authentic, immediate and interior modes of emotional expression. How are the newly forming ideals of Romantic love linked to literature? And how is self-validation linked to authenticity? Let me return to the overall social changes which mark the shift or perhaps the beginning of our modern understanding of individuality, subjectivity, and within it the discourse on love. The German sociologist Cornelia Bohn suggests that changes in the codification of love can be explained in terms of a change in communicational media which accompanied the transition from a predominantly aristocratic (stratified) to an increasingly functionally differentiated society.²⁵ Bohn argues that the communicative medium that dominated pre-eighteenth-century aristocratic societies was *conversation*. Conversational aptitude was of crucial importance in almost all aspects of life, e.g., (politics, economics, personal life, etc. Conversation develops and depends on a semantic of interaction that insists on politeness, indirectness, and general applicability. Conversation focuses on types that are easy to identify and allow all parties to participate. In other words, conversation is geared toward social norms, not toward the expression of individuality. In seventeenth-century aristocratic circles it is perceived to be rude to indulge too much in personal matters, to profile your individuality, be it in intellectual, personal, or emotional matters. If, on the one hand, the aristocratic society and its semantics of love were shaped by conversation as their preferred communicational medium, it was *writing* on the other hand which delimited the bourgeois society and its love semantics. Bohn argues that writing, and correspondingly the practice of reading, fosters a very different semantics. Writing entails absence and distance, and it is in this context that questions of authenticity and immediacy acquire prominence. An interesting reversal takes place: by the end of the eighteenth century,

rhetorical skills and conversational aptitude are rejected; instead, an emphasis on authenticity takes hold. Authenticity, however, is no longer linked to the presence of a person; rather the opposite appears to be the case: writing (especially letter writing, but also poetry) becomes the preferred medium for the expression of authenticity and immediacy. Paradoxically, then, the constitution and performance of the modern individual is linked intrinsically to the mediation of immediacy and authenticity in writing. And literature increasingly becomes the site where this paradox of a medially constructed immediacy is explored.²⁶

As noted above, this development is most apparent with the rise of the literature of sensibility and the epistolary novel. It is as interesting as it is telling, however, that in *Miß Sara Sampson*, the first bourgeois tragedy, the question of authenticity is negotiated--on stage--around the reception and conception of letters.²⁷ This indicates how the rise of the bourgeois family and its notion of love is linked to a much broader social change, a change in the dominant medium of communication. No doubt there are other contributing factors: rhetorically, the influence of Pietism should not be ignored.²⁸ Equally important is the fact that the change from conversation to writing could only take place due to increased literacy rates, the increased availability and affordability of print, and the subsequent popularity of reading. It is within these developments that literature emerges as the primary site for the communication of authenticity.²⁹ Literature provides the new communicational mode which allows the bourgeois family to base its moral and social prerogative on an ideal of love which is supposed to be disinterested, universally applicable and able to overcome all obstacles including social stratification.

In *Miß Sara Sampson* and in *Geschichte des Fräulein von Sternheim* the inherent danger of intrigue corrupting authentic speech is never fully realized. In both works, the authoritative

voice of the father, whether embodied or only a moral presence, ultimately restores and guarantees the authenticity and transparency of the lover's discourse against the aristocratic threats of intrigue and seduction. In comparison to these two texts, Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werther* is most striking for the almost complete absence of persuasion and seduction as well as the absence of a rationalistic and dominant father figure. This absence, however, does not mean that the problematic status of communication with regard to the new ideal of an authentic expression of love is ignored. Rather, *Werther* acknowledges the paradoxical situation which confronts any attempt to communicate love in its authenticity and immediacy and puts this problem at the center of its love experience, as well as its reflections on art and poetry. In fact, it is precisely because art and literature are asked to communicate the incommunicable that literature can become the primary medium for both the expression and experience of love. For that very reason, Werther can experience his love only as suffering, as an inherent impossibility, something that eludes realization because it is only possible as a literary or artistic act.

By the mid-eighteenth century, communicating incommunicability presents an aesthetic problem which evolves around the rejection of rhetoric and the increased insistence on expressive modes of communication. Incommunicability becomes a prominent issue within aesthetics in at least two different regards. Within the Enlightenment's *Wirkungsästhetik* the artistic mode of communication is itself defined in terms of the incommunicable. In this period, it becomes somewhat commonplace to lament the indescribability of art.³⁰ Art and the experience evoked by art elude description. Subsequently, art is subjected to the paradoxical demand of communicating this incommunicability. As increased emphasis is put on expressive modes of artistic representation, the inability of language adequately to express inwardness, authenticity,

and immediacy is discovered. This problem surfaces most prominently in the debates around the authenticity of acting³¹ and later with regard to the difficulties perceived in communicating true experience or emotion (especially the love experience).³² As much as the new ideal of love as authentic and immediate speech serves a social function, love needs a medium that allows the paradoxical expression of such immediacy. And vice versa: because of the significance ascribed to incommunicability by the field of aesthetics, the very eloquent communications on the inability to communicate one's true inner feelings acquire increased significance within literature. The *Sturm und Drang* movement profited most from this development. It draws much of its acclaim from the ability to express eloquently the inability to express itself authentically with regard to both its newly gained emotional sensibilities and its artistic experiences. Goethe's *Werther* is one of the clearest examples of the aesthetic value attributed to the communication of incommunicability. Werther describes his passions and his suffering time and again as something which eludes expression. He also confronts the same problem with regard to his artistic productivity, perceiving himself to be the greatest of all painters only on those days when he is completely unable to put anything on paper.³³ In other words, there is an artistic affinity between such pre-romantic reflections on consciousness with their emphasis on inwardness and subjectivity and the emerging discourse on love: both need to communicate incommunicability in order to establish their authenticity.

I want to suggest then that the apparent lack of intrigue and seduction in *Werther* does not do away with the need to find authentic modes of expression. But it is also not simply, as Luhmann would suggest, that the eighteenth century reacts to the problem of authenticity by differentiating and unfolding such binary codes as naturalness and artificiality, or nature and

civilization, both of which play an important role in *Werther* and actually supercede questions of intrigue and seduction. Rather than “solving” the problem of authenticity, the new communicational mode which evolved during the Enlightenment is now *explored* for its aesthetic rather than its social function. Or more precisely: the aesthetic reflections and self-reflections linking love and the experience of individuality to new aesthetic and artistic ideals intrinsically link the self-definition and self-understanding of the modern individual to a new understanding of art. In this development, love becomes the medium which allows a unique correlation of artistic and individual experience, a correlation which in turn cannot be communicated except perhaps through the lamentation of the impossibility of its communication. In this very specific sense, Werther’s suffering is a central element of the modern individual’s self-experience as both artistically and emotionally unique.

From this perspective the persistently suicidal tendencies of eighteenth-century lovers must be reevaluated. Such suicides do not represent the ailing or failing of the individual but rather are the logical consequence of individuals searching for self-validation *in* love and the expression *of* love according to the newly found ideals of authenticity and immediacy. As Gerhard Plumpe notes in his recent article, Werther’s suicide is not an act of desperation; rather he meticulously prepares for his suicide. Furthermore, I believe it is important to note that Werther stages his suicide: he turns his suicide into an artistic act. He borrows the guns from Lotte’s husband Albert. In a last letter to Lotte, he explains his suicide in highly poetic and philosophical terms. Finally, when he shoots himself, Emilia Galotti--another of Lessing’s bourgeois tragedies ending with the loving daughter’s death--lies open on his desk. As artistic act, his suicide performs the very paradoxical speech act required by the newly formed ideal of

love. By forever removing his voice from the social sphere, Werther's suicide becomes the most expressive of possible communications. It symbolizes the ultimate expression of incommunicability and hence--paradoxically--the ultimate authentication of his love and validation of himself. In his last letter to Lotte he writes:

Hier, Lotte! Ich schaudre nicht, den kalten, schrecklichen Kelch zu fassen, aus dem ich den Taumel des Todes trinken soll! Du reichtest mir ihn, und ich zage nicht. All! All! So sind alle die Wünsche und Hoffnungen meines Lebens erfüllt!³⁴

If Werther truly thinks the paradoxical logic of Romantic self-validation to its conclusion and yet self-validation remains the central aspect of our contemporary ideal of love, one must wonder why today the "romantic comedy" has become such a popular genre. Is this our superficial way of avoiding suicide as a logical consequence of authentic love? Or have we simply lost our artistic inclinations when it comes to matters of the heart? Probably both. Considering the alternative, however, it is hardly surprising that the Enlightenment's insistence on authenticity is not taken too seriously anymore. It seems that today authenticity has retained little more than a sentimental value, cherished *because of* rather than *in spite of* its impossibility. Or else the communicational constraints authenticity puts on the subject are simply ignored and instead models for "authentic" behavior provided by literature and the mass media are imitated. This without regard to the fact that the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries already take issue with the ideal of authentic and immediate love as it is articulated by Goethe's *Werther*. In particular, German Romanticism appears to recognize the paradoxes involved in proclamations

of authenticity and immediacy. Instead, however, of insisting on resolving the authenticity debate, for example, by exploring observational schemas such as the opposition of natural/artificial and nature/society or through suicide, Romantic poetry turns toward the exploration of the mediality of language. Poetic simulations of intimacy and immediacy, Romantic irony and self-reflection, and especially the lure of a paradoxical mediation of immediacy within poetry itself give an indication of how later Romantic writers explore literature as a preferred mode which allows a unique appreciation of the paradox of a mediated immediacy. Romantic literature does not only explore the communicational paradoxes created by the demand for authenticity and immediacy; rather we also find open rejections of the idealization of incommunicability.

Perhaps the most revealing instance of a text taunting the discourse of authenticity can be found in Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*, which most clearly exposes the paradox of communicational immediacy. Olympia, a lifeless machine which only emits the sounds "ach, ach, ach," attracts the utmost devotion of Nathanael, who recognizes in her "words" the "echte Hieroglyphe der innern Welt voll Liebe und hoher Erkenntnis des geistigen Lebens in der Anschauung des ewigen Jenseits."³⁵ Because Olympia cannot articulate a single word, she comes to represent the purest expression of inwardness. The social consequences of Nathanael's self-deception are even more drastic. The scandal caused by Olympia forces the outraged social circles to sneeze artificially and break with social etiquette in order to prove their authenticity. In other words, the copy forces the originals to simulate authenticity. We witness a phenomenon which Kleist describes in his essay "Über das Marionettentheater" with regard to grace: in its purest and

most divine form, love, defined as authentic and immediate communication, remains completely empty.

Notes

¹Luhmann, *Liebe als Passion* 208.

²In this respect, Crystal Kile's assessment of the myth of romantic love in contemporary popular culture is only half-right. In her article from 1992, she claims that "the myth of romantic love in western culture decrees that one only becomes fully 'self-actualized'--achieves a full, mature identity and psychic completeness--through choosing a love partner and remaining true to that partner until forces beyond one's control intervene" (151). More recent developments in popular culture suggest that the emphasis on self-actualization cannot *per se* guarantee or justify the traditional reliance on partnership, faithfulness, and specified gender roles. In fact, it could be argued that it is the very emphasis on self-validation which encourages a critical review of traditional cultural values in the first place.

³Rougement 282.

⁴Rougement 7.

⁵In the letter from June 16, Werther describes how Lotte, with tears in her eyes looking at the now distant thunderstorm, puts her hand on his and utters "Klopstock!" Werther is profoundly moved: "Ich ertrug's nicht, neigte mich auf ihre Hand und küßte sie unter den wonnevollsten Tränen" (Goethe 6.1: 27).

⁶The German epistolary novel closely follows the model set by Richardson and Fielding (see, for example, Hohendahl's "Empfindsamkeit und gesellschaftliches Bewußtsein").

⁷I do not want to imply that the *Sturm und Drang* dichotomy between sensibility and rationality, intimate and public discourse can or should be maintained. Rather, I will subsequently draw on and support the research which investigates how both are central components of the Enlightenment. Most recently, Albrecht Koschorke has taken the thesis that "Empfindsamkeit über die engere literaturhistorische Periodisierung hinaus [...] als ein Schlüsselmoment des gesamten Aufklärungsprozesses aufgefaßt werden kann" (11) as the starting point of his lengthy study. According to Koschorke, it is writing which correlates "bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit und bürgerliche Intimität" (183).

⁸In her article of 1986, Caroline Wellbery focuses on the discursive patterns in *Werther* which constitute the "imaginary" and give "subjectivity an entirely new form" (C. Wellbery 232).

⁹Lessing, *Miß Sara Sampson* Akt. II.2.

¹⁰La Roche 125.

¹¹La Roche 142.

¹²De Laclos' novel has been produced successfully by Hollywood three times in recent years. In 1988, Stephen Frears directed *Dangerous Liaisons*. In 1990, Milos Foreman's *Valmont* was released. The most recent remake, Roger Kumble's 1999 *Cruel Intentions* transports the story into a modern day New York highschool setting. If these movie adaptations are to be called

romantic, it is because (as with Derby) in the end the seducer (and with him intrigue and seduction) is overcome by “love” and the seducer has to pay for his sins with his life.

¹³Lessing, *Miß Sara Sampson* Act III: 3.

¹⁴I am arguing here against Friedrich Kittler who understands the “reciprocal expectations of expectations” as the principally new discourse mode of the bourgeois family which undermines the expectations of the aristocratic suitors in Lessing’s tragedies (see Kittler, *Erziehung* 39-41). Kittler ignores the fact that Sara’s attempt to resolve the situation fails. I return to Kittler’s article below.

¹⁵Winfried Nolting understands the contradiction between language and emotion as a fundamentally hermeneutic problem which defines the bourgeois tragedy: “es ist immer die Krise zwischen Empfindung und Wirklichkeit gewesen, d.h. eine Sprachkrise gewesen, die die ‘Vernünftigen’ fälschlicherweise glaubten vermeiden zu können” (100). Adopting the outside perspective suggested by Niklas Luhmann’s theory, Dietrich Schwanitz understands the problem as more specific to the eighteenth-century code on love which demands authenticity where authenticity is impossible: within communication.

¹⁶La Roche 194.

¹⁷The transition from the aristocratic family of generation to the bourgeois family of procreation entails, following Kittler, a set of important changes: the bourgeois family gains its coherence economically and idealistically; it is based on an ideal of uninhibited communication; it

reproduces through education rather than birth and birth rights (see Kittler, *Erziehung*).

¹⁸This is surprising because Kittler himself elucidates many of the key aspects where a newly perceived ideal of love contributes to the coherence of this new family ideal: the validation of intimate discourse through love, love's ability to select partners allegedly independently of their social or class affiliation, and love's function as a foundational category for the family unit.

¹⁹The father in Sophie von La Roche's novel dies early and is only present as an ideal voice incorporated by Sternheim.

²⁰It is patriarchal not because of an inherent masculine predisposition for superior rationality or male propensity for aggressiveness, but because traditionally--and more so in the bourgeois world of commerce than in aristocratic circles--only the father partook in non-familial social functions (economics, politics, science, etc.) and hence the father became the voice for non-familial social norms and the place where private and public communications intersect.

²¹Hart 117. Hart is summarizing the position of other scholars such as Bengt Soerensen, Karin Wurst and Frederick Wyatt. Sally Winkle comes to a similar conclusion in her 1988 study of bourgeois women ideals in the German epistolary novel of the 1770s. For a more general investigation of love and patriarchy, see also Jacqueline Vansant.

²²The family ideal of the Enlightenment and its proclaimed humanism could well be linked to Foucault's elaboration of the penal code reforms of the eighteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the criminal becomes a symbolically generalized family member, a truly "prodigal son"

who has to establish his identity as a “complete person” in a confessional discourse which is very similar to the intimate and self-centered discourse demanded by the modern family.

²³ “[...] an der Empfindsamkeit teilzuhaben bedeutet, menschlich zu sein und nicht bürgerlich oder aristokratisch” (Hohendahl 202).

²⁴ Gerhard Plumpe in a recent article on Goethe’s *Werther* speaks of the “exceptional subject.” Following Luhmann’s essay “Individuum, Individualität, Individualismus,” Plumpe sees *Werther* as the construct of a difference which fundamentally characterizes this epoch, the difference between communication (society) and consciousness (the individual). Functional differentiation which defines the person as the multitude of its functional integration (and hence as fragmented, sectorial, faceted) confronts the person of the eighteenth century with identity questions. It misreads the difference between consciousness and communication as a conflict between individuality and society and attempts to ‘solve’ this conflict by looking for a paradoxical (and hence impossible) confirmation of itself outside communication, outside social integration.

²⁵ Bohn’s argument is also indebted to Luhmann. In describing the changes in historical semantics during that period, Luhmann stresses the importance of the change in communicational media from conversation to writing on numerous occasions (see esp. Luhmann *Gesellschaftsstruktur und Semantik I* and *Liebe als Passion*). Luhmann sees this change as an integral part of the overall social change from stratification to functional differentiation.

²⁶ Drawing on a much larger body of texts, Koschorke recently explored in depth the social, political, and philosophical effects of the eighteenth-century change in media on modern society.

For example, Koschorke elaborates how writing has changed the regard for solitude. Whereas in aristocratic circles solitude was considered to be suspicious, bourgeois society gives it the predicate of authenticity. Subsequently, solitude is cherished for it permits an escape from the social order of things, it invites communication without interaction, and it promotes and increases “inwardness” (see Koschorke 174ff).

²⁷For Lessing’s extensive use of epistolary devices in his dramas, see Steven Cerf and Edward Haymes.

²⁸See esp. Lothar Seeger’s article on Goethe’s *Werther* and Pietism and Ulf-Michael Schneider’s book *Propheten der Goethezeit*.

²⁹For evidence for the ideal of “transparent signification” at the end of the eighteenth century, see esp. Friedrich Kittler’s *Aufschreibesysteme*. David Wellbery’s *Laokoon* also follows Michel Foucault’s assessment of the representational paradigm of the classic age, but focuses more specifically on the German Enlightenment.

³⁰ Cf., for example, Winckelmann’s comment on the statue of Apollo: “Wie ist es möglich, es zu malen und zu beschreiben” (366).

³¹See Diderot’s *Le paradoxe sur le comédien* and Lessing’s *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*.

³²Luhmann’s *Liebe als Passion* first investigates this problem and links it to larger social changes of that time. For a more comprehensive account of the problem of expressive speech as it emerges in the seventeenth century, see Ursula Geitner’s *Die Sprache der Verstellung* and her

essay “Die ‘Beredsamkeit des Leibes’.” Geitner interprets the rejection of the rhetoric tradition in the name of authenticity, naturalness, and sincerity as an illegitimate confusion of consciousness and communication which resulted from the social shift from stratification to functional differentiation. A more recent article by Christiane Zschirnt expands on the psychological dimension of the incommunicability problem by linking it to the emergence of the latent/manifest distinction and subsequently to the “observation-schema” of unconscious/conscious in the eighteenth century’s romantic novel.

³³I am referring to Werther’s famous letter from May 10th: “Ach könntest du das ausdrücken, könntest du dem Papiere das einhauchen, was so voll, so warm in dir lebt, daß es würde der Spiegel deiner Seele, wie deine Seele ist der Spiegel des unendlichen Gottes” (Goethe 6.1: 9).

³⁴Goethe 6.1: 123. My interpretation is supported on the linguistic and rhythmic level (through repetition and alliteration) where the “all! all!” of the poisonous cup merges with the fulfillment of “all” of Werther’s life wishes and hopes.

³⁵Hoffmann 33.