



It is a correspondence composed of questions, with their answers, in the polite taking of turn, rather than the letters I was considering as my response, after the form of the epistolary novel, which started with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* of 1740. Richardson was a printer, and had a particular vocation: the compilation of manuals on letter-writing techniques for young women (young ladies, well brought up *jeunes filles*). In my library, there is a small collection of this type of novel, an old Penguin edition of *Pamela, Les liaisons dangereuses* (my favourite book of letters), Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *La nouvelle Héloïse*, and Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker*, among others. They launch right in, my two women, that is; there is no introduction. That is exactly as I heard them once, from the back of a room (I was sitting rather uncomfortably on a table), and at the end of the discussion, another public exchange, I introduced myself (I was expected, I was not an embarrassment as the approach of a woman of a certain age might suggest; indeed, I had been invited to supper, a risotto, but I had been obliged to decline due to familial duty). The first question returns to the past, while there is a suggestion of the future, of prophecy and presence of mind, which I am tempted to compress as 'prescient'. Quickly, yes, at once, the present, being present, is insisted upon, at least in my reading. It echoes as presence, while absence has an equally positive existence, It is, of course, so often a matter of tense. I do not think they are speaking in the same room. I suppose I might ask, yet while I think this, I know that I will not. Today I am only on the edges of the exchange, once again uncomfortably perched, unstable.