6. Frances Burney's "Inward Monitor" and the Self-Governing Woman

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If Boswell’s experience in a print-saturated London threatened his conception of an authentic self and motivated him to develop strategies of self-government, then Frances Burney’s ideas about urban selfhood were even more complex due to gendered notions of urban conduct. In her second novel, *Cecilia* (1782), Burney presents readers with a moment that highlights how London’s proliferating print technology presented a new cultural problem to women who tried to navigate the urban landscape on their own. Unlike Boswell’s moral anguish over his inability to interpret the innumerable ways a man could relate to London’s environment, Burney’s problem instead focuses on how these proliferating signs and textual representations did not offer women endless possibilities for self-definition. As Burney experienced them, these proliferating signs and textual representations placed an infinite number of boundaries upon women’s urban experiences and cast women as passive objects. Burney recognizes that London’s blurred readability was actually limiting a woman’s experience of the city.

For example, *Cecilia* records a heroine’s experience amid the mobs that inhabited London’s street level—the same environment that Boswell had conceived to be dizzying and in need of discipline. Outside “the * * coffeehouse,” Cecilia “jump[s] out of the carriage, with the intention to run down the street” in search of her male suitor, Delvile:

Mean while the frantic Cecilia escaped both pursuit and insult by the velocity of her own motion. She called aloud upon Delvile as she flew to the end of the street. No Delvile was there!—she turned the corner;
yet saw nothing of him; she still went on, though unknowing whither, the
distraction of her mind every instant growing greater, from the inflamma-
tion of fatigue, heat, and disappointment. She was spoken to repeatedly,
she was even caught once or twice by her riding habit; but she forced her-
self along by her own vehement rapidity, not hearing what was said, not
heed ing what was thought. . . . She scarce touched the ground; she scarce
felt her own motion; she seemed as if endowed with supernatural speed,
gliding from place to place, from street to street; with no consciousness
of any plan, and following no other direction than that of darting forward
where-ever there was most room, and turning back when she met with any
obstruction; till quite spent and exhausted, she abruptly ran into a yet open
shop, where, breathless and panting, she sunk upon the floor, and, with a
look disconsolate and helpless, sat for some time without speaking.¹

The abstract details of this passage (she visits “the * * coffeehouse” [C,
894] and collapses “in — street”) combine with its “breathless” litany of
emotional experience, punctuated by commas and semi-colons, to repre-
sent late eighteenth-century London as an abstract interior experience rath-
er a Dickensian description anchored to clearly detailed external referents.
What is unique to a lone woman’s experience of London’s streets, however,
is the feeling of passivity that accompanies this experience. Passive voice
saturates this crucial episode (“she was spoken to”; “she was even caught”)
as though Burney wishes readers to experience the conflicting feelings of
independence and passivity that accompany a woman who must interpret
London without a male conductor. During this moment, Cecilia lacks
self-conscious interpretation or reflection—a dangerous interior condition
which Cecilia’s external silence tries to represent.

Cecilia’s street-level flight exposes the inadequate interpretive skills
for navigating London that conduct books and male guardians have bequeathed to her. Burney stresses this failure by trapping the exhausted
Cecilia in a nightmare of ambiguous economic signification; that is,
the “open shop” to which Cecilia flees is a pawnbroker’s shop: “‘She’s
quite crazy,’ said the man of the house, who was a Pawn-Broker; ‘we
had better get rid of her before she grows mischievous’” (C, 897). This
interpretive house of mirrors continues when the owners mistake her for
a prostitute by “concluding at first she was a woman of the town” (C,
897). Imprisoned in a pawnbroker’s bedroom in an indefinable area of
London, Cecilia becomes what both Boswell and Burney had feared they
might become while living and writing in a textually saturated London: a
Chapter 6: Burney’s “Inward Monitor”

misinterpreted, ambiguous textual sign. As a result of Cecilia’s lone flight though London’s streets, the woman of the pawnbroker shop transforms the “lost” Cecilia into a newspaper advertisement so that other Londoners might be able to read, interpret, and reclaim Cecilia:

The woman [of the house], growing uneasy from her uncertainty of pay for her trouble, asked the advice of some of her friends what was proper for her to do; and they counselled her to put an advertisement into the papers herself the next morning.

The following, therefore, was drawn up and sent to the printer of the Daily Advertiser.

MADNESS

Whereas a crazy young lady, tall, fair complexioned, with blue eyes and light hair, ran into the Three Blue Balls, in — street, on Thursday night, the 2d instant, and has been kept there since out of charity. She was dressed in a riding habit. Whoever she belongs to is desired to send after her immediately. She has been treated with the utmost care and tenderness. She talks much of some person by the name of Delvile.

N.B. She had no money about her.

May, 1780 (C, 901)

This advertisement interprets Cecilia’s exterior features; not only does it describe her as “tall, fair complexioned, with blue eyes and light hair,” but also “crazy.” With this newspaper excerpt, Burney suggests that London’s printed text not only misinterprets a woman’s authentic interior but also reproduces these misinterpretations throughout the city, ad infinitum. Our reading about Cecilia’s madness in a newspaper excerpt within a novel is notable because it allows Burney to suggest that London’s proliferating print technologies do not refine and specialize knowledge about female Londoners. Instead, printed text helps to misinterpret and to categorize Cecilia as a completely passive creature. Yet Cecilia is not the first time that Burney focuses on the debilitating effects of London’s proliferating print culture upon women.

Although Burney’s first novel Evelina (1778) never forces its heroine onto London’s streets alone, Evelina does examine how the conflicting and ambiguous signs of London inflict confusion and passivity onto women. Consider, for instance, the disjointed, staccato exclamations that
characterize Evelina’s first London-letter to her male guardian, the Rev. Mr. Arthur Villars:

This moment arrived. Just going to Drury-Lane theatre. The celebrated Mr. Garrick performs Ranger. I am quite in extacy. So is Miss Mirvan. How fortunate that he should happen to play! We would not let Mrs. Mirvan rest till she consented to go, her chief objection was to our dress, for we have had not time to Londonize ourselves. . . .

I can write no more now. I have hardly time to breathe—only just this, the houses and streets are not quite so superb as I expected. However, I have seen nothing yet, so I ought not to judge.  

Evelina’s first letter in London is important for at least three reasons. First, the verb “Londonize” introduces the type of female agency that is available to Evelina in London; that is, Evelina fills her London letters with passive constructions rather than active verbs. These passive constructions introduce the city into Evelina’s letters:

The shops are really very entertaining, especially the mercers; there seem to be six or seven men belonging to each shop, and every one took care, by bowing and smirking, to be noticed; we were conducted from one to another, and carried from room to room, with so much ceremony, that at first I was almost afraid to go on. (E, 21)

The phrase “we were conducted” summarizes the extent to which Evelina controls her actions in London. Evelina uses passive constructions to describe an infinite number of experiences that she does not know how to interpret or narrate. Second, the image of London that Evelina brings to the city shapes her actual experiences there: “the houses and streets are not quite so superb as I expected.” Burney suggests that the printed technologies that shaped Evelina’s notion of London (conduct books, parental advice, and perhaps even the writings of Gay, Fielding, and Pope) fail her. Finally, Evelina punctuates her letters to convey a sense of how London’s crushing pace and incessant demands for interpretation make it impossible to write. She continually exposes how the demand that she, as a young woman in London, write detailed letters to her male guardian is at odds with the letter’s ability to adequately contain and represent all of her actions and thoughts while in London. Thus she proclaims, “I can write no more now. I have hardly time to breathe,” yet she continues to
write because she has been taught to do so: “I could not forbear writing a few words instantly on my arrival” (E, 20). Evelina even apologizes for her formal inadequacy, believing that London, with more time, will make her a better writer: “Pray excuse the wretched stuff I write perhaps I may improve by being in this town, and them letters will be less unworthy your reading” (E, 22). Evelina finally confronts the impossibility of interpreting everything that happens to her in London: “I have a vast deal to say, and shall give all this morning to my pen. As to my plan of writing every evening the adventures of the day, I find it impracticable; for the diversions here are so very late, that if I begin my letters after them, I could not go to bed at all” (E, 22). Evelina concedes that she is exhausted by the irresolvable difference between London’s advertised image and her ability to authentically record her experience. In turn, Evelina yokes her inability to conduct herself properly to her “London letters”: “And here I conclude my London letters,—and without any regret; for I am too inexperienced and ignorant to conduct myself with propriety in this town, where everything is new to me, and many things are unaccountable and perplexing” (E, 40).

In Evelina’s attempt to provide her male guardian with her initial reaction to London, Evelina submits to London’s “perplexing” environment and the apparent agency it has over her knowledge and actions. With these examples, Burney suggests that a thoroughly print-drenched London requires women to imagine new interpretive strategies to avoid their being written into a state of passivity. When Evelina writes about the demand “to Londonize ourselves,” she advertises a passivity inflicted upon women citizens not only by a personified “London,” but also by a specific style of writing that characterized London epistles. For Burney, “Londonization” is a process that renders both Evelina and Cecilia passive. For instance, neither heroine fully comprehends Londonization. London is a place where neither heroine wishes to be. Evelina and Cecilia are repeatedly delayed in London (it is almost impossible for Burney to express this detail without using passive voice), and they repeatedly wish to return to the country. These captive writers offer a unique twist on letter writing; they literally navigate or conduct themselves through an environment that previous texts designed to be unmaneuverable to the unmarried woman. In particular, writing becomes a survival skill that exercises imagination and explores agency in both a setting and textual tradition that imposed supposedly natural limitations on what women could say and write. Burney uses Evelina’s personal letters to advertise these limitations: “And yet, I must confess, that I am not half so happy here at present as I
was ere I went to town: but the change is in the place, not in me” (E, 98). This confession, with its qualifying disclaimer, “the change is in the place, not in me,” shows Evelina granting a large amount of agency to an entity that she distinguishes from herself: her environment. 4 This separation and the confession which encourages it appear both dangerous and artificial. This personification of place is, Burney suggests by writing Evelina and Cecilia, a side effect of textual representation. The difference between Evelina’s reliance upon writing and the role that letters in Cecilia play can therefore suggest how Burney reimagined a woman’s relationship to a London that was now saturated with a type of printed text that attempted to control and conduct her.

It is, of course, arguable whether Cecilia’s self-navigating flight through London is “realistic”; however, my point is that Burney’s novels represent how women experienced late eighteenth-century London—how women felt while interpreting not only London’s spaces but also any writing that originated in the city. Burney’s own experiences, recorded in her journals and letters, further support this claim. For instance, as early as 1768, Burney’s journal records the suspicion and ambiguity that accompanies letters from London:

Oh my dear, I have received the finest letter that ever was wrote—sure!—while we were at dinner, a packet came from London—papa opened it—and among other Epistles, was the following to me—

TO MISS FRANCES BURNEY
When first I saw thee, Fanny, move
Ah me! what meant my throbbing heart?
Tell me—oh tell me—is it Love
That is Lodged here within my Breast?
Incognitus 5

Although Burney’s mother eventually attributes its authorship to a family member, 6 this letter nonetheless exhibits how Burney had been acclimated to London’s ambiguous signs and letters early in her life. While “Incognitus” is on a first-name basis with Burney, she is left to interpret the Londoner’s textual puzzle. In a 1777 letter to her sister Susanna, Burney details the volumes of urban literature that she and her family’s friends consume as they anticipate a return to London:
Amid these frenzied descriptions of her circle’s varied reading lists, Burney emphasizes her “studying” Le Sage’s novel for its “moral sentences” and its instructive conduct. Under the heading of “We Read,” Burney reveals to her sister the textual and interpretive preparation that conditioned her return to London. Thus, Burney’s experience with interpreting London-based texts involves not only being attracted to endless diversions and agitation (like Boswell’s experience) but also—and this is the new cultural problem that a woman’s experience brings to the foreground—being pulled (in passive voice) from one attraction to another by writerly authorities, many of them unknown men. Burney thoroughly recognized the textual techniques that Gay, Fielding, and Pope had established to control others, especially as she represented her experiences in London.

Given the boundaries which Burney felt London’s printed text was placing on women, late eighteenth-century London clearly presented Burney with a new cultural problem: how to acquire an authentic sense of selfhood amid an infinite number of competing, confusing, and frequently ambiguous textual signs and conventions in London that were designed to limit and control a woman’s urban experience. In writing *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, Burney faced an important question: if a previous generation of authors (such as Gay, Fielding, and Pope) governed the female experience of London by imagining passivity to be part of that experience, then how might women salvage printed text to reimagine their urban agency? Burney answers this question on a formal level by rejecting the epistolary novel as a vehicle for self-knowledge. Refusing to be governed by unrelated, disparate texts that saturated the marketplace as they attempted to control London’s populace, Burney writes *Cecilia* as an experiment in imaginative self-government. Burney does not write *Evelina* and *Cecilia* to govern readers; rather, she offers readers (particularly women readers) new interpretive strategies for governing themselves within a London that is not of their own making—a London they did not originally imagine. For this reason, *Cecilia* trains the interpretive skills of its readers so that rather than relying upon the imagined governance of Gay, Fielding, and Pope, these readers might govern themselves.
This chapter therefore views Burney’s first two novels beyond a critical narrative that privileges confession as the eighteenth-century novel’s only mode of interiority. At the same time, the goal is not to present Burney’s first two novels as anomalies in a narrative about the eighteenth-century novel but to view Burney’s modes of interiority as viable alternatives to confession. In particular, I argue that *Evelina* and *Cecilia* constituted a project in which Burney rejected confessional and interior revelation as signs of feminine health or proper conduct. Writing about women and their relationship to a city previously defined by male writers such as Gay, Addison, and Steele, Burney suggests that highly self-conscious interpretative activity should replace epistolary confession. For Burney, this substitution results in a woman’s proper definition of urban independence and generates a type of self-government that could counter London’s proliferation of ambiguous and confusing printed advice. This at first seems counterintuitive to twenty-first-century interpretations of eighteenth-century interiority. Burney’s rejection, however, does not mean that she reinscribed herself within a masculine paradigm; instead, it allowed Burney to suggest how urban geography and textual traditions could recommend new ways for women writers to compete with male writers for imagined sites of authority in London.

I focus on *Evelina* (1778) and *Cecilia* (1782) instead of addressing Burney’s final two novels, *Camilla* (1796) and *The Wanderer* (1814), for two reasons. First, London is a virtual character in *Evelina* and *Cecilia*. Each novel attempts to illustrate London’s dizzying influence on a woman’s “entrance into the world”; the heroine of each novel learns things about herself when she learns things about London. Burney therefore mapped her specific brand of interiority onto London to make her version legible to an urban audience. Lacking a Freudian vocabulary or an elaborate tradition of free indirect discourse, Burney anchored her idea of interiority to a literal cityscape. This literal cityscape, however, was simply an imaginative starting point for Burney. Burney assumed that her readers would be familiar with either London’s geography or classical textual traditions. Thus, the metaphor of conduct is an important tool for Burney since this metaphor could at some times refer directly to the way conduct books produced urban knowledge, and at other times, this metaphor could help readers imagine new geographic relationships (a critical self-awareness that replaced male guardians in the literal cityscape) or forms (new modes, voices, or narratives that replaced epistolarity). By evoking the metaphor of conduct while describing London, Burney outlined a version
of interiority that did not require the pain and humiliation that Jane Austen would continue to yoke to self-knowledge.

Burney’s urban project not only tested the inherent, moral nature of a heroine, but it also judged the effects of the city on its inhabitants’ values as the city became a dominant model for governing British people. By referring to “the city” as an “it” with “its” own archive of moral qualities, I mean to highlight a unique personification that Burney questions throughout these novels. If there is a common task shared by Evelina and Cecilia, it is to link interiority to abstract representations of London. Burney helped to build the idea that London—as a character with its own disposition—exhibited an agency that Burney’s characters must either blindly accept or carefully question.

Another reason why I view Evelina and Cecilia as components of a novelistic project involves they way Burney used Cecilia to rewrite Evelina. Both novels launch a young orphaned woman into London. Both novels carefully detail moments of crisis that are unique to women who lack proper conductors, guardians, or parents. Both novels substitute London for proper parents. Both novels self-consciously exploit epistolarity. I argue that the formal and thematic similarities between Evelina and Cecilia allow us to view the two novels as a single project that attempted to outline, clarify, and validate feminine authority in London. Evelina and Cecilia constituted a single project because, as I will show, Burney imagined that her writing in and beyond an epistolary mode could change or at least guide the way women conceptualized their relationship to authority in London. It is difficult to see this project in either Evelina or Cecilia alone; however, by comparing the two novels’ treatments of textual traditions and geographical boundaries, we may begin to identify how Burney imagined that she was, first, redesigning women’s interior selves, and second, representing these interiors as proper and natural elements of the self-governed Londoner.

When I call the Evelina-Cecilia pair a “project,” I refer to Burney’s use of the word. There is a crucial episode in Cecilia when our heroine, during her first days in London, proposes “to become mistress of her own time” (C, 55). In a chapter Burney titles, “A Project,” Cecilia uses her imagination to understand why Londoners’ exteriors do not reveal their interior qualities:

. . . she determined no longer to be the only one insensible to the blessings within her reach, but by projecting and adopting some plan of conduct,
better suited to her taste and feelings than the frivolous insipidity of her present life, to make at once a more spirited and more worthy use of the affluence, freedom and power which she possessed.

A scheme of happiness at once rational and refined soon presented itself to her imagination. She purposed, for the basis of her plan, to become mistress of her own time, and with this view, to drop all idle and uninteresting acquaintance, who while they contribute neither to use nor pleasure, make so large a part of the community, that they may properly be called the underminers of existence: she could then shew some taste and discernment in her choice of friends, and she resolved to select such only as by their piety could elevate her mind, by their knowledge improve her understanding, or by their accomplishments and manners delight her affections. (C, 54–55)

During this episode of “projecting,” Cecilia imagines a “plan of conduct” that will help her relate to London and that does not involve confession or interior revelation. Cecilia imagines that she can transform desire into social action because Cecilia interprets her own desires rather than requiring others to do so for her. Burney also expresses Cecilia’s imagination in a style that rejects Evelina’s beloved epistles. Cecilia organizes her plan in her mind—not in a letter. As I will show, Burney’s conceptualization of self-government and urban independence required her to reinterpret the epistolary novel’s formal constraints. Evelina and Cecilia critique the ways in which epistolarity promotes written confession as an exercise in, or physical proof of, virtue and identity. The way the confessor-interpreter relationship produces truth parallels the way in which the epistolary novel’s writer-reader relationship produced truth. While confession’s artifice attained a certain transparency during the twentieth century, I am suggesting that Evelina and Cecilia attempted to expose this transparency to an eighteenth-century audience.

By calling the Evelina-Cecilia pair a project, I am also arguing that Evelina harbors several unanswered and open-ended questions. Most notably, although London is incessantly recalled throughout the novel’s final volume in both content and the style in which Evelina writes, the city suddenly drops out of the novel after the second volume. I do not attempt to close off this open-endedness but to interpret Burney’s next novel, Cecilia, as a sequel to Evelina. As a sequel, Cecilia reinterpreted what London and the textual traditions women used to record their urban experiences could and could not do for “women of letters.” Because they are Burney’s strategies of self-authorization in both novels, the textual tra-
Urban Epistolarity (or, Confessing in Print)

A mimetic approach to epistolarity is partly to blame for the claim that Burney solely values confessional interiority in *Evelina*. Letters, so the argument goes, are vehicles for self-revelation; letters more adequately reveal truths about an abstract and timeless human condition than more “fictional” vehicles such as poetry or novels do. However, we must remember that eighteenth-century letters did not simply magnify an individual self that hived itself off from a social self or community. For example, we need to recall that the eighteenth-century letter was “an art . . . naturally looked upon as a continuation of the art of conversation . . . an art which at its best should be the triumph of wit and humor and imagination.”

Conversation, which Addison and Steele considered to be the basis of imagination, was a social activity; thus, epistolary conversation was not only a private transaction but also a social art. In his study of Samuel Richardson’s epistolary techniques, Tom Keymer considers this artistry to focus upon “the experience of writing—on the efforts of engaged parties to describe, make sense of, and often advance particular purposes in, their world.” In this way, the eighteenth-century familiar letter, the foundational unit of the epistolary novel, harbored a social function that exercised both the reader’s and writer’s imaginations as the letter produced, performed, and replicated a writer’s versions of self-knowledge and truth. The eighteenth-century letter was a highly crafted form of writing. Indeed, some of the most famous examples from the growing industry of conduct books were not books but collections of letters: Hester Chapone’s *Letters on the Improvement of the Mind, Addressed to a Young Lady* and Wetenhall Wilkes’s *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady* are two of the most famous examples. The letter not only brought with it a normalized writing style, but also delivered rules of social conduct to readers. This perspective suggests that eighteenth-century letter writing was not always an activity that privileged an interior self over considerations about its readers.

Epistolarity is only initially part of Burney’s novelististic project; she experiments with the form in *Evelina*, but, in *Cecilia*, rejects certain limitations that writing an epistolary novel had allowed her to recognize. This is not to say that Burney, as an eighteenth-century woman novelist, was able to discard the
myth that writing epistles was a feminine skill; however, by making *Cecilia* inherit only faint traces of epistolarity, Burney was able not only to expose the inherent limitations that the epistolary form assigned to women writers, but also to exploit the myth that only epistolary talent could produce a marketable woman novelist.

Another way to interpret the relationship between *Evelina* and *Cecilia* is to place the *Evelina-Cecilia* project in the context of the proliferation of eighteenth-century writing about London. By 1777, Londoners had access to a variety of works written by men that professed to help readers understand their relationship to an urban community: John Gay’s *Trivia*, John Rocque’s 1746 map, Addison and Steele’s periodicals, Samuel Johnson’s “London,” to name but a few. Therefore, from an urban context, there are at least two ways to explain why Burney began her *Evelina-Cecilia* project with an epistolary novel. First, the epistle remained a textual tradition associated with producing and performing feminine virtue. Second, the function of the epistle had increasingly been associated with instructing women. By casting *Evelina* as an epistolary novel and then writing *Cecilia* as a retrospective critique of the epistolary novel’s influence on the way women related to London, she initiated a project that explored how genres became gendered and meaningful. Thus, *Evelina* began a project that attempted to respond to Evelina’s awareness of a gaping void in the literary marketplace: “But, really, I think there ought to be a book, of the laws and customs à-la-mode, presented to all young people upon their first introduction into public company” (*E*, 70). The specificity of Evelina’s request (“of the laws and customs à-la-mode”) suggests that conventional conduct books were not adequately doing their job, especially for young women introduced to the public. Like the strategies of self-government in Boswell’s *London Journal*, Burney’s novels are made possible by London’s changed urban environment since she and her fictional characters are dealing with their inheritance of Fielding’s, Gay’s, and Pope’s contributions to imaginative governance and strategies for shared consensus. Unlike Boswell, however, Burney’s London is complicated by gendered forms of writing and the gendered spaces that these forms construct.

**The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World (or *Evelina*)**

Despite *Evelina*’s epistolary template, Evelina is not comfortable writing letters. Consider, for example, Evelina’s unease as she forces herself into
her first epistle: “Lady Howard insists upon my writing!—yet I hardly know how to go on”; “I am half ashamed of myself for beginning this letter”; “I almost repent already that I have made this confession” (*E*, 18–19). Confession generates Evelina’s anxiety; it is the source of her “shame.” Evelina’s untamed style—her dashes, her exclamations, her spontaneous modal auxiliaries—exposes the assumptions that women letter-writers unknowingly perpetuated: “I made a resolution when I began, that I would not be urgent; but my pen—or rather my thoughts, will not suffer me to keep it—for I acknowledge, I must acknowledge, I cannot help wishing for your permission” (*E*, 18–19). Evelina anxiously corrects her diction to accept the dutiful position of a letter writer: “I acknowledge, I must acknowledge.” This self-editing—her injection of the modal “must” between subject and verb—distances Evelina from agency. Evelina also corrects her elision between “thoughts” and “pen” because the private letter, as the eighteenth-century myth claims, is supposed to be an unhinged, natural confessional that conceals nothing. By having Evelina correct her writing, Burney foregrounds this myth and therefore immediately destabilizes the logic that underwrites the epistolary novel that follows.

Although *Evelina* is an epistolary novel, Evelina’s style and the content of her letters make it clear that the epistle is not an adequate form to record a “history of a young lady’s entrance” into London. For example, Evelina is aware that her letters must satisfy Villars and his desire to read—or judge—the most quotidian details of her maturation in London. If Evelina is uncertain of her success in mastering the urban epistle, Villars’s first response, which resembles a reader’s report, assures her that her uncertainty and suffering are proof of maturity: “I am sure 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. But your confusion and mortifications were such as to entirely silence all reproofs on my part” (*E*, 46). Burney crafts this response carefully; it judges Evelina’s conduct and then interprets her “confusion and mortifications” as evidence of her proper maturation. If, as Evelina wrote earlier, she feels “compelled to confess my absurdity” (*E*, 32), Villars’s letter naturalizes this compulsive feeling; his letter naturalizes confession as proper conduct. The letter promotes Evelina’s shame, her blushing (“yet I blush to write it to you!” [*E*, 33]), as an external marker of internal propriety and natural virtue. According to Villars, feelings of humility and shame adequately stand in for his presence in London as her guardian.
Villars writes his response letter (letter XV, volume I) on April 16; however, according to the order in which Burney presents the letters, Evelina does not receive Villars’s report card until the very end of letter XXII (volume I), which Evelina writes on April 18. That is, the delay between Villars’s writing and Evelina’s reading (we read four lengthy letters written by Evelina before we witness her receiving Villars’s letter) renders Villars’s reaction obsolete, his power negligible. In fact, Burney interrupts the novel with an extended dash and a row of asterisks to suggest that the letter is impractical as a vehicle for uninterrupted guidance and surveillance:

To-night we go to the Pantheon, which is the last diversion we shall partake of in London, for to-morrow—

... This moment, my dearest Sir, I have received your kind letter.
If you thought us too dissipated the first week, I almost fear to know what you will think of us this second. . . . (E, 87)

To make the epistolary work, Evelina needs to write to someone whom she imagines possesses the authority to critique her conduct. In the form through which Evelina must express her thoughts, Villars represents a particularly masculine position of authority because he acts as the distanced, Addisonian observer-critic who interprets what he sees or reads.

Throughout *Evelina*, Villars’s letters validate Evelina’s writing as social conduct. Villars is Evelina’s reader and her literal conductor or guardian; we readers are merely voyeurs, reading over his shoulder. When Villars judges Evelina’s experiences, he uses a vocabulary of conduct:

... I am led to apprehend that his [Mr. Macartney] unhappy situation is less the effect of misfortune, than of misconduct . . . .

... the right line of conduct is the same for both sexes, though the manner in which it is pursued, may somewhat vary, and be accommodated to the strength or weakness of the different travellers.

... As to Sir Clement Willoughby, I know not how to express my indignation at his conduct. (E, 180–81)

Evelina’s final letter to Villars, which she writes after marrying Orville, need only be three sentences long because the entire dynamic upon which
her epistle rested (the need for a male guardian or interpreter) is now rendered obsolete by her marriage:

All is over, my dearest Sir, and the fate of your Evelina is decided! This morning, with fearful joy, and trembling gratitude, she united herself for ever with the object of her dearest, her eternal affection.

I have time for no more; the chaise now waits which is to conduct me to Berry Hill, and to the arms of the best of men. (E, 336–37)

Burney ingeniously spotlights Evelina’s resignation of agency in this passage. For the first time in the novel, Evelina represents herself in the third-person voice; “she” is being conducted “to the arms of the best of men.” Evelina’s letters, in both form and content, end in a telescopic diminution of agency. Cecilia, however, strives to reclaim this third-person voice.

Although Evelina ends in confession and reconciliation, I have focused on several episodes to suggest that all is not well in Burney’s canonical epistolary novel. Part of Evelina’s target is the dysfunction of epistolarity and the confessional tactics it uses to construct feminine interiority. These tactics include passive constructions, shameful revelation, and the myth (strengthened by her reader, Mr. Villars) that letters (the feminine “pen”) expose women’s natural “thoughts” for all to see. And although volume three of Evelina resembles a canonical eighteenth-century novel in its content, Burney taints our reception of this content because we can no longer unequivocally state that the form that delivers this content to us is an adequate representational vehicle. In the end, Evelina the novel and Evelina the character are urban products. If Evelina details “The History of a Young Woman’s Entrance into the World,” then Evelina’s history irretrievably shapes her to be an urban creature. One of the more dangerous side effects of employing a confessional mode of interiority in London is that it tends to personify and therefore empower “place” as a separate, indomitable entity. How strange for Burney to draw attention to the dysfunction of confessional interiority without designing anything to replace it; how stranger yet for us to consider Evelina to be Burney’s last word on women’s agency in London.

**Memoirs of an Heiress (or Cecilia)**

If we can call Evelina Burney’s performance of the side effects and limitations of confessional interiority, then Cecilia represents her attempt to
move beyond these limitations. Whereas *Evelina* shows that Burney was conscious of the ways an epistolary novel inherently supported confessional tactics, *Cecilia* shows Burney imagining ways not only to explode the self-evident assumptions promoted by epistolarity, but also to suggest that interpretative skill should replace confession. *Cecilia* accomplishes these tasks in both its form and its content.

Burney narrates *Cecilia* in the third person. By rejecting the strictures of the epistolary novel that *Evelina* had briefly outlined, *Cecilia* renders everything that occurred between *Evelina*'s letters, those previously ineffable gaps, narratable. A sustained, self-conscious critique of form therefore becomes part of the narrator’s agenda in *Cecilia*. Formal concerns, however, are no longer disruptions as they were in *Evelina*. Throughout *Cecilia*, Burney draws attention to the ways Cecilia’s interior depends upon Cecilia’s acquiring agency over her textual (epistolary) and social (male) conductors in London. One way to claim this authority, Burney suggests, is for women to reimagine their relationship to those who read their letters. For example, by imagining that she is guided not by a male reader but by an “inward monitor” (C, 585) of her own creation, Cecilia is able to act in ways that would normally be socially unacceptable for women in London. In particular, Cecilia rectifies a situation that even Burney’s male characters cannot handle properly: a suicide that occurs at Vauxhall, which was one of the most public arenas in eighteenth-century Britain. Burney’s genius involves her ability to rally sympathy for Cecilia’s socially unacceptable response to her guardian’s suicide, and thereby to depict the unacceptable as completely proper. Cecilia, reacting to the suicide of her legal guardian, begins to imagine how she may become her own guardian via descriptive, analytic, and interpretative strategies. By depicting this chaotic scene at Vauxhall as well as peppering Cecilia’s relatives throughout London, Burney’s novel shapes and is shaped by marginally administered areas of London and therefore contributes to the city’s traditions of imaginative governance by writers.

Recognizing the imaginary authority that Villars possessed in *Evelina* as that of Evelina’s reader-conductor, Burney develops ways for Cecilia to internalize this imaginary role. Consider, for example, the extremely performative beginning of *Cecilia*. In contrast to her heroine’s delayed entrance in *Evelina*, Burney begins *Cecilia* by citing the heroine’s “secret prayer”:

“PEACE to the spirits of my honoured parents, respected be their
remains, and immortalized their virtues! may time, while it moulders their frail relics to dust, commit to tradition the record of their goodness; and Oh may their orphan-descendant be influenced through life by the remembrance of their purity, and be solaced in death, that by her it was unsullied!"

Such was the secret prayer with which the only survivor of the Beverley family quitted the abode of her youth, and residence of her forefathers; while tears of recollecting sorrow filled her eyes, and obstructed the last view of her native town which had excited them.

Cecilia, this fair traveller, had lately entered into the one-and-twentieth year of her age. (C, 5)

Cecilia does not address this prayer to a male guardian via a letter; in fact, Burney advertises that it is “secret.” Cecilia therefore begins by rejecting confession and valuing internalized secrecy. By describing Cecilia as a “traveller,” Burney introduces us to a woman who conducts herself to London and through this novel. Cecilia’s inner monologue speaks to none but herself.

Burney relocates Evelina’s reader-conductor within Cecilia. Consider how Cecilia responds to the barrage of advice she receives before leaving for London from a coterie of landed male gentry (Mr. Monckton, Mr. Belfield, Captain Aresby, and Mr. Morrice). Bombarded by aphoristic quotations from Pope and Shakespeare and warnings about the imagination, Cecilia finds herself in the middle of “an argument” (the chapter’s title) about individual, or female, agency in an urban environment:

“All this,” answered Mr. Monckton, “is but the doctrine of a lively imagination, that looks upon impossibilities simply as difficulties, and upon difficulties as mere invitations to victory. But experience teaches another lesson; experience shews that the opposition of an individual to a community is always dangerous in the operation, and seldom successful in the event;—never, indeed, without a concurrence strange as desirable, of fortunate circumstances with great abilities.”

“And why is this,” returned Belfield, “but because the attempt is so seldom made? The pitiful prevalence of general conformity extirpates genius, and murders originality; man is brought up, not as if he were ‘the noblest work of God,’ but as a mere ductile machine of human formation . . . .” (C, 15)
Monckton and Belfield loosely personify the two positions in the continuing argument between sovereignty and self-government. Both men attempt to become Cecilia’s conductor in London. Burney, however, exposes their debate over imagination and conduct as a pseudo-philosophical struggle for artificial authority over Cecilia. This struggle extends to another trivial argument over who, in Monckton’s house, has the proper right “to conduct” Cecilia into the chaise that will conduct her to London:

The usual ceremonies of leave-taking now followed, and the Captain, with most obsequious reverence, advanced to conduct Cecilia to the carriage; but in the midst of the dumb eloquence of his bows and smiles, Mr. Morrice, affecting not to perceive his design, skipped gaily between them, and without any previous formality, seized the hand of Cecilia himself; . . .

The Captain shrugged and retired. But Mr. Monckton, enraged at his assurance, and determined it should nothing avail him, exclaimed “Why how now, Morrice, do you take away the privilege of my house?”

“True, true,” answered Morrice, “you members of parliament have an undoubted right to be tenacious of your privileges.” (C, 19)

Monckton wins the right by following the proper rules of conduct; it is his house. Throughout this chapter, Monckton assumes a Polonius-like role (immediately following Belfield’s quoting Hamlet) and assigns Cecilia the task of going to London to mature yet remain unchanged:

“Be upon your guard,” he [Monckton] cried, “with all new acquaintance; judge nobody from appearances; form no friendship rashly; take time to look about you, and remember you can make no alteration in your way of life, without greater probability of faring worse, than chance of faring better. Keep therefore as you are, and the more you see of others, the more you will rejoice that you neither resemble nor are connected with them.”

. . .

Mr. Monckton, in leading her to the chaise, again begged permission to wait upon her in town . . . and Cecilia, gratefully thanking him for his solicitude in her welfare, added “And I hope, sir, you will honour me with your counsel and admonitions with respect to my future conduct, whenever you have the goodness to let me see you.”

This was precisely his wish. (C, 18, 19)
Although she appears to choose Monckton as her conductor in London, Cecilia grows disgusted with the inadequacy of all those in whom she is supposed to confide or to whom she is to confess her feelings.

Cecilia reaches this conclusion after an instructive and satirical cram-session on London’s populace provided by Mr. Gosport. Gosport is valuable to Cecilia because he, like the Restoration’s rake, utilizes a specialized vocabulary for talking about the urban scene:

> The TON misses, as they are called, who now infest the town, are in two divisions, the SUPERCILIOUS, and the VOLUBLE. The SUPERCILIOUS, like Miss Leeson, are silent, scornful, languid, and affected, and disdain all converse but with those of their own set: the VOLUBLE, like Miss Larolles, are flirting, communicative, restless, and familiar, and attack without the smallest ceremony, every one they think worthy their notice. (C, 40)

Cecilia immediately mobilizes this vocabulary, and she uses it to interpret her own appearance: “‘Probably, then,’ said Cecilia, ‘I have passed to night, for one of the VOLUBLES; however, all the advantage has been with the SUPERCILIOUS, for I have suffered a total repulse’” (C, 40). It is important to note that, given a lexicon for understanding her place in London, Cecilia interprets this language rather than uncritically draping it over herself. This is why Cecilia relates to Gosport throughout the novel; they both understand how language generates urban authority and reputation. They also both understand that language requires active interpretation rather than passive acceptance.

When Cecilia proposes “to make a visit herself to each of [her guardians], to observe their manners and way of life” (C, 56), she commits to a comprehensive tour of London. In particular, Burney maps Cecilia’s three guardians onto three areas of London: the Delviles live on St. James’s Square (Delviles equate with the Court), Mr. Briggs lives on an unnamed street in “the city” (Briggs equate with the City of London), and the Harrels live on Portman Square (Harrels equate with the nouvelle riche suburbs bordering upon the space between Court and City). Burney’s even distribution of Cecilia’s legal guardians throughout these different areas of London weakens Evelina’s suggestion that London was a single, authoritative entity with an indomitable agency over its populace. The Court, City, and middle ground are not abstract administrative objects, but are represented by families who characterize the spaces they inhabit. Burney
may therefore play on the idea that London stands in for Cecilia’s parents; she may reinterpret *Evelina*’s Londonization by using a familial analogy.

When Burney maps Cecilia’s surrogate parentage onto London’s geography, she assumes a certain amount of familiarity on the part of her readers. Burney suggests that in order to sympathize with Cecilia, readers must acquire a familiarity with this geography. In *Cecilia*, an antiquated love of surname and bloodline characterizes the Court; a hyperobsessive economic awareness and self-inflicted poverty characterize the City; and an inordinate desire for both bloodline and money by those who have neither characterizes the middle ground. But Burney also introduces the idea of “an inward monitor” (*C*, 585) and presents it as a way to know both the city and, by analogy, the inner self. Cecilia defines this inward monitor in response to the absence of proper escort; that is, Burney has Cecilia develop it as a contrast to Monckton’s empty (that is, economically self-interested) role as Cecilia’s male conductor. Cecilia’s project for acquiring agency hinges upon interpreting London as an extension of her inner self. London, again, is an essential part of Burney’s novelistic project for proposing alternatives to confessional interiority.

On two specific occasions, however, Cecilia’s agency exceeds the bounds of metaphor. At Vauxhall Cecilia stumbles into a situation where she must test the extent to which imaginative agency, or metaphor, can produce legitimate authority. Suicide was, by itself, an extremely complex act for eighteenth-century Britons to interpret; however, a suicide on the public pathways at Vauxhall heaped more ideological baggage onto an already uninterpretable act. Narrating the ride to Vauxhall, Burney prepares readers for an episode that will require hypersensitive interpretative skills: “During the rest of the ride not another word was said; Mrs. Harrel wept, her husband guarded a gloomy silence, and Cecilia most unpleasantly passed her time between anxious suspicions of some new scheme, and a terrified wonder in what all these transactions would terminate” (*C*, 397–98). The words “scheme” and “transactions” advertise that readers need to mobilize their interpretive skills to “transact” Harrel’s approaching suicide. This is Burney’s technique for conducting her readers.

Burney frames Harrel’s suicide at Vauxhall in indecipherability because people from all three regions of London converge in Vauxhall’s environment. Mr. Simkins cannot understand the Captain’s French idioms (“you said something of a blank?” [*C*, 408]); the Captain gives Cecilia “an unmeaning smile” (*C*, 408); and Sir Robert responds to Mr. Hobson’s city-inflected ideas by crying, “What do you mean by that, fellow?” (*C*, 202 Part  II: Governing the Self
During this scene where no one can interpret anyone else, Harrel runs off and shoots himself. Upon hearing the pistol, the rest of the men flee Cecilia’s Vauxhall box, leaving Cecilia and Mrs. Harrel without male escorts and alone in London’s infamous public space. Burney casts this episode in slow-motion:

Mrs. Harrel and Cecilia were now left to themselves, and their horror was too great for speech or motion: they stood close to each other, listening to every sound and receiving every possible addition to their alarm, by the general confusion which they observed in the gardens, in which, though both gentlemen and waiters were running to and fro, not a creature was walking, and all amusement seemed forgotten.

From this dreadful state they were at length removed, though not relieved, by the sight of a waiter, who, as he was passing shewed himself almost covered with blood! (C, 414)

Burney’s passive phrases “were now left to themselves” and “were at length removed” produce a claustrophobic terror (the women see nothing beyond the confines of their “box”) and pin Cecilia into a corner from which any attempt to leave (to wander about Vauxhall alone or to attend to her guardian’s corpse) would be improper. When Cecilia learns that Harrel’s wound may not be fatal and that a surgeon might be able to save him, she again tries to literalize her metaphor of imaginary agency and conduct:

“A surgeon!” exclaimed Cecilia, recovering from one surprize by the effect of another, “is it then possible he may be saved?”

And without waiting to have her question answered, she ran out of the box herself, flying wildly about the garden, and calling for help as she flew, till she found the house by the entrance; and then, going up to the bar, “Is a surgeon sent for?” . . . . Nor would she quit the bar, till two or three waiters were called, and received her orders. And then, eager to see them executed herself, she ran, fearless of being alone, and without thought of being lost, towards the fatal spot whither the crowd guided her. (C, 415)

Cecilia reacts to Harrel’s suicide because no one else does; more importantly, she wishes to act properly in this occasion by receiving Harrel’s deathbed confession and granting last rites: “Cecilia, though greatly disappointed, still
determined to make way to [Harrel], that she might herself enquire if, in his last moments, there was any thing he wished to communicate, or desired to have done: but, as she struggled to proceed, she was next met and stopt by Sir Robert Floyer, who, forcing her back, acquainted her that all was over!” (C, 416). Cecilia’s agency in this passage involves damage control; she wants to end this episode as quickly yet as properly as possible. Cecilia also wants to interpret Harrel’s “insane” act properly. Sir Robert Floyer’s “forcing her back,” however, wakes Cecilia from the imaginary relationship she has constructed with Harrel. Previously “fearless of being alone, and without thought of being lost,” Cecilia now faces the terrifying task of conducting a widow—and herself—back to Portman Square without Mr. Harrel, their proper male conductor.

Burney forces Cecilia to deal with some terrifyingly quotidian details related to Harrel’s suicide. Cecilia must deliver Mrs. Harrel to a coach without seeing her husband’s body, choose an appropriate escort for the corpse, secure a coffin, and find a place to inter the body until the funeral. All of the men, however, are more interested in who has the proper right to conduct Cecilia, not Harrel’s lifeless body, back to Portman Square. As in the “Argument” chapter, Cecilia encounters men vying to be her conductor:22

“My coach, Sir,” said Mr. Marriot, “will be ordered when the ladies are ready, and I hope to have the honour myself of conducting them to town.”

“No, Sir,” cried the Baronet, “that can never be; my long acquaintance with Mrs. Harrel gives me a prior right to attend her, and I can by no means suffer any other person to rob me of it.” (C, 419)

Anticipating the potential for another duel for which she would be responsible, Cecilia must reconcile her proper choice of a male conductor with a feminine code of urban conduct which stipulates that women do not travel alone from Vauxhall to town:

... the impossibility that two ladies could go to town alone, in a hackney coach, and without even a servant, at near four o’clock in the morning, they mutually urged, vehemently entreating that she would run no such hazard.

Cecilia was far other than insensible to these representations: the danger, indeed, appeared to her so formidable, that her inclination the
whole time opposed her refusal; yet her repugnance to giving way to the overbearing Baronet, and her fear of his resentment if she listened to Mr. Marriot, forced her to be steady, since she saw that her preference would prove the signal of a quarrel. (C, 420–21)

Cecilia stands paralyzed between two manifestations of Burney’s metaphor of conduct: urban travel and masculine honor. For Cecilia alone, this situation is irresolvable. Burney dissolves the stalemate by having Cecilia meet young Delvile by “surprise” (C, 421). Burney curtails the suicide’s disruption of Cecilia’s narrative with a deus ex machina that guides Cecilia to her future husband, Mortimer Delvile. The narrator’s switching to Sir Robert and Marriot’s perspective at the close of the chapter also shores up an end to this disruption: “Sir Robert and Mr. Marriot, confounded though enraged, saw [Cecilia and delvile’s] departure in passive silence: the right of attendance they had so tenaciously denied to each other, here admitted not of dispute: Delvile upon this occasion, appeared as the representative of his father, and his authority seemed the authority of a guardian” (C, 423). We witness a literal changing of the guard in this passage. Young Delvile “appears” or “seems” to replace the dead Harrel as Cecilia’s “guardian.” The males who are denied this privileged position leave Vauxhall and end this chapter “in passive silence.”

Although Harrel’s suicide normalizes Cecilia’s relationship to a male conductor, Cecilia’s agency in this scene (her ability to interpret how to react properly to Harrel’s act) stems from her desire to follow her “project” to “become mistress of her own time.” Thus, Burney suggests how interpretative activity can produce action and, in turn, serve as signposts of interior virtue. Consider, for example, Mrs. Delvile’s response to Cecilia’s actions at Vauxhall:

Charming Miss Beverley! how shall I ever tell you half the admiration with which I have heard of your conduct! The exertion of so much fortitude at a juncture when a weaker mind would have been overpowered by terror, and a heart less under the dominion of well-regulated principles, would have sought only its own relief by flying from distress and confusion, shews such propriety of mind as can only result from the union of good sense with virtue. You are indeed a noble creature! (C, 425, emphasis Burney’s)

Mrs. Delvile reaches her conclusion about Cecilia’s “propriety of mind”
by evaluating not our heroine’s letter-writing skills, as Villars does in *Evelina*, but our heroine’s “conduct.” Mrs. Delvile’s comments privilege interpretation rather than confession. Delvile lauds Cecilia for her ability to render herself “well-regulated” rather than being “overpowered by terror.” Burney shores up this paradigmatic change in feminine interiority by having Cecilia read Harrel’s suicide letter. It is no accident that Harrel’s deranged suicide letter takes the form of a confession (“To bring myself to this final resolution, hard, I confess, have been my conflicts” [*C*, 431]). This letter also ends with the only textual break or gap in *Cecilia* (*C*, 432). As in *Evelina*, the epistle’s validity as a representational vehicle is suspect. Cecilia interprets Harrel’s suicide note as an “incoherent letter” (*C*, 432).

Because Cecilia is aware of confession’s manipulative qualities, she reinterprets letter writing as a self-conscious, interpretative craft rather than an unaware, revelatory vehicle for confession. Consider, for example, Cecilia’s important letter to young Delvile in which she revokes her consent to marry him. Cecilia writes this letter to reject Delvile as her male conductor; thus, Cecilia approaches letter writing as a tool for acquiring agency:

> Cecilia . . . determined to act consistently with her professions and her character, and, by one great and final effort, to conclude all her doubts, and try to silence even her regret, by completing the triumph of fortitude over inclination.

> She called, therefore, for pen and ink, and without venturing herself from the room, wrote the following letter. (*C*, 584)

Burney casts Cecilia’s letter writing as an active choice (“she called . . . for pen and ink”) rather than a passive compulsion. Cecilia’s careful diction maintains this agency: “I blush at this tardy recantation, and I grieve at the disappointment it may occasion you: but I have yielded to the exhortations of an inward monitor, who is never to be neglected with impunity. Consult him yourself; and I shall need no other advocate” (*C*, 585). Cecilia does not “blush” in response to confessing; her “blushing” in the above excerpt is rhetorical. For Cecilia, it is a stylistic device of proper letter writing now divorced from the supposedly “natural” confessional drive nurtured by epistolarity. This letter also names the alternative mode of interiority that Burney has been developing: “an inward monitor.” Highly self-conscious interpretative skills constitute Cecilia’s inward monitor; they also take the place of an “exterior monitor” previously held by her male conductors.
Although Cecilia advertises that this inward monitor renders her independent (“I shall need no other advocate”), she also genders her interior monitor as male (“Consult him yourself”). We may wish to interpret this as a failure on Burney’s part to escape the epistolary control of a male reader. While I have not argued that *Cecilia* is a revolutionary treatise, I suggest that we contextualize Burney’s gendering this inward monitor in terms of the situation in 1782. Addison and Steele’s concept of the disinterested observer play directly into Burney’s concept of “monitoring.” Thus, by gendering her metaphor, Burney was able to empower women writers while not fully rejecting letter writing as an unproductive tradition. Cecilia’s inward monitor takes the place of an external male reader.

Eighteenth-century conduct books did valorize feminine “passivity.” I see the *Evelina-Cecilia* project as Burney’s successful attempt to write herself out of these epistolary limitations. Burney understands that her project for replacing confession with interpretation belongs to a slow process that has painful side effects, and it is from this perspective that we may interpret Cecilia’s eventual madness. In fact, Cecilia’s insanity follows another of her attempts to literalize her imagined authority. Prefacing Cecilia’s impromptu flight through London’s streets, Burney details how Cecilia’s project for acquiring agency has become problematic, especially because it stands in direct contrast to marriage:

> It seemed once more in her power to be mistress of her destiny; but the very liberty of choice she had so much coveted, now attained appeared the most heavy of calamities; since, uncertain even what she ought to do, she rather wished to be drawn rather than to lead, rather desired to be guided than to guide. She was to be responsible not only to the world but to herself for the whole of this momentous transaction, and the terror of leaving either dissatisfaction, made independence burthensome, and unlimited power a grievance. (*C*, 621–22)

Equivocation dominates this passage: Cecilia’s imagined agency battles an imagined satisfaction in “be[ing] drawn” and “be[ing] guided.” Burney represents this equivocation as both painful and the “work of mental reformation” (*C*, 790). Cecilia considers her interpretative activity to be laborious; thus, Burney’s novel writing, as interpretative activity, appears to effect “work.” In the case of Cecilia’s street flight, Burney’s task is to question the boundaries of feminine agency.

While hastily trying to interpret one of Delvile’s letters, Cecilia con-
cludes that he has mistakenly assumed her having an affair with Belfield. We should note that a series of misinterpretations (by both Devile and Cecilia) cause Cecilia to take to the streets:

These thoughts, which confusedly, yet forcibly, rushed upon her mind, brought with them at once an excuse for his conduct, and an alarm for his danger; “He must think,” she cried, “I came to town only to meet Mr. Belfield!” then, opening the chaise-door herself, she jumped out, and ran back into Portland-street, too impatient to argue with the postilion to return with her . . . . (C, 889)

Cecilia runs to unnamed coffeehouses and confronts a coachman who, while insisting upon his payment, physically restrains Cecilia from pursuing her imagined agency:

“Let me go! let me pass!” cried she, with increasing eagerness and emotion; “detain me at your peril!—release me this moment!—only let me run to the end of the street,—good God! good Heaven! detain me not for mercy!”

. . . a mob was collecting: Cecilia, breathless with vehemence and terror, was encircled, yet struggled in vain to break away; and the stranger gentleman, protesting, with sundry compliments, he would himself take care of her, very freely seized her hand.

This moment, for the unhappy Cecilia, teemed with calamity; she was wholly overpowered; terror for Delvile, horror for herself, hurry, confusion, heat and fatigue, all assailing her at once, while all means of repelling them were denied her, the attack was too strong for her fears, feelings, and faculties, and her reason suddenly, yet totally failing her, she madly called out, “He [Delvile] will be gone! he will be gone! and I must follow him to Nice!” (C, 895–96)

We should note that this excerpt clarifies that Cecilia “goes mad” before her street pursuit. Burney’s altered style (the barrage of commas and short paragraphs of exclamation) as well as Burney’s describing the way Cecilia “madly call[s] out” to nobody expresses Cecilia’s insanity. Cecilia’s failure to interpret her situation ends in a confessional outburst on the streets of London, and this outburst attracts a mob, the ultimate urban marker of ill conduct. Burney continues to punish her heroine’s uncritical “horror for herself” as she describes Cecilia “gliding from place to place, from street
to street; with no consciousness of any plan . . .” (C, 897). Cecilia lacks “any plan” and therefore lacks “consciousness.” Without interpretation, Cecilia lacks a proper “inward monitor” and, using a metaphor of conduct, she lacks a proper conductor. Thus, when Cecilia enters a pawnbroker’s shop, the owners at first misinterpret her to be a prostitute. As I reviewed at the beginning of this chapter, it is at this point where the pawnbrokers easily translate Cecilia into a piece of printed text in The Daily Advertiser. Due in part to this textual imprisonment, Cecilia experiences a condition that epitomized for eighteenth-century Britons a complete lack of self-government: madness.

Although Cecilia’s pursuit through London’s streets is highly complex because of its eighteenth-century novelty, we need to remind ourselves that neither a disembodied “London” nor its abstract streets drive Cecilia mad. Cecilia’s cessation of interpretative activity is the source of her breakdown; it leads her imagination to create groundless fictions about Delvile. In the absence of a Freudian lexicon for describing interior struggle, Burney casts Cecilia onto the streets alone, and, by having Cecilia exhibit improper conduct, is able to represent Cecilia’s mental breakdown. Because Burney’s metaphor of conduct refers both to literal geography and figurative mental activity, the impropriety of Cecilia’s flight through the unknown streets echoes the mental crisis she experiences. This scene also helps Burney examine the way in which language and literature were distancing London from human agency. Cecilia questions Evelina’s claim that “the change is in the place, not in me” and offers to rephrase it as “the change is in me, not in the place.”

Cecilia’s flight through the streets of London may appear to represent the failure of Burney’s experiment with imaginative agency. What heals Cecilia, however, is not confession but meticulous editing and concealment. In particular, the physician who attends to Cecilia’s recovery, Dr. Lyster, is versed in more than just physic and medicine; he resembles a narratologist: “He [Lyster] went, however, to Cecilia, and gave her this narration, suppressing whatever he feared would most affect her, and judiciously enlivening the whole by his strictures” (C, 925). An edited narrative brings Cecilia back to life not only in Lyster’s narrative, but also in the narrative Burney’s writes; that is, Burney must ignore certain parts of Cecilia’s struggle for agency in order to reach the telos of marriage. In an urban environment that values language and narrative, there is a ruthless need for incessant interpretation. Pausing from this interpretative activity can almost prove fatal. Burney calls attention to Lyster’s narrative function when she temporarily imbues him
with the power of an omniscient narrator who seems to proclaim the novel’s moral from a position outside the novel’s confines:

“The whole of this unfortunate business,” said Dr. Lyster, “has been the result of PRIDE and PREJUDICE, Your uncle, the Dean, began it, by his arbitrary will, as if an ordinance of his own could arrest the course of nature! and as if he had power to keep alive, by the loan of a name, a family in the male branch already extinct. . . . Yet this, however, remember; if to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you owe your miseries, so wonderfully is good and evil balanced, that to PRIDE and PREJUDICE you will also owe their termination . . . .” (C, 930)

Lyster’s concluding moral, of course, leaves certain things out in order to make its summary possible. In particular, Lyster edits the disruptions to create a sanitized product. That Austen supposedly fed upon these lines to launch her own career suggests that Lyster’s words tie off an unfinished project in which Austen sensed more work was needed.

By using London’s geography as a metaphor for Cecilia’s interior breakdown, Burney is able to detail Cecilia’s participation in an unprecedented and supposedly immoral experience on London’s streets. Evelina would have never been able to represent, express, or confess such an experience in a letter because a letter is the mythic repository for proper feminine conduct. Cecilia, however, uses London’s geography and the gendered archives of conduct associated with that geography to convey an eighteenth-century woman’s experience with madness. If Cecilia cauternizes her imagined agency and exposes her metaphor for what it really is (that is, imagined) by relying upon a male conductor (that is, Delvile), we should not automatically assume that Cecilia, as a novelistic project, fails to reach Burney’s goals. The novel offers no immediate solution to the problem of how to express this new model of interiority, but, then again, solutions are not the immediate goals of “a project.” Burney points to interpretive activity as a way for Cecilia to become aware of the imprisoning effects of confessional interiority in London. Burney does not point to interpretative activity as a way to enjoy a dangerous urban independence that jettisons standards of proper social conduct altogether.

Although one might be tempted to say that Cecilia’s imagined agency and independence ultimately end in marriage, Burney’s imagined authority is a different story. Burney reimagines form and, in turn, reimagines what constitutes interiority. Burney’s exposure of the limitations of con-
fession and epistolarity suggests that she valued the imagination’s ability to critique existing social and textual conducts. From this perspective, *Cecilia* is Burney’s most valuable contribution to helping her readers interpret their relationship to eighteenth-century London and literature about London in general.

Burney’s “inward monitor” constitutes an innovative strategy for female self-government that originated in a gendered experience of London’s ambiguous signs and textual artifacts. The frenzied confusion that Cecilia experiences as she flees London’s streets and arrives at the London pawnbroker’s shop parallels Burney’s experience as a woman writer living in London’s print-saturated environment of the late eighteenth century. This environment caused Burney to ask the same questions that Cecilia inevitably asked herself: How did we get here? In an environment that is shaped by others (the imaginative vestiges of early eighteenth-century writers), how am I to realize my authentic self? Burney’s strategies for self-government attend to the need for new interpretive skills that carefully reconsider the types of London-based authorities to whom women should defer. Burney’s answer is simple: a woman needs to defer to her authentic self. However, due to the calcified layers of printed text and cultural conducts that attached themselves during the early eighteenth century to this authenticity, Burney acknowledges that this is an extremely difficult task. Burney writes *Cecilia* to wade through these layers of print-saturation, retire the epistolary novel, and reclaim a highly interpretive third-person narration.

We may therefore register a major paradigm shift between *Evelina* and *Cecilia* by understanding the different functions that Burney assigns to the disruptive episodes in each novel. In *Evelina*, for example, forged letters destabilize the epistolary logic that underwrites Burney’s epistolary novel. In *Cecilia*, by contrast, the disruptive scenes (Cecilia’s confrontation with the mob, Harrel’s suicide at Vauxhall, and Cecilia’s street flight) normalize Cecilia’s interpretative activity by forcing it to confront its practical limitations. What this reveals is that what was experimental in *Evelina* was normalized in *Cecilia*; the gaps in *Evelina* become interpretable parts of narrative in *Cecilia*. Thus, we may recognize *Cecilia* as Burney’s attempt to understand the ways form and urban geography in *Evelina* forced her
to write in a specific way. Burney’s textual project, like Cecilia’s imagined project, is an interpretative one.

Considering self-conscious interpretation as a way to understand feminine agency, Burney was able to view London as an unfinished project. Women could participate in this urban project only if they seized the sites of agency (geography and textual traditions) that these novels performed. This is why Burney’s activity as a writer, like Gay’s activity, becomes part of the text’s project. Burney performed her own rhetoric to make her readers recognize the writer as a proper interpretative authority. But Burney did more than just raise awareness of these strategies of authorization; she made her readers realize that these strategies could fashion and authorize ideas of gender. Just as Burney, the novelist, doubles as our letter writer and conductor in *Evelina* and *Cecilia*, we, the readers, double as the interpreters of Evelina and Cecilia. Burney stresses the slipperiness between these double roles in order to show her readers how these imaginary yet authoritative roles made gender meaningful. London, Burney seems to say, did not have to be this way for women. Epistolary confession, Burney suggests, did not have to be the only means for knowing oneself. When Cecilia launches herself onto the streets, gender’s constructed boundaries become as opaque as epistolarity’s truth claims. If we recognize the visibility that Burney’s novels lent to epistolarity and confession between 1778 and 1782, Burney may suggest to us that our own model of confessional interiority, psychoanalysis, never had to be our only means for knowing ourselves.