

DE EPISTULIS*

The letter¹ is defined inside the co-ordinates of certain elements², among which the most obvious are the greetings in the beginning and in the end. We might consider this as the primary frame of the letter, one that is absolutely necessary: setting the space and time borders, as much as the human relationship. The communication established by means of a letter may be a clear and open one, explicitly achieved, or, on the contrary, a secret communication, closed to anyone but the individuals that are inside the relationship set by the primary frame. The private nature of communication through letters is materialised in the protecting systems of its content; this protection is necessary both when the communication is secret, enclosed, and when it is open and clear. A protecting system might be, in its turn, an external, even mechanical one (such as seals, boxes, all the equivalents of the modern envelopes) or an internal one, intrinsic to its content. In this latter situation, there are two possible ways of protecting the content of the letter: explicitly, by using a code (*id est* signs that are obviously unknown) that only the addressee can decipher, or implicitly, by using a code that seems to be accessible to anyone (*id est* signs that are apparently known) but, in fact, reveals its true meaning only to the addressee. The procedures that keep letters safely are much subtler than the modalities that protect books: chains (*libri catenati*) and curses addressed to potential thieves.

Besides defining their private nature, that goes from strictly private to indifferently addressed (to which are to be added the false letters, whose addressee

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¹ The earliest mention of writing in Homer is related to a private form of communication between two persons from two different places: in the sixth book of *Iliad* seems to be pointed out the first letter of the Greek and Roman antiquity (the Bellerophon episode). This particular letter is not fully presented, but is revealed its content and, even more interesting, the effect that it could have had on its messenger (Homer speaks about death signs, *sēmata lygra*, and about being kept well protected: v. 169). Subsequently, it has to be noted that the very first ancient letter (as much as we now know) was private.

² Vide Carol Poster, *A Conversation Halved: Epistolary Theory in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, in Poster, Carol, and Linda C. Mitchell (edd.), *Letter-Writing Manuals and Instruction from Antiquity to the Present. Historical and Bibliographic Studies. Studies in Rhetoric/Communication*. Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2007, pp. 21–51.

is in fact an undetermined public), letters are sometimes revealing the way they were made up, either as internal elements (the content) or external elements (the writing). These self-referential elements (that might be interpreted as *realia*, even if this is certainly not the intended purpose of their authors) would have probably represented the secondary, subordinate frame of the letter, being for the authors a vivid and very personal way of achieving their «half of the dialogue», as the ancient world used to define the letter. These self-referential elements should be considered part of the style and, subsequently, represent a modality of signing, in ancient manner, a letter. A revealing example is one of Cicero's letters to Quintus (3, 1), extended to about 2000 words, written by three, or maybe four, different persons. The first part was written by a *librarius*, whose name is unknown; the 17th and 18th paragraphs were written by Cicero himself (*cum scripsissem haec infima, quae sunt manu mea, uenit ad nos Cicero tuus ad cenam*); the next four paragraphs were "dictated" by Cicero to Tiro during the dinner (*haec inter cenam Tironi dictaui, ne mirere alia manu esse*) – and probably it was not a *syllabatim* dictation, there were ideas worded by Tiro; the final part it is due to somebody else.

The fact that the ancient letters usually were not autographed (as clearly suggest the frequent mentions of *seruus ab epistulis, amanuensis, epistolographus*), results in an extension of the «signature» inside the letter: Cicero once confesses (*Fam. 7, 32, 1*) that had identified the sender of a confidential unsigned letter solely by the style of its author (and not by the way it had been written). There is a dynamic that can be detected in the purpose of writing, swinging between *revealing* and *hiding*.

A brief survey of two significant letter-collection of Antiquity, based on the self-referential criterion, reveals certain characteristics. Seneca's *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* contain a restrained number of elements that may indicate an authentic correspondence, subject to all letter constraints. There are some references to *exempla* (copies of the letters, either sent or received letters), the effects, the signature or the letter seen as a gift. On the other side, Cicero's *Epistulae ad Atticum*, that are undoubtedly real letters (*id est* letters composed and written for a specific addressee, nevertheless with a certain preoccupation for an extended public), include a significant amount of specific elements, mostly belonging to expressed concerns over the safeness of correspondence.

Seneca, *Ad Lucilium*:

citation: 8,1; 40,2; 41,1.

copies of letters: 21,4.

effect: 19,1; 40,1; 89,23; in humoresque variant: 102,1; beneficent (in time): 7,8.

gift: 10,5; 29,1; 32,1; 38,1; 118,1.

reference to his own letter: 76,20.

signature: 13,16.

Cicero, *Ad Atticum*:

citation: 16,5,3; 9,10,4; 13,40,1.

circulation of letters: 16,16a,4.

collection of his own letters: 16,5,5.

commentaries on letter received: 7,7,5;

comparison with different letters: 3,2,1.

copies of letters: 8,11d,3; 10,3a,2; 10,8,10; 10,8a,2; 10,9,2; 10,10,1; 13,22,5; 16,12,1; 16,15,3; copies of others' letters: 10,4,6; 11,7,2; 13,45,1; for himself: 9,10,4; for others: 2,25,1; requested copy: 7,23,3.

destroyed letter: 8,2,4; 10,12,4.

effect: 6,3,8; beneficent (in time): 9,10,10; 13,13/14,3.

false letter: 11,16,1; announced to its presumed author: 6,6,4; requested false letters: 3,15,8; 3,21,1; 11,3,3; 11,5,3; 11,7,7; 11,8,2; 11,12,4; with details: 11,2,4;

fear of indiscrete lecture: 1,9,1; 1,13,1; 1,17,10; 1,18,2; 2,19,5; 2,20,3; 8,9,2; 10,8,1; 11,1,1; 11,4a,1; 16,2,6.

lecture in public: 9,7,2.

lost letter: 2,8,1; 2,13,1; 5,17,1; 5,21,4; 11,24,4; probably lost letter: 5,3,2.

revealed message: 8,15a,3; 15,2,1; with author's permission: 6,3,8.

private letter (specifically): 1,16,8; 5,11,7; 8,9,2.

reference to copies of letters: 15,6,4; 15,28,1.

secrets: 2,19,5; 2,20,5; special language: 1,13,4; 7,13,5; 7,13a,1; 8,6,2; Greek: 2,19,5; 6,1 (passim); 6,4,3; mythological names: 1,12,1; 2,14,1.

signature: 2,13,16; „*manu propria*”: 2,23,1.

tabellarius: 13,29,3.

The ancient theory of epistolography³ is based on the concept of letter as gift: the author expresses him/herself, approaching a topic meant to be appropriate to the addressee, in an adequate style. The two characters connected by a letter become the harmonious halves of a unit that exists in two different places of the world. The letter instantly cancels the distance, reuniting the two persons and the two places. The relationship between friends is defined in terms of presence *uersus* absence, obviously considered positive, respectively negative situations: letter is in itself an energetic modality to terminate a harmful status, at least on the length of reading it. The letter is a complete gift, as it has material consistency and intrinsic value; from this prospective, the letter is more precious than the direct dialogue that cannot be treasured in a traditional manner, repeatedly. The material cutting up of the letter requires this interpretation. The value of the gift has the common coordinates,

³ For a wide survey of this topic, *vide Appendices A–G (Bibliographies)*, in: Poster, Carol, and Linda C. Mitchell (edd.), *ibid.*, pp. 245–335.

as the material used (expensive, mostly if it is used one single time), the exquisite appearance (calligraphy), the author devotion (time, attention, *studium*). The writing itself may be interpreted as quantifier of the time spent by the author, in a direct relation: a *manu propria* letter is a palpable proof. The materials used in Antiquity did not allow a rapid and uninterrupted writing; on the other side, for avoiding such tiredness, there were professional calligraphists: the result was nevertheless a shorter letter, as usually dictation had to be slow and, inevitably, fragmentary (*vide Cicero, Att.: (7, 13a) si scriberem ipse, longior epistula fuisset, sed dictaui propter lippitudinem; (10, 3a) alteram tibi eodem die hanc epistulam dictaui et pridie dederam mea manu longiorem*). Besides this quantifiable dimension of the letter text, there is the intrinsic value of the *ars epistolaris*, as a precious sign of extended *studium* and *amor* toward the addressee.

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