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Epistles and Letters – Between the Private and the Public Space

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Introduction

Epistles have revealed private feelings, attitudes, and teachings of all kinds as early as the times of the Bible. They have equally constituted a means of communication between private persons who sometimes acquired the status of public personalities and who decided that they should have their correspondence offered to the public sphere. Writers whose correspondence was ultimately a proof of their artistic gifts had it published in volumes, either through their own decision or through the intermediacy of their legal representatives (relatives, editors, biographers, etc.).

All along their evolution, epistles and letters have witnessed intervals of climax and times of oblivion or complete abandonment, even if used as a narrative technique or as a product in itself intended for a special purpose.

Our approach intends to outline a concise overview of private letters which became public letters addressed to a public audience. Along the centuries, more or less compact collections of letters have contributed to the creation of the epistolary (national or European) literature and have been used as a means of revealing elements of private life to the public eye. The current approach consists of two major sections. The first describes the mechanism of communication through letters as well as the parts making up the respective mechanism. The second and larger section of our presentation considers letters as they have integrated themselves in the public sphere. Unlike Epistles, which are familiar to the Christian world, in most of the cases, letters have been traditionally acknowledged to have (had) a highly private character. Despite the tradition, private letters have gradually got access in the public sphere, but in different ways. These ways include letters inserted in novels, novels based on letters, manuals of letter-writing practices, textbooks and courses which present theoretical aspects and give practical models of letters or exercises devised to develop the letter-writing skills. Although the literature focusing on letters is so vast, the main aim of this contribution is to track the voyage of letters from the private to the public sphere.

1. Communication through letters

Our investigation intended at first to assess the status of letters in the public sphere, but as it progressed, many other details were recorded.

The widening of the scope of research required the necessity for the description of the process of communication through letters. In order to acknowledge communication through letters as a particular instance of the communication act, it is useful to ponder on a possible representation of the respective act. For the purpose of this presentation, we decided to resort to Jakobson's description of the act of

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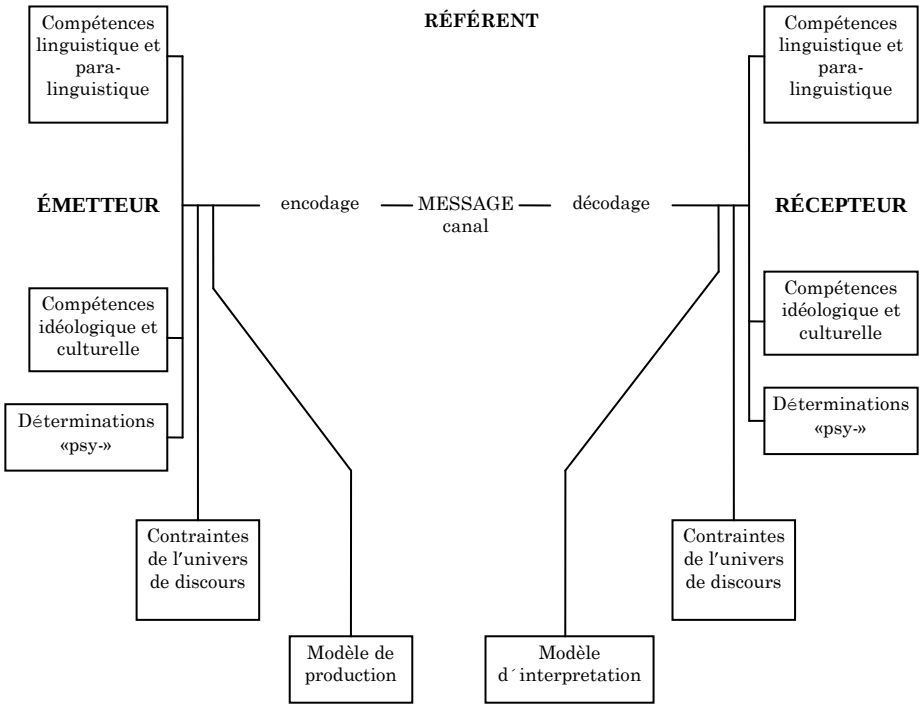
communication, which was taken over and improved by Kerbrat-Orecchioni. Jakobson concisely refers to the basic elements of the theory of communication, and implicitly, to the act of communication to be 'the interlocution' (our English version) (Jakobson 1965:32).

In the early 1980s, Kerbrat-Orecchioni thought it proper to update Jakobson's representation of the act of communication and she suggested an improved version. We have adopted the French linguist's point of view for it serves the descriptive purpose of our investigation and we present it in what follows:



(Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1980: 19)

The three basic elements in the communication process remain the same, but the new contributions which complete Kerbrat-Orecchioni's diagram will have to accept new names in order to make them fit into our epistolary universe. The epistolary universe of communication reveals a higher degree of complexity which is due, on the one hand, to the spatial remoteness of emitter and receiver and, on the other hand, to the manner in which they build their dialogue, namely, via letters whose delivery involves temporal remoteness as well.

When the process of communication is performed through letters, the emitter may assume either the status of the *epistle author* or that of the *epistler*. Although a tendency to accept the two terms as synonyms has been obvious in the literature of speciality, subtler and more profound literature and discourse analysts found differences between the two. Thus, Duchenes (1971) describes the distinctions between the two to be based upon the way or the methods they resort to in order to address the public. *Epistle authors* focus on the public and that is why the literary

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intention and implicitly the conscientious or purposeful use of a certain kind of rhetoric permeating letters are easily observable.

Unlike this former category of authors, *epistlers* have in view no public whatsoever, and on account of such a perspective, they establish a bilateral relationship between themselves and their letter addressees.

The other pole of the communication through letters, the receiver of the message is, in this particular case, the addressee. According to Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1980:23) receivers may also be divided into 'allocutaire' and 'non-allocutaire'. The former category is restricted to the addressee proper or the direct addressee, the only person for whom the letter is intended. The latter is comprehensive enough to include the addressees the letter author has in mind (the public and the indirect addressee) as well as any other category of addressees, those whom the letter-writer does not particularly have in his view, or the so-called additional addressees.

The final element in the chain of the communication process is the message. The message in the traditional epistolary discourse displays structural constraints imposed by the letter layout requirements (the date, salutation, complimentary close, etc.). The content of such a message reveals the constraints of the epistolary universe it belongs to and its model of presentation is either the epistle or the letter.

To encode the message, letter-writers will have to consider three factors, which exercise a particular sort of influence upon public or private letter receivers who have to apply the same factors to decode the same message. These factors include linguistic and paralinguistic competence, cultural and ideological competence as well as the restrictions imposed by the universe of discourse and by the model of production. This model of production becomes, in the eyes of the addressee, who turns into a '(non-)allocutaire', a model of interpretation, since the intended letter end-user will not only read the content but the message as well. And the message may suggest either an open end to the story in the letter or an idea which is carefully hidden between the lines.

2. Epistles and letters in the epistolary universe

The current section continues commenting on terminological issues, as at a superficial glance, the terms *epistle* and *letter* might be taken for synonyms, first of all because they represent forms of human communication involving spatial and temporal distance.

Nevertheless, there are some particulars which distinguish epistles from letters. Despite their representing, up to a certain point, similar text structures, they serve different interests.

Differences may include not only their etymology and their productivity, but also their specialized meanings. Thus, *epistle* comes from Greek while *letter* originates in Latin. Epistle is a productive lexical unit since it offered the English language both a noun (epistler or epistoler) and an adjective, *epistolary* – used either with reference to the nouns epistle or letter, when referring to something '(1) relating to, denoting, conducted by, or contained in letters; (2) (of a novel or other work) when constructed in the form of a series of letters' (Collins English Dictionary 1999: 521).

Used as a common noun, *epistle* designates (1)'a letter, especially one that is long, formal, or didactic; (2) a literary work in letter form, especially a dedicatory verse letter of a type originated by Horace' (Collins English Dictionary 1999: 521). The term *letter* is defined to be 'a written or printed communication addressed to a

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person, company, etc., usually sent by post in an envelope'. (Collins English Dictionary 1999: 890)

In literature, the *epistle* displays a specialization of meaning since it is used to designate "a poem addressed to a friend or patron, thus a kind of letter in verse" (Cuddon 1982:238).

2.1. Epistles

According to the Collins English Dictionary (1999: 520), the term *Epistle*, accepted as a proper noun, is assigned to the New Testament where it is used with reference to 'any of the apostolic letters of Saints Peter, Paul, James, Jude or John'.

Actually, these Epistles represent nearly a third of the New Testament and moralising or/and educational in their content, they serve as an instrument for the argumentative purpose of facilitating the transmission of a certain message which may be either "behind the writing" as in James's Epistle or "stated quite clearly" as in John's First Epistle (Kuhrt 1991:46). In this particular case, the letter pattern is noticeable only at the formal level. Thus, all of them bear the title which includes both the epistle authors and the allocutaire (see the dictionary entry quoted in the foregoing). The allocutaire, mentioned in the Epistle title, may be seen as a community (see the Epistles addressed to the Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Thessalonians, etc.) or as an individual (see the Epistles addressed to Timothy, Titus, or to Philemon).

These Epistles chronologically mark the beginning of the presence of letters belonging to the public sphere.

2.2. Letters and epistles – a structural form of the epistolary literature

The epistolary literature, which represents a considerable chapter in the history of the European literature, displays several narrative techniques involving the use of letters.

These literary structures either make a whole novel (see, for instance, Pierre Choderlos de Laclos's *Les Laisons Dangereuses*, or Dimitrie Bolintineanu's *Manoil*), or part of a novel, which the case with Richardson's three famous novels, *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded(1742), Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady*, and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, or they only represent a chapter or part of a chapter in a novel. At the same time, it is worth mentioning that epistolary literature, based of the works where this narrative technique prevails, could be divided into pure fiction and literature intended for specific purposes.

Along the centuries, epistles, understood as poems dedicated to friends or patrons, mainly dealt with two comprehensive and generous strands, romantic or sentimental topics and moral or philosophical topics. The former, also known as the Ovidian type of epistles permeated by a romantic and sentimental vein, were more popular in the Middle Ages, and were influencing the theories of courtly love. This pattern is supposed to have inspired Samuel Daniel who introduced it in *Letter from Octavia to Marcus Antonius* (1603). The latter strand, commonly known as the Horatian type of epistles, was to bring about a steady and long-lasting fashion in literature, exercising a greater influence upon literature authors during the Renaissance and thereafter. Vaughan, Dryden, and Congreve resorted to this narrative technique, but Samuel Johnson appears to have been the first to use it in *The Forest* (1616). Pope also adopted it and he "proved to be the most skilled practitioner, especially in his *Moral Essays* (1731-5) and *An Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* (1735) (Cuddon 1982: 238-9).

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Events narrated by means of letters enjoyed a large popularity in the 1690s. The numerous collections of letters were signed by authors who were mainly concerned with other sorts of writings. Thus, Thomas Brown who was first a satirist and later on a hack writer and translator tried his talent as a letter writer and produced *Letters of Wit, Politics and Morality,* while John Dennis, author of tragedies and "best known for his critical work" as a letter composer producing *Familiar and Courtly Letters* (Harvey 1975: 228). Also successful against this chronological background were those included in Charles Gildon's collection *Letters of Love and Gallantry*. These titles emphasize the continual enlargement of the scope of letters so as to include topics more diverse than love and these were family, life in general, politics, morality, etc.

Famous writers of the epoch as John Wilmot Rochester, the poet of genius, or remarkable personalities as the second duke of Buckingham contributed to the refining of the art of letter-writing.

The letter-writing vogue diminished in the course of time and after the Restoration the epistolary narrative technique was related to more specific fields of activity, such as politics (e.g. *Letters to Mayor Alderman of Kingston upon Hull* by Marvel) and science (e.g. the letters written by Hook, or by Newton, by Locke and by many others of his contemporaries).

Up to the 17th century things had so evolved that the letter also became a means of telling love stories. The collection *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* assigned to Aphra Behn is one of the literary works which paved the way to the epistolary novel proper.

The narration through letters exercised a double impact on the producers of literature and on beneficiaries of literature. Widely accepted as they had become, the letters when they did not constitute the literary work proper, they represented just parts of it. Thus Thomas More included letters in his *Utopia* (1516). The translation based on the first edition and published by Penguin Books (1965) included the introductory part which consisted of More's letter to Peter Gilles, and Gilles's letter to Busleiden, but a mention is also made by the editor concerning the omission of two other letters belonging to the original version, since their translator did not consider them as a "part of the practical joke" (More 1965: 22).

The 18th century witnessed the flourishing of epistolary prose in the English literature, where best samples come from Samuel Richardson and which were mentioned in the foregoing. Once the model was launched in the public sphere it became public possession and was adopted by authors in most of the European countries.

Although Richardson's three novels enjoyed a different amount of success, they exercised a remarkable influence on subsequent writers of fiction both in England and abroad. Even if the roots of the epistolary genre are so deeply rooted in the history of the universal literature, Richardson's absolute merit is that of having produced novels exclusively made up of letters.

Echoes of his technique were to be felt, and, totally or partially followed by a considerable number of writers, some years later or even more than one hundred years after the publication of Pamela, in all European literatures from Paris to the far European east in Sankt Peterburg and Moskow.

Besides the letters written by English authors, the epoch witnessed numerous translations from Latin and French, whose main purpose was to provide instruction and models to be imitated. Thomas Brown translated some of the Latin letters written by Pliny the Younger and by Cicero, whilst among the French writers

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especially admired and translated were Scarron, Fontenelle and Voltaire, particularly towards the end of the century.

2.3. Private letters in the public sphere

As human relations gradually changed, this mode of communication - the letter - acquired not only new purposes but new uses as well. The development of trade and commerce, on the one hand, and the difficulties implied by any way of travelling and the scarcity of the means of transport on the other, had as an outcome both a tremendous quantity of correspondence and an insisting demand for patterns, or models of letters. The demand was increasingly felt by the end of the 15th century, and particularly in the 16th century.

As instruments or documents devised to facilitate communication between family members, the earliest English letters appeared in the second half of the 14th century, being preceded by a private and semiofficial correspondence in French, language whose use on the territory of the British Isles was at its height in those years.

Letters written in English were discovered by specialists to have first occurred among *The Paston Letters* and *The Stonor Correspondence* in the 1420s, while after the year 1450 they were "everywhere the rule"(Baugh and Cable 1991: 153). The collection known under the name of *The Paston Letters* constitutes "a series of family and business letters which commences in 1425 and spans four generations" (Burnley 1992: 177).

Sutherland (1975: 232) also quoted the example of a more familiar, friendly and natural correspondence between Sir William Petty and Sir Robert Southwell, who also span many fields of interest, covering a wide range of topics and disciplines. More practical in their purpose "full of sensible instruction, admirably expressed, more particularly in matters of good breeding", the *Letters* written by the fourth Earl of Chesterfield were devised for the education of his natural son, Philip Stanshope (Harvey 1975: 162). A father's teachings to his son were also revealed to the public sphere for educational and argumentative purposes. Argumentative, because the teachings based on a lifetime experience could be used by less eloquent parents as strong arguments in support of their own cases, situations, character presentations, a reason for one choice or another, etc.

2.4. Public letters in the public sphere

The final section of our study will consider the letters which were written for instructive purposes and whose both epistler and non-allocutaire are pure inventions. The concern for the development of letter models resulted in an impressive collection of such models, out of which few of the very well known authors will be mentioned. But public letters mean more than textbooks on correspondence, as they will also include seemingly private letters whose epistler may or may not be a public personality but who shows his message to the public eye. The end of this subdivision will illustrate one instance of the kind.

The interest in this narrative technique coupled with the need arising from business preoccupations had already set a fashion and created a public interested in matters of correspondence who were eager to benefit from letter models as those presented by Elisabeth Rowe in her work entitled *Letters, Morals and Entertaining* (published between 1729 and 1733).

Once a market had been created, in 1739 Richardson was addressed an order by Rivington and Osborn, two well-known book tradesmen of the time who owned a bookselling business. They told Richardson that many of their customers had insistently asked about a collection of business letters for the less educated business

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persons who, nevertheless, wanted to impress their partners (Doody 1985: 7). As a consequence, the booksellers asked him to produce a collection of sample letters intended for the less cultivated people. The offer was addressed straight to Richardson for he had made himself known as a talented author of letters since his childhood, as he himself confessed it in an autobiographical letter sent to a friend, the Dutch Johannes Stinstra. This collection which looked like a booklet came out in 1741 bearing the title *Letters Written to Particular Friends, on the Most Important Occasions* and also providing directions on how to think and act justly and prudently in the common concerns of human life.

The public interest in letter-writing practices is supported by various textbooks providing information, suggestions and models which have been produced, say in the last twenty-five years (Ashley 1991)

The public letter has become a way to exchange ideas in the public sphere with other readers on a certain topic, or to express personal feelings, reactions or attitudes. For instance, the Guardian Weekly has a permanent column providing its readers to express their reactions regarding the content of the articles published there. Viața liberă, the local paper of our town, has a column dedicated to its readers who need answers to questions generally addressed to the mayor or other local authorities who are difficult to get in touch with. A thorough research and analysis of the public letters whose epistle authors are outstanding political figures would illustrate a wealth of manipulating means, but this discussion will be far beyond the scope and the purpose of the current approach. Nevertheless, the pile of letters signed by politicians and addressed to politicians which have flooded the Romanian media for the last two years give the public an insight of the relationships which characterize the political world.

Letters have also become a journalistic instrument intended to draw the readers' attention on stringent matters as the renewal of their subscription to the respective journal, contributions to charity events, etc.

Letters have become a pattern for advertising purposes. Catalogues provided by famous publishing houses open with a small letter written in a friendly tone approach their prospective readers, inviting them to consult their offers and to order their products.

Final remarks

Except for the Epistles of the Bible, both (literary) epistles and letters have tangoed from the private to the public sphere ever since the 15th century. Our investigation revealed the continual sharing of private letters with the public sphere or the public conscience which was either invited to react to events, opinions or situations, or just to accept suggestions, solutions or information.

Epistolary literature proper starts with epistles intended for the public space and addressing an individual or collective (non-)allocutaire. The literary tradition based on letters making up epistolary novels established in the 18th century has been continually enriched both with new novels and with volumes of private correspondence signed by famous writers or other celebrities. For reasons which go beyond the purpose of the present approach, epistlers and epistle authors continue to offer the public sphere their more or less private correspondence. A recent example would be the collection of letters edited by Gabriel Liiceanu (1996).

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In addition to that, the letter structure was borrowed for other purposes but the literary one, and what resulted from this borrowing could be accepted as epistolary writings.

These epistolary writings encompass:

- letters initially written to be family letters but which were subsequently acknowledged as public possessions;
- letters produced by epistle authors and addressed to allocutaires who are public figures (political, intellectual, scientific personalities);
- letter patterns used an interactive dialogue between the media and its consumers or between the public at large and their local, regional or national authorities;
- letter patterns used for advertising purposes.

Based on a simple structure, concise and highly private in its initial conception, the letter almost invaded the public sphere centuries ago to remain here as fresh and incentive as it was the first day it was offered to the public.

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