

A POET'S LETTER: *TRISTIA* 1.1

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Ovid's attempts to receive absolution from Augustus sublimated into literary letters, displaying some precise details that can be read in connection to ancient epistolography. The three defining human elements of a letter – author, addressee and courier – together with its essence, the message, are continuously rearranged in the poem *Tristia* 1.1. This poetic letter is written by Ovid (its “father”), is destined to reach Rome (not daring to go directly to the emperor, *vide* v. 69-70), and seems to travel by itself (though the presence of a possible messenger might be detected in v. 125-126), from a distant place, outside the world Ovid used to live in, bearing a message that is about itself and about the relationship with the author, with the addressee, with his other letters/works seen as belonging to a personal (or maybe public) library or archive.

Some general notes on ancient epistolography are to be taken into account. The letter is defined inside the co-ordinates of certain elements (*vide* Poster 2007, 21-51), 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, obscure to anyone but the individuals that are inside the relationship set by the primary frame. The private nature of communication throughout letters is materialised in the protecting systems of their content; this protection is necessary both

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when the communication is secret, enclosed, and when it is open and clear. Besides defining their private nature, stretching from strictly private to indifferently addressed (to which are to be added the non genuine letters, whose addressee 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 the author) would have probably represented the secondary, subordinate frame of the letter, being for the author a vivid and very personal way of achieving his “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 (*Fam.* 3.1), extended to about 2000 words, written by three, or maybe four, different persons. 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 calligraphy). There is a dynamic purpose of writing, swinging between *revealing* and *hiding*.

In an epistolographic perspective over *Tristia* 1.1, a brief survey of two significant letter-collection of Antiquity (of Seneca and Cicero), based on the self-referential criterion, may expose 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), 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, though with a certain preoccupation for an extended public), include a significant

amount of specific elements, mostly belonging to expressing concerns over the safeness of correspondence.

Reading Ovid's poem *Tristia* 1.1 as an epistolographic work reveals that its first line equals the definition of the letter: *sine me, liber, ibis in urbem* ("you will go without me to the city"). The common letter might be approached by multiple negative and positive definitions, which we can briefly list in order to identify the form of letter Ovid wrote here: it is not an interior monologue (as ideas articulated for himself, even assuming or miming a dialog with a person that formally answers the questions expressed by the author); it is the written form of somebody's own ideas; it is not a conversation (as verbal exchange of ideas among a limited number of persons); it is a dialogue of imprecise dimensions that includes answers to a question-advise-information or expresses a question-advise-information (*Tristia* 1.1 includes only vague answers and subtle requests). The subject of this dialogue might be null or quasi-null, when the author focuses on the letter itself (it is the case here) and the need to communicate is the only reason of the epistolary exchange. Although a common letter is not literature in the wide meaning (as written text intended to be read by an indeterminate number of persons, known and unknown, or whose identity is of no interest), any letter is literature as being a written text and, consequently, a cut into the stream of ideas put in words; the cut is given by the material frame of the letter. The verbalized frame is another element: these are *formulae*, more or less rigid; and, finally, there is the epistolary discipline, materialized in answering a letter, in offering some information, in expressing the interest regarding the addressee). It is a completely acceptable piece of literature when the epistolary approach is only a pretext (the case of *Tristia* 1.1) or when there are some explicit references (*vide* v. 105-107) on preserving other letters/works in order to render them publicly, toward an indeterminate number of recipients, whose identity is either unknown or indifferent to the author.

There are several different reasons that generate a letter — and only a few of them are legitimate, *id est* logical. Exchanging information (in the

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variant of offering information) is the best reason for a letter. Asking for information, news and advice is a common reason. The reasons of writing a letter are accompanied by pretexts that make epistolary communication superior to direct communication; whenever the information is null or quasi-null, the letter fills certain emptiness and is simply the result of contact desire. This culminates with the series of letters *nihil habeo quod scribam* (vide Cicero, *Att.* 9.10.1; 9.19.4).

The reason of this specific Ovidian "letter" is certainly different and, only from the standpoint of its author, is a "conversation halved", quenching a huge thirst of talking to friends, to Romans, to Rome. Nonetheless this letter is a *donum*, "gift", to its addressee. The ancient theory of epistolography is based on the concept of letter as gift: the author expresses himself, 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 an *integer* 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 (obviously considered a positive element) *uersus* absence (negative situations): letter is itself an energetic modality to terminate a harmful status, at least over the span of reading it.

Any habitual letter is a complete gift, as it has material consistency and intrinsic value; from this perspective, the letter is more precious than the direct dialogue that cannot be treasured in a traditional manner and cannot be visited repeatedly. The material cutting up of the letter requires this interpretation. The value of the gift has the common coordinates, as the material used (expensive, mostly if it is used one single time), the exquisite appearance (calligraphy), the author's commitment (time, attention, *studium*). The writing may be interpreted as proclaiming the time spent by the author, in a direct relation: a *manu propria* letter is a palpable testimony. 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. Besides the quantifiable dimension of the letter text, there is most certain the intrinsic value of the *ars epistolaris*, as a precious sign of extended *studium* and *amor* toward the addressee.

This specific *epistula-donum*, *Tristia* 1.1, is not wrapped in a *donum*-like cloth, bearing no ornaments, deliberately, as Ovid explained. It is *incultus* (“unadorned”, v. 3), it is not dyed with purple, the colour of joy and luxury (*nec te purpureo uelent uaccinia fucco*, “you shall have no cover dyed with the juice of purple berries”, v. 5), its title is not written in red ink (*nec titulus minio*, v. 7), its paper is not tinged with oil of cedar (*nec cedro charta*, v. 7); the scroll of the letter does not have precious rods (*candida nec nigra cornua fronte geras*, “you shall wear no white bosses upon your dark edges, v. 8); its paper is not carefully prepared (*nec fragili geminate poliantur pumice frontes*, “let no brittle pumice polish your two edges”, v. 11). This appearance is well suited to the status of its “father”: he is an *exul* (v. 3), so that the letter is wearing the same mourning clothes as its author. The *donum* is simply a mirror of the author, bearing (with no embarrassment) the marks of his tears (*neue liturarum pudeat; qui uiderit illas, de lacrimis factas sentiet esse meas*, “be not ashamed of blots; he who sees them will feel that they were caused by my tears, v. 13-14).

The epistolary exchange is largely affected by distance and chronological disparity, not to mention the fear over the possible accidents in delivering the letter. This fear generates numerous devices meant to secure the content of the letter and help it reach its addressee. The precise data (salutation *formulae*, notes regarding date and place) are to be found in *Tristia* 1.1 in volatile forms. The *formulae* are the specific frame, the element that defines the letter as such: *uade, liber, uerbisque meis loca grata salute* (“go, my book, and in my name greet the loved places”, v. 15)¹. The *formulae* are the stiffening of a salutation taken over from the spoken area and enriched with the specific marks of the epistolary exchange. A letter, before offering the message, is supposed to reveal its

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author; for the ancient epistolography, there is the aggravating circumstance, beyond any control, of the graphic text that can not be recognize; there are several reasons for that, besides reading for the first time someone's handwriting: either the text is not written *manu propria*, or the receiver does not read it, but listen to someone who is reading it. The element that authenticates the letter (*formulae*) might function as a *sigillum*, meant to protect the content of the letter during the journey to its addressee². In a common letter, mentioning the addressee seems totally redundant, given the fact that the letter is entrusted to a courier in order to handle it; nevertheless, the itinerary of a letter usually had several segments and several couriers were supposed to give letters to different persons to carry them further. In addition, we face the actual status of ancient letters, which were frequently copied and could circulate as authentic literary pieces. From the standpoint of the addressee, the *formulae* functioned as identification marks and as clues to the relationship between sender and receiver. Certain details of the *formulae* were meant to express the politeness or to include supplementary elements; the final salute sometimes opened the way to a multiple dialogue, containing short messages for different persons of the addressee's family or friends.

The addressee in *Tristia* 1.1 is as open as it could be: to everyone who still remembers Ovid and would want to know something about his fate (*siquis [...] nostri non immemor illi, siquis, qui, quid agam, forte requirat, erit*, "if [...] there shall be any there who still remembers me, any who may perchance ask how I fare", v. 17-18).

Space and time are differently inserted in Ovid's poem: time is redundant in a false letter like this one, in literary perspective, but space is even more important than normally is in common *epistulae*: geography is the ultimate reason of Ovid's pleading, he beseeches Augustus to allow him renounce the *terra remota* ("a land far removed from my own", v. 128). Significantly, the notation regarding the place is included in the final line of

the *Tristia* 1.1, exactly where we would expect to find it in a common letter.

Dimensions of the letter (and, also, of the epistolary exchange) are a permanent concern in ancient texts. There are several facts that influence the dimensions of the *epistulae*: the sense of time, the general state of mind of the sender, his health, the content itself of the message and the relationship to the addressee. Generally speaking, the courier (*tabellarius*) is probably the element exterior to the letter that is most important in the epistolary exchange. Nevertheless, this element might be integrated, as interior element, when the letter itself is caused by the presence of a *tabellarius* (as frequently is the case in Cicero's *epistulae*). By contrary, the absence of a *tabellarius* might result in non-writing a letter.

Preoccupied to let his letter travel safely, Ovid decides to shorten the message, at least by the end: *plura quidem mandare tibi, si quaeris, habebam, sed uereor tardae causa fuisse morae* ("more direction for you, if you ask me, I have been keeping, but I fear to be the cause of lingering delay", v. 123-124); *si [...] omnia ferres, sarcina laturo magna futures eras* ("if you were to carry [...] all that occurs to me, 'tis likely you would be a heavy burden to him who shall bear you", v. 125-126).

This Ovidian letter is meant to speak alone, not needing the augmentation of a voice; nevertheless, there are to be noticed the reminiscences of the epistolographic *realia*. The courier might be any person that happens to travel to the addressee or to someone else who is able to assume the final delivery, or a professional courier, or one of the personal slaves – this being the best option, both as confidence and as a guarantee of authenticity. The importance of a courier is multiplied when entrusted with an oral message or an incomplete letter that has to be supplemented – with precise information or as answers to any of the receiver's questions. A *tabellarius* is sometimes sent in order to bring back an answer or, in an extreme situation, only for bringing a message, in a reverse distribution of the roles between sender and receiver.

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All the elements connected to author's fear over the fate of his letter, its journey toward the addressee, evil facts and persons that might interfere, are transferred in Ovid's poem to the *liber* itself.

The fear over a lost letter seems to have two main sources: the first one is common and hardly needs any comment (no matter the importance of its content, a sent letter is supposed to reach its addressee, to fulfil its mission, either as giving/asking information or as a gift, *epistula-donum*). The other source is in perceptible contradiction to the actual status of ancient letters: even when written (as frequently happened) in order to be read by different persons, besides the addressee, the letters generate an obsessive fear over their loss. The route a letter was supposed to take was precise: from author to the addressee, who is entitled to lend it, cite it, comment, copy or give it to be copied to a different person or persons. All these acts are allowed to the owner, *id est* the receiver – with only one exception: the letters that had an *expressis uerbis* interdiction of being circulated. The letter whose content was confidential entered the same category.

The perils that Ovid's letter was about to encounter were mostly in Rome and came from the other works of the same author, so that are fraternal perils: *caue, liber, et timida circumspice mente* ("be careful, my book, and look all around with timid heart", v.87). More than that, the letter itself might become a peril to his author: *deque tribus, moneo, si qua est tibi cura aprentis, ne quemquam, quamuis ipse docebit, ames* ("and I warn you, if you have any regard for your father, love not any one of the three, though he himself teach you", v. 115-116).

Ovid is not concerned over the vanishing of his letter/poem, but over a possible fading of its content, a misunderstanding of the words he wrote with a precise meaning, to a precise (although not explicitly mentioned) addressee.

One fear is not present in Ovid's poem/letter: fear of his letter to be forged. The forged letters are a reality of epistolary exchange. There are

several particular instances of forgery that hardly fit the pattern. Some forgeries were announced to the person that was the alleged author (Cicero, *Att.*, 6.6.4), or even the “author” requested falsifying his own letters (Cicero, *Att.*, 3.15.8; 3.21.1; 11.3.3; 11.5.3; 11.7.7; 11.12.4). The intrinsic signature is clearly stated by Ovid, better than in any real letter: *ut titulo careas, ipso noscere colore* (“though you should lack a title, your very style will bring recognition”, v. 61); *nec te, quod uenias magnam peregrinus in urbem, ignotum populo posse uenire puta* (“and think not, because you enter into the great city as one from foreign lands, that you can come as a stranger to the people”, v. 59-60).

Ovid’s opening poem of *Tristia* collection is a beseeching for his absolution; as a literary piece of work, the text is charming and perfectly articulated. Most of its coherence proceeds from the enactment of an authentic epistolary construction: reading *Tristia* 1.1 as a letter multiplies the literary beauty of the poem (that was, all the same, ineffective for its exiled author).

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NOTES

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- ¹ The line opens a graceful insinuation: *contingam certe quo licet illa pede*, "I will tread them at least with what foot I may", v. 16: the poetic (*id est* metrical) ability allows Ovid a virtual presence in a forbidden place.
- ² The *epistulae* of Cicero and Seneca do not lack the introductory *formulae*, in a complete monotony, but remains the unceasing doubt over fidelity of the scribes toward their models.

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