

An “Ikon of the Soul”: the Byzantine Letter

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Byzantine epistolographic concepts are a natural development of the concepts of classical antiquity, and especially of the Second Sophistic, that were adapted to fit the requirements of Christian ontology. The surviving letters were intended not always to convey information, for which the courier or “living letter” was often responsible, but usually to fulfil the obligations and genuine needs of friendship and to serve as much prized pieces of literary art in their own right. In the one case the letter was deemed an “ikon of the soul,” creating an illusion of the presence of the writer and thereby demanding tokens of his individual characteristics. In the other it was required to be original within the strict framework imposed by the imitation of ancient models; and by adherence to changing stylistic canons it came both to foster obscurity and to embrace subject-matter not commonly associated with the letter.

Surviving Byzantine letters are almost entirely the productions of a small segment of Byzantine society, the upper-class intelligentsia, that were deemed worthy of preservation by sender or recipient: unlike Graeco-Roman Egypt, Byzantium was not permitted by nature to bequeathe to us its refuse tips of ephemeral communication. Other limitations on the study of Byzantine epistolography are merely temporary: many letters remain still unread in manuscript, many published texts are poorly executed, most annotated editions scarcely merit the description. Furthermore, Byzantine letters have been used chiefly as source material by historians political, military, theological, and ecclesiastical, while only recently has any attempt been made to analyse them in accordance with Byzantine criteria. Consequently, any survey written in our generation must of necessity be to some degree provisional.¹

The term “Byzantine” is notoriously hard to define. For present purposes it is taken to refer to the East Roman Empire governed from Constantinople (or Nicaea) between 330 and 1453 AD. (The

earlier date involves no cultural discontinuity with the preceding age; it is simply a date of convenience, being the year when Constantine inaugurated the city as a second capital of the Empire. The latter is the year of the city's capture by the Osmanli Turks.) The main governmental language for a little more than the first two hundred years was Latin, but this is of scant literary importance in the East. Byzantine literature, largely through its adherence to an imitation of classical Attic Greek, exhibits a remarkable, though not of course total, homogeneity throughout its history. Its main stages are a period of great activity declining a little before and during the iconoclastic controversy (eighth and early ninth centuries) followed by a series of cultural revivals culminating in a splendid flowering during the Palaiologan age of the last two centuries. Nevertheless, the purpose of this survey is to examine not so much the changes that occurred in Byzantine epistolography, but the underlying concepts that remained true throughout its history. Examples will be drawn from the whole period and, whenever possible, from writers whose letters are accessible in translation. First, however, a brief sketch is required of the history of epistolography in the Greek and Roman worlds up to the fourth century AD.²

In the self-contained Greek city-states there was little need for written communication. Homer, it is true, had mysteriously alluded to a folded tablet bearing ill-omened signs signifying that the bearer was to be put to death (*Iliad* 6.168-170), and the Spartans made use of the skytale, a device that enabled the ephors to send a secret message to a Spartan king abroad,³ but communication was almost exclusively oral at this time. A form of letter that served as a vehicle for chiefly philosophical ideas developed during the fourth century and was partly responsible for the forgery of letters purporting to be of famous men that became popular in the last two centuries BC. Official correspondence became regular in the Hellenistic kingdoms and was greatly increased as the centralised authority of Rome reached ever more remote areas of the world.

Epistolography became the subject of professional interest to scholars such as Artemon, the editor of Aristotle's letters; epistolary characteristics were laid down in the treatise *On Style* by

a certain Demetrios (first century BC or AD?); and the Second Sophistic, a movement that began roughly in the age of Augustus and eventually merged with its Byzantine equivalent, encouraged the analysis and categorization of letters—by the fourth century AD 41 had been discovered, but the number was subsequently to rise to 113. This academic interest fostered the production of imaginary letters from mythological or historical personages, originally as exercises in style and ingenuity and later as examples of literary art in their own right (e.g., the verse epistles of love-lorn heroes and heroines of Ovid's *Heroides*). Later (second century AD) this latter category included letters in exquisite Greek ostensibly written by humble folk such as farmers, fishermen, parasites, and prostitutes.

Meanwhile Cicero had been engaging in his voluminous correspondence with the single aim of communicating ideas and news (it was carried by private couriers or friends going the right way: neither in the ancient world nor in the Byzantine was there any organized postal service for private mail, although abuse of the state courier system was not infrequent). In 44 BC Cicero expressed his intention of publishing a small selection of his letters that he judged worthy of wider dissemination. Although he did not live to carry out his plan, a much larger selection of his letters was subsequently published partly from the copies kept by his secretary Tiro and his brother Quintus. This led through emulation to the writing by others of private letters that were often intended for ultimate publication: those of the younger Pliny are the most famous classical examples. By the fourth century AD—under pressure of the risk, if not always the desire, of publication—letter-writing among the educated classes had become subject to conventions of style and even content. Moreover, it was now an obligation of friendship with the occasions when letters were required formally prescribed. This can well be seen in the letters of the Roman senator Symmachus, which may be regarded to some extent as “a museum of late Roman *amicitia* in all its complacency, with its affected rules of etiquette, its repetitive triviality.”⁴

One element remains to set the stage for Byzantium—the Christian. The Pauline Epistles, themselves in the tradition of the

classical epistolary exposition of (philosophical) ideas, had helped to keep the Church together and were now held as a major part of the divinely inspired scriptures, thereby elevating this particular literary form to a position that it had never enjoyed before. For three centuries other letters also had been a basic source of religious guidance and comfort to scattered communities, and now, as the Church in its successful struggle with paganism based its organisation upon that of the State, they remained vital. Now too the great Cappadocian Fathers—St Basil, his brother St Gregory of Nyssa, and his friend St Gregory of Nazianzos—with their splendid training in the thought and rhetoric of the Second Sophistic, made Christian literature respectable in the eyes of the educated and enabled the traditions of pagan epistolography to be continued in a fervently Christian society.

Virtually every Byzantine letter was intended to be a piece of literary art, to fulfil the obligations of friendship or to convey information. Most letters combined two or even all three functions, but the first was rarely absent (since, however, it was the main criterion for selecting letters for preservation, our surviving corpus cannot be truly representative). In addition, all letters, except sometimes those of officialdom, were believed to bear the impress of their authors' personalities. It will be most convenient, therefore, to examine the Byzantine letter under the broad headings of Artistry, Individuality, and Content.

Figure 1. Cod. Par. gr. 3041, fol. 5 verso. Paper. Early fifteenth century. The emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, in accordance with common practice, possessed his own copy of letters that he had himself sent, though it was, of course, actually penned by a scribe. In the folium illustrated can be seen substantial corrections in the emperor's own hand to a letter (*Ep.* 7) written to Nicholas Kabasilas during the siege of Thessaloniki (1383-1387). The second letter (*Ep.* 8), of approximately the same date, is one of many addressed to Manuel's old friend and mentor Demetrios Kydones. Contained in the same ms. is the emperor's *Dialogue on Marriage* which he personally corrected at length before taking the drastic step of stroking it out entirely.

I. Artistry

1. *Emphasis upon Beauty*

One of the commonest features of Byzantine letters is lavish praise of a correspondent's literary style and doubts of the competence of the writer to match its elegance that are couched in such exquisite language as to elicit similar eulogies.⁵ (The most famous example of such complimentary rivalry is the interchange between Basil and Libanios, his sometime teacher and renowned pagan sophist of Antioch.⁶) The key epithets used to describe epistolary productions are "beautiful," "sweet," "lovely," and "graceful," but more revealing are the supplementary metaphors of feasts, honey, fragrant flowers of divers hues, melodious birds, the bewitching song of the Sirens, and the collaboration of the Muses, all of which allow of elegant elaboration.

Collections were made of these pearls of beauty. In a letter of the Palaiologan era Joseph Bryennios (*Ep.* 2) describes, doubtless with exaggeration, the situation in early Byzantium: "Whenever they sent or received letters, the senders, before giving them into the hands of the bearer, would write them down in a book . . . and the recipients would immediately . . . show them to men of literary interests. The recipients would be the first to repeat them by heart and write them on their own writing-tablets; those who in turn got them from the recipients would themselves too write them down . . . and repeating them by heart as show-pieces would let fall from their lips these useful things . . . at every kind of gathering. For this reason the recipient was admired for being a friend of such a great man, the writer was applauded and praised as an orator. . . ." Libanios is witness to the fact that Basil's letters to him were read out to admiring friends and applauded (Basil,

Figure 2. Cod. Par. gr. 3041, fol. 32 verso. Illustrated here, from the same ms. as Figure 1, is a folium containing the bulk of Manuel's letter (*Ep.* 52), again personally corrected, to Gabriel, Metropolitan of Thessaloniki, in which he discourses on his and his contemporaries need to write even though they cannot hope to attain the style of the ancients (see above. The whole letter is translated in J. W. Barker, *Manuel II Palaeologus: a Study in Late Byzantine Statesmanship*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1969, pp. 422sq.). The origin of the mysterious doodle of a drawn bow and arrow is unknown. Secular letters did not merit the attention of the Byzantine illuminator: indeed, with very few exceptions (mainly histories) only sacred books gained this distinction.

Epp. 338, 340), and in Bryennios' own day the emperor Manuel II often complimented his correspondents upon the applause their letters had caused, for their charm alone, when read before himself and his literary friends (*Epp.* 9, 24, 27, 32, 34, 44, 61). Such a circle was often called a "theatron."

A writer would have had little control over the collections of his letters made by friends or admirers, but he frequently made a careful choice of letters for his own collection. Figure 1 shows evidence of Manuel II's proof-reading of the copy of his selected letters written by his scribe; and Figure 3 shows evidence of an alteration made years later by Nikephoros Gregoras to a letter in his own collection when his quarrels had reached a more advanced stage. Scholarly readers sometimes added marginal annotations, as can be seen in Figure 4 showing a manuscript dating from the late ninth or early tenth century, one of our earliest of any Byzantine letter-writer. This example is striking also for its emphasis upon visual beauty both in the hand of the text and in the arrangement of the contemporary notes. Calligraphy was held in some esteem at this period, but later mss. were often abominably written by scribes quite immune to any influence of Persian aesthetics. Marginal annotations on letters are fairly infrequent, although John Tzetzes (twelfth century) went so far as to write verse commentaries on his own letters.

2. *Rhetoric*

To the Byzantines ingenuous naïveté could have no possible claim to literary beauty; this was realized exclusively through the studied art of rhetoric based upon the principles of the Second Sophistic. Some Christian letter-writers did indeed pretend

Figure 3. Cod. Vat. gr. 1086, fol. 151 recto. Paper. Fourteenth century. The folium shows part of a letter of Nikephoros Gregoras to Demetrios Kabasilas from the author's own ms. written for him by a scribe. The interesting feature is the substitution of two lines written by Gregoras himself on a strip of paper glued over the original. It almost certainly represents an attempt by Gregoras to make his remarks relevant to the altered situation of his complicated quarrels. The original letter was probably written in the 1330's, while the "correction" cannot have been made before 1351. See further I. Ševčenko, "Some Autographs of Nikephoros Gregoras," *Zbornik Radova*, 8.2 (1964), 444-446.

ignorance. Even Basil protested to Libanios that he had forgotten what little he may have learned from him—but this in a letter (*Ep.* 339) that not only won the approbation of the sophist and his friends but in which Basil confessed his failure to find any stylistic errors in the other’s letter, the self-confessed ignoramus competent to judge the master! (Basil’s brother Gregory of Nyssa was equally modest but more honest [*Ep.* 13] in telling Libanios that though he had learned from him only through Basil, the water in his buckets, scanty as it was, “is yet from the Nile.”) The pretence can be easily explained: it accords with Christian humility, the Christian content must be given preference to the vehicle, and the stylistic hall-mark of the New Testament is, at best, simplicity. But, as Isidore of Pelusium claimed in a letter (5.281), “The language of the divine wisdom is pedestrian, but its thoughts reach to heaven; the style of pagan knowledge is resplendent, but its matter is lowly. If one could have the thought of the one and the style of the other one would rightly be judged most wise, for sweetness of tongue can be an instrument of the supramundane wisdom.” Christian adoption of pagan rhetoric was made possible by the desire to render Christian literature “respectable,” by the natural Greek love of rhetoric and, as G. L. Kustas points out, by the widening of the concept of simplicity in the Second Sophistic to embrace the work of Plato that thus “in effect gave a handle to generations of Christian writers who, though embarrassed by the simple style of the New Testament, could escape their dilemma by emulating the classical Platonic model, which now shared a common definition with the language of the Gospel.”⁷

Figure 4. Cod. Barocc. 217, fol. 217 verso. Parchment. Late ninth or early tenth century. This ms. of the letters of Photios is perhaps contemporary with the patriarch. Scattered through it are marginal annotations that could conceivably emanate from Photios himself. Those on the illustrated folium indicate allusions to Demosthenes and Thucydides. The text is in somewhat archaic miniscule, the annotations in either miniscule or, as here, basically uncial. Other illustrations of this ms. are given by B. Laourdas, who edited the annotations, in *Athens*, 55 (1951), 125-154; N. G. Wilson in *Mediaeval Greek Bookhands* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Mediaeval Academy of America, 1973), plate 15; and in *Greek Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library: an Exhibition held in Connection with the XIII International Congress of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 1966), plate III.

Nobody denies Byzantine literature's dependence upon rhetoric, but critics differ in interpretation of that dependence. The common view is that "the paralyzing grip of Hellenistic rhetoric was a strait-jacket which held fast its prisoner in a state of mental retardation."⁸ A more sympathetic, sensitive (and correct) view is that of Kustas, whose work is based upon "the conviction that Byzantium bestowed upon the art of rhetoric an authority to define its intellectual and spiritual vision which is without parallel in the history of literate societies. Rhetoric did not simply provide the machinery of literary endeavor; it was a key element of the Byzantine *Weltanschauung*. It gave formal structure through the logos to the fundamental characteristics and innermost aspirations of the Byzantine Christian mind. More than a habit of literature, it was an expression of life. Better still, it might be both at once, for it held out a special way of looking at words and how they work which rested ultimately on the claims of Christian ontology. Its fortunes, describing yet another instance of that effort toward synthesis which is the hallmark of the Byzantine achievement as a whole, can therefore best be understood in relation to the trends of Byzantine culture itself."⁹ Kustas' work is of fundamental importance in our appreciation of virtually any Byzantine text written in the "high" language (see below). The subject is too vast for discussion here: the simple statement must suffice that Byzantine literature is the lineal successor of the rhetoric of the Second Sophistic (and in particular of the principles laid down in the second century by Hermogenes of Tarsos) that was understood through and shaped by certain concepts of Neo-Platonism and Christianity.

But what rules did rhetoric lay down specifically for the letter? First, the letter should afford "glimpses of character," a subject that merits separate treatment (below). Second, it should be neither too long nor too short (Byzantine letters sometimes erred in both directions, but the "rule" remained a pervasive pre-occupation, despite the sensible comment of Gregory of Nazianzos [*Ep.* 51] that subject-matter should dictate length). Third, not every topic was held suitable, a limitation originally aimed at preventing letters from becoming treatises but later, under the concept of the letter as a piece of literary art, directed against the

inclusion of ephemeral facts and distressing news (this again could be broken but remained a preoccupation¹⁰). Fourth, the letter, being half a dialogue, should be graceful but simple and plain, a “rule” whose fate must be examined more closely.

3. *Obscurity*

Not only should a letter be simple and plain, but Aristotle had laid down that the chief virtue of any style was clarity. Most letters written before the iconoclastic period bear at least traces of this doctrine, but from the literary revival in the ninth century the majority of letters are of great verbal complexity and often obscurity. Even a Byzantine did not always understand his correspondent: Symeon Metaphrastes claimed (*Ep.* 94) that he could not understand a bishop who, if he intended to be obscure, had certainly succeeded; and our ms. of the “Letter to the Amir at Damascus” of the famous scholarly archbishop of Caesarea Arethas (vol. 1, no. 26) preserves the scribe’s marginal annotation to the effect that it was written “in everyday language so that the Saracens could understand it.” How can this change be explained?

The letter was traditionally and naturally regarded as comparable with the dialogue, and hence was expected to approximate conversational Greek. But since the Byzantines spoke and wrote two increasingly distinct languages, the written (“high”) one being an approximation of classical Attic, the automatic check on non-conversational idiom was removed. Moreover, those capable of writing Attic well were an exclusive minority, and exclusive minorities are prone to have modes of expression (and Byzantine epistolographic obscurity is primarily one of expression rather than one of thought) that are peculiar and often intelligible only to themselves for the very purpose, conscious or not, of preserving that exclusiveness. Indeed Arethas, in a short, bellicose and arrogant tract entitled “To Those Who Have Accused Us of Obscurity, in Which We Discuss also the Forms of Style We Use” (vol. 1, no. 17), accuses his detractors of ignorance. Allied to all this was the natural competitive tendency, that never lies far below the surface of Greek or Byzantine, that urged him to seek ingenious variations of his own within the accepted contours of expression. This inevitably led to obfuscation of meaning.

Christianity too had its effect. In the early centuries it had served as a check on flights of grand rhetoric through the influence of the New Testament's verbal simplicity, in which believers had perforce to take pride, and the necessity for expounding the faith, often by letter, to those without a clear knowledge of it. These reasons, however, disappeared when the New Testament was placed under the same stylistic headings as Plato's dialogues and when virtually every child was brought up in an understanding of the faith. Christianity now began to exert a quite contrary pressure. The Trinitarian and Christological disputes may have sharpened wits, but they hardly fostered clarity, and in addition Christianity began to develop "the principle that obscurity was a mystical means of expressing divine truth,"¹¹ a principle that is in fact common to all religions of initiation and that was not subject in Byzantium to the customary check of secular education since theology so thoroughly permeated intellectual thought. Since the whole cosmos was held to be the work of God, and since the synthesis of rhetorical styles and of literary distinctions between genres, already noticeable in the Second Sophistic, was promoted by this same Christian emphasis upon the unity of things, the Byzantine letter-writer could henceforth on any topic indulge his predilection for the grandeur of obscurity, under whose spell some of his classical forefathers had also fallen. Moreover, grandeur was increasingly promoted by rhetoric as the principal stylistic virtue.

One aspect of obscurity to which the above remarks do not apply is diplomatic obscurity, practised seriously and expressly for utilitarian purposes. Mention should be made here, despite its aspects of frivolity, of one of the strangest exchanges of notes in diplomatic history.¹² This was between the Byzantine ambassador Leon Choïrosphaktes and the Bulgar khan Symeon, who had been

Figure 5. Cod. Barocc. 131, fol. 106 verso. Oriental paper. Thirteenth century. The folium shows the major part of a letter (*Ep.* 1) of Michael Choniates, Archbishop of Athens, to his brother, the historian Niketas. This copy may have been written during the time of the Nicaean Empire. It frequently happened that miscellaneous works of different hands were ultimately bound up in a single volume. Examples of the five principal hands of this ms. are illustrated by Wilson, *op. cit.* (n. on Figure 4), nos. 58-62, who promised a description of the whole ms. in the *Bodleian Library Record*.

educated at Constantinople and now in a game with the hapless envoy proved his scholarly aptitude. The stakes of the game were the possession of certain Byzantine prisoners and the rules were the manipulation of punctuation that allowed differing interpretations of the khan's intentions.

4. *Imitation of Classical Models*

The problem of imitation exercised antiquity for, as the lyric poet Bacchylides sang (fr. 5 Maehler), "As of old so now, one poet is heir to another (for it is not easy) to find the gates of virginal songs." By the time of the Second Sophistic the classical view that a writer should benefit from and improve upon his predecessors had given way to a greater dependence. "Longinos" claimed (*On the Sublime*, 13.2) that imitation was "like taking an impression from . . . moulded figures or other works of art" and was (ibid. 13.4) "a second path to sublimity." The Byzantines eagerly accepted this doctrine,¹³ especially in and after the classical revival of the ninth century by which time the works of the early Church Fathers were being accepted into the canon of classical literature. Moreover, they accepted the doctrine almost entirely without a spirit of emulation, as is well illustrated in a letter of Manuel II (*Ep.* 52; Figure 2), "If someone would legislate that the lesser should be silent because of the greater, no modern, I believe, would dare to open his mouth on account of the vast superiority of the ancients." Horrified, he goes on to add revealingly, "but that would be appalling."

The most striking aspect of this imitation is the very language, a language of Attic diction and grammar divorced from the demotic of quotidian oral communication (imitation of diction extended even to anachronistic geographical and ethnic nomenclature). *Topoi*, style and even phraseology were also zealously imitated with the help of rhetorical hand-books, formularies, and florilegia. Joseph Bryennios described (*Ep.* 2) letter-writers as men

Figure 6. Cod. Barocc. 25, fol. 293 recto. Paper. Early fourteenth century. A damaged—but the sole surviving—witness, written in a minute and scholarly hand, of an elaborate covering-letter in the form of an essay on the symbolism of the apple that accompanied a gift of the fruit from John Geometres, a poet of the tenth century.

who “had a love of learning, a love of beauty and a love of each other,” by which he referred simply to letters of friendship that were artistic through the imitation of classical models.

We must, however, qualify this seemingly complete, arid, and unthinking dependence. First, classical subject-matter was rarely treated *in extenso*, as is so common in modern European literature. Second, quotations and allusions, however numerous, were usually perfectly apposite—the patriarch Nikolaos Mystikos on one occasion (*Ep.* 25) criticized the Bulgar khan Symeon for adducing a faulty biblical parallel. Third, it is becoming increasingly evident that many Byzantines, despite their access to florilegia, remembered many quotations from their own reading. In a recent collection of 384 letters by various authors of the tenth century¹⁴ there are 232 quotations of which repetition accounts for only 16. Personal florilegia could, of course, be made and Gregory of Nyssa complimented Libanios (*Ep.* 14) on a letter of his that was used for this purpose. We must not, however, underestimate the retentive powers of men who personally possessed few books—and those without indexes (the most celebrated exhibition of memory is that of the fourth-century sophist Proharesios for whom two opponents chose a difficult and indecorous topic for an impromptu oration: after a brilliant performance Proharesios asked the short-hand scribes to check him as he repeated his speech¹⁵). Fourth, and most important, as a sixth-century writer on imitation claimed,¹⁶

Figure 7. Bodl. ms. gr. misc. e. 4, foll. 2 verso and 3 rect. Paper, Fifteenth century. Fol. 2 verso shows the conclusion of a fragmentary letter of Manuel Chrysoloras to the Florentine chancellor Coluccio Salutati in answer to a request for information on Greek breathings. Fol. 3 recto shows the beginning of a second letter from Chrysoloras to Salutati. Chrysoloras, sent as an envoy to Italy by Manuel II in 1396, was appointed Professor of Greek at the University of Florence and through the enthusiasm of his students was largely responsible for the spread of Greek studies in Italy, (see G. Cammelli, *I Dotti Bizantini e le Origini dell'Umanesimo*, vol. I, *Manuele Crisolare* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1941). Leaves of manuscripts sometimes became separated from each other: the ten leaves at Oxford were originally part of a ms. now at Naples that contained further letters of Chrysoloras (see B. L. Ullman, *Studies in the Italian Renaissance* (Rome: Storia e Letteratura, vol. 51, 1955), pp. 279-283.

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“it is possible both to preserve one’s own nature and to emulate an ancient model” if one perceives and cultivates one’s natural bent while studying and imitating a kindred model. Byzantine literature is permeated through and through by the attempt to be original within the strict framework of the imitative tradition.

II. Individuality

Demetrios’ natural observation (*On Style*, 227) that everybody shows the image of his own soul in his letters became enshrined as rhetorical dogma in the second century AD, by which time the letter had been officially classified under the heading “Delineation of Character.” G. Karlsson has recently done some valuable work (op. cit., n. 5) on tracing the resultant and concatenate concepts of the letter as an ikon of the soul, as a creator of the illusion of the writer’s presence and as a vehicle for the mystical union of friends’ souls. The former two in particular occur in early Byzantine writers both pagan (Julian and Libanios) and Christian (Basil, Gregory of Nazianzos, John Chrysostomos, Synesios, etc.), the latter of whom were doubtless encouraged by St. Paul’s remark (1 *Cor.* 5.3) that through a letter he could be present in spirit though absent in body. The concepts were never forgotten and from the time of Theodore the Studite (eighth to ninth centuries) they were used with great frequency and elaboration. A typical example may be cited from a letter of the tenth century,¹⁷ “Nature has devised letters as some sort of comfort and consolation for friends who are separated, since they offer, when we read them, an illusion of the presence of our loved ones, and almost produce the bodily presence of what our mind desires. For this reason the man who called letters ‘ikons of the absent’ was perhaps right, since he who reads a letter sent by a friend has at the very moment of receiving and opening it filled his yearning soul with unsullied joy, because of the appearance that he is engaging in converse with his friend.” It is true that the letter was sometimes held to be a “second best” and a request was made for “the prototype of the image,” but Michael Psellos actually claimed¹⁸ that he took more pleasure in letters than in conversation on the ground that the former are more revealing of character.

Our conceits, fostered by both rhetorical theory and the Eastern Church's conviction of the distinctiveness of the individual,¹⁹ accord ill with the prevailing modern criticism of Byzantine letters as impersonal documents. Are these conceits merely a literary tradition or a rhetorical statement of fact? The question deserves some consideration. We could attempt to resolve it by assessing the characters of letter-writers on the basis of their letters, a lengthy procedure vitiated by the subjectivity of the assessment and the writers' desire to project a *persona* (this, I believe, is not as serious a problem with the Byzantines as is often thought). A more profitable method may be to compare the reactions of different men to similar situations, as shown, for instance, in the letters addressed to emperors by men in prison or awaiting trial. To reduce the external variables here are typical extracts from the letters of two men sent to the same emperor, Leo VI (886-912).

Arethas, after thanking his emperor in one letter (vol. 2, no. 72) for not abusing his power but summoning him to trial, claimed that the charge had already been denounced by the bishops as calumnious. He reviewed the history of the case in which at his former trial he had been most distressed by the emperor who had sent a slanderer to the public stables to collect false evidence. He then concluded, "But should wrong triumph over me, should justice have no strength, and give my blood to my enemies to drink, I shall find that tribunal where there is no respect of persons, no shrinking before the mighty, and your Majesty—well I know it—will repent in this case too, as you have regretted other attacks made on me at the instigation of wicked and vain minds . . . and the present proceedings will be reckoned by us and by everyone else childishness, a thing built on sand."²⁰

In contrast is Leon Choiosphaktes, in prison and admittedly suffering more than Arethas, to the same emperor (*Ep.* 22), "Receive, Your Majesty, receive and receive favourably my prayer! Save me, save me alive! . . . Do you not pity my numerous tears frequently flowing? Does not my unkempt hair move you to sympathy? Nor the fact that I have more lice than Kallisthenes? Nor that I am more shrivelled up than Zeno? Nor that through lack of exercise I have dropsy as bad as Philoktetes? Nor that I have lost my salary for so many years? . . ."

Men under duress are apt to reveal their personalities. A severer test must be found. Father G. T. Dennis recently compared²¹ the average Byzantine letter with "the modern, mass-produced greeting card." The closest parallel is actually between the modern card of sympathy and the Byzantine letter of condolence, that are both of necessity heavily dependent upon paramythetic topoi. It is generally conceded that the numerous such letters of the early centuries reveal not only traits of the personalities of their writers but also adaptations to fit the requirements of the recipients, as in many of Theodoret²² and Basil, two of whose letters (*Epp.* 5 sq.) are addressed separately to a father and mother who have lost a son (another good example of such a letter that takes the personality of the recipient into account is *Ep.* 69 of Julian). Does the supposedly more mechanical literature of later centuries afford any parallels to this individuality and sensitivity?

From the tenth century there are three consolatory letters by Nicholas Mystikos who, as patriarch, must have had plenty of practice in this sphere. Yet of one of these letters there exist two versions (*Ep.* 47I and II) that illustrate the patriarch's difficulty in finding the right tone. The first contains a lengthy lamentation on the bitter event that robbed the patriarch of voice, hearing, and even reasoning powers; and it is unfinished. The second is considerably colder and more dignified, being basically a list of the traditional Christian arguments calculated to solace the bereaved. *Ep.* 156 is a hard-hitting exhortation to the emperor Romanos II to put aside his grief for his wife and not be sullen or complain. *Ep.* 46 is addressed to the new king of Abasgia whose father has recently died—it is simply a note of diplomatic sympathy far removed from Nicholas' other efforts. From the same century there are further letters of consolation. One is a beautifully composed note²³ by an anonymous writer to a friend who was brought on a gentle but firm rein from helpless despair, with tears openly encouraged, through bitter-sweet memories to a manly resolve that is forged by his mother's noble end and is perhaps also for her sake. A more highly-flown consolation is that of Philetos of Synada (*Ep.* 4), notable for its emphasis upon the tragedy of his friend's loss. This is not atypical and is probably not, as is often assumed, a triumph of rhetoric over sensibilities as much as an intuitive

understanding of the psychological need for a brief surrender to grief as a means of overcoming it. Notable also in this letter, and again not atypical, is how the first and second persons singular eventually coalesce into a united first person plural. In stark contrast is a blunt letter from Arethas (vol. 1, no. 22), who has little time for sentiment. He gives scriptural and classical authorities for the belief in the superior and blessed state of death and demands that the recipient refrain from lamentation: we can but hope that he knew his man.

Brief mention must be made of one final letter of condolence, written with tongue in cheek by Nikephoros Gregoras (*Ep.* 129) to console a young friend over his beautiful young wife, only just married and already unfaithful.

III. Content

1. *Letters Conveying Information*

Byzantine letters had a tendency to avoid concrete, factual information. Artistic requirements, as has been seen, dictated this tendency, but the rôle of the bearer must not be forgotten. Many letters were simply polite or artistic covering-notes for the real message. This was almost always the case with the innumerable letters of recommendation for young hopefuls who could recite their own qualifications, and often also the case, for security, with governmental as well as with much of private correspondence. The conceit of the bearer as "the living letter" obtains throughout Byzantine history and is solidly based upon actual practice.²⁴

This tendency, however, has been exaggerated. Not only are the surviving letters not truly representative, but also artistic requirements could effect the excision of factual sections from a letter when it was being copied.²⁵ Ecclesiastical history, including relations with the Papacy, is heavily dependent upon the letters of the often feuding hierarchy of the Church who discuss also pastoral affairs, theology, and heresies (our earliest knowledge of Bogomilism comes from a lengthy letter on the subject in the name of the patriarch Theophylact). Political and diplomatic history too would be far more scanty and uncertain without these letters, while social history, as least of the upper classes, is largely dependent upon the correspondence of emperors (including Theo-

dore Laskaris who ruled from Nicaea), court and church officials, and scholars like Psellos, Tzetzes, Planudes, and Demetrios Kydones. For the middle and lower classes, however, we are more dependent upon Saints' Lives, although some letters are of help such as those of certain patriarchs, like Athanasios I, solicitous for the welfare of their flocks. Especial mention should be made of the rather different correspondence of "Anonymus Londinensis," a well educated school-teacher of the tenth century whose methods and tribulations contribute to our picture of everyday life in a Byzantine school.

2. *Literary Essays, etc.*

Although Aristainetos (sixth century?) and the chronicler Theophylact Simokatta (seventh century) continued the classical practice of composing imaginary letters from courtesans and the like and John Chortasmenos actually answered some letters of Libanios written over a thousand years earlier, almost all Byzantine letters were addressed and sent to real and contemporary figures. Nevertheless, there were three types of letter that would hardly be so classed to-day. The first two are those, usually from spiritual or ecclesiastical figures like Basil or Photios, that are virtually indistinguishable from a homily²⁶ or a treatise. The former was descended from the Pauline epistles and the latter was a more direct survival, despite the warning of Demetrios (*On Style*, 228), from the letters of the philosophical schools, but each influenced the other. The third type is rather different.

Description has always had a valid though inessential rôle to play in a letter. Basil once gave a masterly portrait of the ascetic monk:²⁷ "You made your sides hollow by your deprivations, so that they hung flabby even round to the back; and you declined the use of a soft waist-band, but drawing your flanks in tightly, like a gourd, you forced them tight against the region of the kidneys. You rid your flesh of all its fat, nobly drained the channels of your abdomen dry, and by compressing your stomach itself with fastings, you caused your outstanding ribs, like the eaves of a house, to cast a shadow upon the region of your navel. . . ." This had legitimate purpose—to remind a monk now fallen into adultery of the beauties of his former mode of life accurately portrayed. On the

other hand in a letter to Gregory of Nazianzos (*Ep.* 14) a description of the lovely place that he had chosen for his retreat, though based upon reality, owes much to the classical tradition of the ekphrasis of an ideal landscape, complete with pagan mythological allusions. It is a small step from such a letter to one devoted solely to a description and bereft of the customary opening and closing epistolary formulae, especially when it is borne in mind that the letter was commonly regarded as a gift in its own right²⁸ and that in rhetorical theory the ekphrasis and the letter had strong stylistic connexions. Good examples of this extreme form are given by the poet John Geometres who wrote two prose, but often quite poetic, descriptions of his own garden to a friend that are very dependent upon the fused tradition of romantic and eschatological paradises. He wrote also three prose encomia of the apple (see Figure 6), ostensibly covering-letters for gifts of apples that were in effect the excuse for the real gift of these elaborate letters. In one of these he discoursed interestingly on the symbolism, especially the erotic, of the fruit, drawing upon his wide knowledge of classical literature; and in another he continued this theme and expatiated upon the pronunciation of the word for apple before entering the realms of neo-Pythagorean numerology and Trinitarian metaphysics to explain at length his choice of six apples. The first of these covering-letters, in praise of the tree rather than the fruit, gives a further indication of the scope of the epistolary genre in Byzantium. It is based chiefly upon an earlier work (sometimes and probably falsely attributed to Libanios) whose arguments Geometres neatly adapted or reversed; but it opens with a piece of sheer sophistry designed to force an Homeric passage to give primacy to the apple in emulation of a similar covering-letter for a present of figs (in the corpus of Julian but almost certainly spurious) that extracted primacy for its fruit from the same Homeric passage. Full appreciation of Geometres' effort can be gained only with the knowledge of his worsted rivals; and with those he expected his reader(s) to be familiar, for he did not acknowledge his polished games. The letter concludes with a well told and elsewhere unattested little myth on the origin of the apple-tree.

3. *Letters of Friendship*

The vast majority of surviving letters was written by friends, not only to fulfil the obligations of friendship, not only to give aesthetic enjoyment to the immediate recipient and his literary circle, but to meet a real need. Letters, as ikons of the soul, served as a link between those physically sundered and served as emotional comfort, especially to a campaigning general or an ecclesiastic stationed in a remote cultural back-water (and after the Arab conquest few places outside Constantinople were believed to rise above that depressing state), or to one cut off for other reasons, like the lonely and insecure co-emperor Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos kept out of power by the great usurper Romanos I and touchingly grateful for the letters of his friend Theodore, the bishop of Cyzicus.

These letters may not appeal to every taste. Attempts at wit were few and far between, despite the efforts of a tenth-century bishop, Leon of Synada, four of whose letters (17-19, 21) describe a friend in abusive banter as the world's greatest nincompoop. Trivia were relegated to delivery by the bearer and intimate details were omitted completely as is indicated by the emperor Julian (*Ep.* 29), "I should not have objected if someone had made public everything that I ever wrote to my wife: it was all so restrained." But the Byzantines did consecrate much time and care to their letters of friendship, and their pains were worthwhile, as Symeon Metaphrastes bears witness (*Ep.* 89), "When your letter reached me these worries were dissipated like the shadows of dreams after awakening. When I got it into my hands I loosed its fastenings and immediately looked at its length, just as the thirsty gaze at the size of the cup before drinking; then, slowly, dwelling on every syllable, I read it, prolonging for myself the pleasure and desiring not to stop the cause of my pleasure until I was satisfied. . . ."

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2. A good survey is that of J. Sykutris, "Epistolographie" in *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Suppl. 5 (ed. A. F. Pauly, G. Wissowa, W. Kroll. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1931), pp. 185-220.

3. A message written on a strip of leather wound round a stick could be read by the recipient only with the help of an identical stick. Ancient descriptions are given by Plutarch, *Life of Lysander*, 19 and Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 17.9.

4. J. F. Matthews, "The Letters of Symmachus" in *Latin Literature of the Fourth Century*, ed. J. W. Binns (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974),

- p. 62. Matthews is at pains to show the limitations of this narrow view of these letters: much of what he says is relevant in general if not in particular to Byzantine epistolography.
5. For a discussion of this theme, see G. Karlsson, *Idéologie et Cérémoniale dans L'Épistolographie Byzantine* (2nd ed. rev.; Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 1962). Karlsson deals with the origin and development of certain epistolary concepts in letters of the tenth century.
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 8. R. J. H. Jenkins, "The Hellenistic Origins of Byzantine Literature," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 17 (1963), 52.
 9. See note 7, p. 1. The book is based upon two earlier articles whose value is not thereby obliterated: "The Literary Criticism of Photius: a Christian Definition of Style," *Hellenika*, 17 (1962), 132-169; and "The Function and Evolution of Byzantine Rhetoric," *Viator*, 1 (1970), 55-73.
 10. An interesting example is given by Manuel II who describes at length (in a series of letters to friends) his hardships during his vassalage to the Osmanli emir Bayazid I, but concludes one letter with the remark that they require rather an historian than a letter-writer (*Ep.* 19, to his old mentor Demetrios Kydones, a pro-Latin scholar and theologian and himself an inveterate letter-writer).
 11. Op. cit. (n. 7), p. 27. Kustas devotes a whole chapter (pp. 63-100) to "The Concept of Obscurity in Greek Literature."
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 19. On the influence of this, see Kustas, op. cit. (n. 7), pp. 27-62.
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 24. See Karlsson, pp. 17-19.
 25. A good example is given by Karlsson, pp. 16sq.
 26. For the close relationship between the homily and the letter, see Kustas, op. cit. (n. 7), pp. 43-48.
 27. *Ep.* 45 (Deferrari's translation).
 28. See Karlsson, pp. 112-117.