

A Companion to Byzantine Epistolography

Edited by

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The Epistolographic Self

Stratis Papaioannou

τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ὡς ἀπ' ἄλλου¹



1 The Premises

1.1 *Rhetoric and the Self*

Due to the available evidence, letter-writing in Byzantium has been studied, primarily and justifiably so, as a genre that belonged to the wider rhetorical tradition and thus to the literary discourse of the learned, cultural, and often social elite.² In approaching the question of the epistolographic self, we must thus begin with an understanding of what rhetoric was in Byzantium and what kinds of “self” – understood here as discursive subjectivity – it promoted.³

From linguistic and anthropological perspectives, rhetoric – to put it here as briefly as possible – was a distinct mode of communication, based on a codified and markedly learned register of language; as such, it defined writing as well as oral performance for specific private and public settings, included a set of expectations pertaining to form, and promoted a series of character-types / literary personae pertaining to content. Training in these types of style and model “selves” was inculcated through the study and imitation of ancient, early Byzantine, and a few middle Byzantine exemplary authors – from Demosthenes to Gregory of Nazianzos and, in later centuries, from Symeon Metaphrastes to Michael Psellos. Simultaneously, competence in rhetoric was judged by one’s ability not only to imitate these models, but also to establish

1 Gregory of Cyprus, *Letters*, no. 48, ed. Eustratiades, p. 197.

2 See, e.g., the list of letter-writers reviewed in Grünbart, *Formen der Anrede*, pp. 15–27. Most of these authors’ letters usually survive in manuscripts that either contain each individual writer’s rhetorical production or join together letter-collections and other similarly learned works by a variety of writers for the purposes of (primarily) rhetorical education.

3 For discursive subjectivity, namely the web of personal emotions, experiences, relations, and views as expressed and constructed through language, see, e.g., Schrag, *The Self*, pp. 11–41.

one's unique talent. Rhetoric was thus bound by the emphasis on tradition and literary canon in theory, as well as the necessity to distinguish oneself in practice.

This tension between norm and individuality was further accentuated by the sociological placement of rhetoric, which presupposed a competitive arena. For, while the layers of learnedness were potentially infinite, access to them was limited to those with sufficient economic or social capital – money as well as personal connections – that would allow them to acquire advanced literacy. A constant effect of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion was therefore produced: inclusion for those who could prove their competence in rhetorical learnedness, and exclusion for those who could not.

As such, a seminal consequence of rhetoric for whoever engaged with it, either as listener/reader or, especially, as speaker/writer, was that he or (more rarely) she was immediately put in the spotlight. This was a discursive practice that was predicated upon an accentuated self-awareness and self-display: the heightened need to show to others that you belong to an exclusive group by following its norms, but also that you can excel and differ by your own skill, talent, and individual voice.⁴

1.2 *Letter-Writing*

If we approach Byzantine rhetoric in this light, then like all other rhetorical genres – such as orations, rhetorical storytelling (in hagiography, historiography, etc.), and high-style poetry, to name the most important – letter-writing too presented writers and readers with a field for self-awareness and self-display, where the ability to both belong and differ was regularly exhibited. Indeed, of all rhetorical genres, epistolography was regarded, at least from a theoretical perspective, as we shall see below, as particularly self-referential since it operated under the expectation of authenticity and intimacy in private correspondence. This was the case even if letters were often read by circles of readers that exceeded the original addressee, whether during the initial context of a letter's circulation, or, especially, when a letter was deemed worthy of being included in a manuscript that collected the literary production of a writer.

Selves, whether real or imagined, displayed or craftily hidden, thus proliferate in Byzantine letters. We encounter multiple expressions of emotion as well as snippets of autobiographical narrative. We also find multiple demonstrations of high rhetorical skill that could establish the advanced cultural profile of a writer, but which also often turn self-disclosure to literary 'impersonation'.

⁴ This chapter builds on Papaioannou, "Letter-writing", "Byzantine Mirrors", *Michael Psellos*, and *Μιχαήλ Ψελλός* where there is also further relevant bibliography.

1.3 *A Self-Centered Genre? The Constraints*

Self-centeredness was indeed a seminal feature of letter-writing. Still, it would be a mistake to consider Byzantine epistolography as a genre focused exclusively on the self, either one's public image or one's inner life, even if we modern readers are almost by default accustomed to approach epistolography as a type of writing fixated with the self.⁵ We should not forget that the primary purpose of actual letters in Byzantium was, after all, to establish contact between two people separated by physical distance and to communicate whatever immediate need, concern, request, etc. that pertained to matters of everyday life. As is evident from the overwhelming majority of the many non-literary and non-rhetorical letters that survive in papyrus fragments from late antiquity, and which we can consider, *mutatis mutandis*, as representative of letter-writing as it was practiced on a daily basis throughout the Byzantine period, written communication first and foremost served practical needs. This is a written world where both introspection and literariness recede into the background behind greetings, inquiries, instructions, complaints, recommendations, wishes, and so on and so forth.⁶

Even if “published” letter-collections – namely those containing usually rhetorically informed letters that were deemed worthy to be copied into a manuscript and be read by wider and, eventually, future circles of readers – were partially stripped of the everydayness and utilitarian nature of the original missives, these features still pervade the letters and letter-collections that have survived as part of the Byzantine rhetorical tradition. In a very large number of these collections (perhaps much larger than we might expect), the self may be ever-present only in the minimal sense of the first person perspective that dominates the genre; for the self is also remarkably ever-absent as writers are preoccupied with whatever practical purpose their letter is to serve in the here and now. Even the letters of characteristically learned and ostensibly self-involved rhetors, such as, for instance, Michael Psellos in the eleventh century, can occasionally be devoid of excessive learnedness or rhetorical artistry and lacking in intricate self-revelation or self-fashioning.

Further suppression of the authorial “self” in letter-writing resulted from Byzantine decorum. Both Christian ethics and ancient rhetoric demanded that a writer does not focus on him/herself so as to avoid the accusation of

5 “Letters should be indiscretions” wrote T.S. Eliot to his friend Conrad Aiken in 1914 (*The Letters of T.S. Eliot*, p. 82); on epistolography in European modernity see, e.g., Gay, *The Naked Heart*.

6 See Chapter 1 in this volume or the letters in Bagnall/Criboire, *Women's Letters* (see their remarks on p. 5); see also Papatthomas/Koroli, “Subjectivité et stylistique” for an insightful analysis of a private letter from the perspective of the construction of subjectivity.

arrogance.⁷ A side-effect of this was the fact that, in a large number of cases (though again no statistics exist), the first-person singular was substituted by the first-person plural. This occurs even in expressions where modern writers would especially and insistently use the “I”: “as far as we are concerned, we have showed pure love to you, and will also love you still more genuinely” writes Psellos to an anonymous judge, referring to himself alone.⁸ Modesty was also taken into consideration in a genre in which writers struggled to express themselves as well as show off.⁹

With these general observations in mind – (a) the tension in Byzantine rhetoric between tradition, norm, and group identity on the one hand, and individuality and personal distinction on the other; and (b) the constraints imposed on self-writing by both the practical nature of letter exchanges and the morality of humility – this chapter will probe some parameters for the construction as well as expression of the self in Byzantine “real, rhetorical” letters. By the latter locution, I am referring to the majority of our evidence for Byzantine epistolography; these letters were “real” in the sense that they were most likely exchanged between a sender and an addressee, and “rhetorical” in the sense that they were invested with the learned idiom of rhetoric briefly outlined above.¹⁰

The purpose is not to be comprehensive, as that would perhaps be an impossible task; for one might argue that, from a certain angle, *every single* Byzantine letter that has survived offers yet another nuance of selfhood. Rather, my aim is to identify some recurrent features of the Byzantine epistolographic self, by surveying some normative expectations as well as limitations, a sequence of horizons for the epistolographic genre and thus for its self-representational tropes. Thereby, I hope to suggest possible avenues of approaching this immense body of Byzantine texts from the perspective of the history of discursive subjectivity.

2 Biblical, Literary, and Embedded Letters

It might be useful to begin in an unconventional fashion and look at modes of discursive subjectivity in the wider tradition of Byzantine letter-writing, and how that tradition affected the specific field of “real, rhetorical” letters, the

7 See Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*, pp. 132–33.

8 Psellos, *Letters*, no. 332 (to a *magistros* and *krites* of Katotika), ed. Papaioannou, vol. 2, p. 738, l. 15–16: Τὸ γοῦν ἐφ’ ἡμῖν, καὶ ἠγαπήσαμεν καθαρῶς, καὶ εἰλικρινέστερον ἔτι φιλήσομεν.

9 See further Zilliacus, *Selbstgefühl*.

10 This category is more or less coextensive with what Hunger termed “literarische Privatbriefe”; Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur*, vol. 1, pp. 206–07.

focus of this essay. This is necessary, because in the context of Byzantine book culture, and thus from the perspective of Byzantine readers, “real, rhetorical” letters were often surrounded and influenced (as far as self-representation is concerned) by three further types of Byzantine letters, some of which were read very widely. These are as follows.

- (a) What we might term “biblical” letters, namely theological letters and often open letters – addressed to a community of readers – written by or ascribed to Christ’s apostles and included in the canon of the Byzantine New Testament, and also similar letters attributed to the so-called Apostolic Fathers and some early Byzantine writers. Beyond the letters of Paul and other Apostles that were read regularly in liturgical contexts, this type also included letters attributed to Dionysios the Areopagite (the most popular of the Apostolic Fathers), Ignatios of Antioch, and also Gregory of Nazianzos, as well as other Church Fathers, some of whose letters were used in the context of canon law or theological instruction and debate.¹¹
- (b) Collections of what we may call “literary” letters, mostly pre-Byzantine in date and rhetorical in style, attributed to either purely invented characters or to historical or semi-historical figures of the classical past, and used for the purposes of biography, rhetorical instruction, and learned entertainment. This type included such collections as the letters of Plato, Euripides, or Phalaris, the semi-legendary Sicilian ruler of Agrigento, or love letters by fictional characters written by Philostratos or Alkiphron, etc.¹²

11 On Paul see, e.g., Porter/Adams, *Paul and the Ancient Letter Form*; for Ignatios, see, e.g., Edwards, “When the Dead Speak” and the manuscript Florence, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Plut. 57.7 (eleventh century, containing letters by Maximos the Confessor, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzos, and Ignatios); Gregory of Nazianzos’ so-called three *Theological Letters* (ed. Gally), did not circulate with the rest of Gregory’s letter-collection, but were included in manuscripts with his orations.

12 For these, see Costa, *Greek Fictional Letters*, with further bibliography; specifically on the letters of Phalaris which were popular among Byzantine readers, see Russell, “The Ass in the Lion’s Skin” and Hinz, *Nunc Phalaris* as well as Muratore, *Le epistole di Falaride* on the manuscript transmission. For examples of collections of “fictional” letters co-existing with “real, rhetorical” letters see Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, B 004 sup. (Martini-Bassi 81) (tenth century; Phalaris, Isidore of Pelousion, Julian, Libanios, Apollonios of Tyana, Philostratos, and others); Oxford, Bodleian Library, Barocci 50 (tenth century; Philostratos, Libanios, Theophylact Simokates); Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, phil. gr. 342 (eleventh century; various tenth century epistolographers, with John Chrysostom, Philostratos, Apollonios of Tyana, Alkiphron); Venice, Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana, gr. Z. 512 (coll. 0678) (late thirteenth century: Alkiphron, Synesios, Plato); Escorial, Real Biblioteca, Z. iv. 5 (Andrés 344) (fourteenth century; Manuel Moschopoulos, Euripides, Hippocrates, Heraclitus, Diogenes, Plato, Aeschines, Basil of Caesarea, Julian, Gregory of Nazianzos).

- (c) Letters which lie somewhere between the previous two types, and in which category we may place invented letters, embedded in historiographical,¹³ biographical, and, especially, hagiographical narratives. This genre of Byzantine epistolography remains virtually unexplored. In terms of function and style these “embedded” letters resembled “literary” letters, but in terms of effect and authority they often echoed “biblical” letters. Indeed, almost all important figures of the Byzantines’ past, from Alexander the Great to Constantine the Great, a large number of Byzantine Saints and Christ himself, were presented in Byzantine narratives *also* as letter-writers.¹⁴

As might be obvious, these types of letters display a great variety of self-representation, expressed as they are from the perspective of their writer’s voice. No justice can be done to this variety here. It is important, nevertheless, to always retain this much larger and widely read epistolographic corpus in mind when we approach Byzantine self-representation in “real, rhetorical” letters. For one could detect certain shared self-representational attitudes that circumscribe letter-writing discourse in general. The following two stand out.

The first, most common among theological letters, is the self-positioning of the letter-writer as an authoritative figure. In such texts, a commanding, didactic, and assertive tone prevails; the content of the letter and its mediator are presented (sometimes explicitly) as divinely inspired; and the writer is vested with an ethos that is introduced as exemplary.¹⁵ As Photios put it, such is the “apostolic style” (ἀποστολικὸς χαρακτήρ), defined by “its nobility, the lack of excessive artistry, purity, and the spontaneous naturalness of discourse”.¹⁶ Even a cursory reading of Paul’s letters can provide a fair number of examples of such self-positioning,¹⁷ but many literary letters and letter-collections, including some outside the Christian canon, functioned in a similar fashion – for instance, letters attributed to the legendary philosopher Apollonios of Tyana.¹⁸

13 For letters embedded in historiographical literature and also in the Byzantine romances, see Chapter 15 in this volume.

14 For the most famous among those letters, Christ’s letter to King Abgar and its history, see Caseau, “La lettre de Jesus”.

15 For such didactic letters see also Chapter 8, esp. pp. 234–39 in this volume.

16 Photios, *Commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. Staab, p. 531, l. 22–24: τὴν εὐγένειαν καὶ τὸ ἀπερίεργον καὶ καθαρὸν καὶ αὐτοφυῆς τοῦ λόγου.

17 E.g., Cor. I 4:15–16, 11–12 and 15:9–10; Cor. II 9:22 (see Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*, p. 148, n. 65); Tim. II 4:6–7.

18 Apollonios of Tyana, *Letters*, ed. Kayser.

The second stance is what may be read as confessional or, occasionally, autobiographical discourse, the expression of a sinful or exulted, suffering or emotional self. There are such moments in the letters of Paul,¹⁹ but they are much more common among the literary letters; for instance, in the love-affairs portrayed from a first-person perspective in Alkiphron and Aristainetos²⁰ or in the letters by Alexander the Great to his mother.²¹

As will become apparent below, similar approaches often enter the collections of “real, rhetorical” letters, sometimes with explicit referencing and appropriation of earlier biblical or literary models; the examples of letters by Theodore the Studite, Photios, Leo Choiosphaktes, and Constantine Akropolites may suffice here.²²

3 Rhetorical Theory

Another layer of attitudes that conditioned self-representation in “real, rhetorical” letters derived from rhetorical theory pertaining to letter-writing. Such theoretical thought is evident in Byzantine manuals of rhetorical style, in the few manuals of model letters that existed, and in meta-rhetorical comments included within actual letters.²³

As has been pointed out frequently, a commonplace in this context is the expectation and prescription that a letter is and should be an “image of the soul”, namely an unmediated and authentic representation of the inner self of the letter-writer. As is posited in the earliest theoretical statements on epistolography in the Greco-Roman tradition, “every person writes the letter as an image (almost) of his own soul; and yes, it is possible to see the character of the writer in every other type of discourse, but in none so vividly as in the letter”;

19 E.g., Rom. 7:14–18 or Tim. I 1:15.

20 On Alkiphron, see Rosenmeyer, *Ancient Epistolary Fictions*, pp. 255–307; on Aristainetos, see Bing/Höschele, *Aristaenetos*.

21 Particularly in the Byzantine version *epsilon*; see Sempéré, “Le détournement de l'épistolaire”.

22 For Theodore, see the comments in one his *Vitae* (Theodore Daphnopates [?], *Life and Conduct of Theodore the Studite*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 99, col. 153B; BHG 1755); for Photios, see his Letter to Nicholas, Pope of Rome (August or September 861: *Letters*, no. 290, eds. Laourdas/Westerink, pp. 123–38); for Leo Choiosphaktes, see his Letter 19 (ed. and trans. Strano, pp. 76–79), which is full of phrases culled from Alkiphron's letters; for Constantine Akropolites, see his Letter 87 addressed to the Thessalonians, ed. Romano, pp. 176–78.

23 On Byzantine rhetorical theory, see Papaioannou, “Rhetoric and Rhetorical Theory” and id., “Theory of Literature”.

or “let us say what we feel, let us feel what we say.”²⁴ It would perhaps be superfluous to discuss here this common understanding of the letter.²⁵ It might be worthwhile, however, to point to an inherent tension that this definition involved. That is, although the supposition that the letter expresses the inner self truthfully was dominant, this did not preclude the important demand that the writer should also artfully construct and fashion his epistolographic image.

Excessive rhetoricality in letters was indeed often frowned upon, and writers were commended for their *idiotikon* style, namely a style that is simple, non-learned, and which resists the norms of rhetoric, and is thus also *individual*;²⁶ nevertheless, letter-writing was also associated with playful or fictional discourse²⁷ and was praised for the pleasures of its rhetoricality.²⁸ More importantly, it was linked with the Byzantine rhetorical exercise of *ethopoïia*, namely the composition of first-person speeches attributable to stock characters (e.g., “What would Achilles say in this or that situation” etc.).²⁹ As John Doxapatres put it sometime during the first half of the eleventh century, recycling early Byzantine thought on the matter, the *ethopoïia*, “trains us also for epistolary style, if indeed also in letters we must take into consideration the character of both those who send the letter and those who receive it.”³⁰ As an aside, an extreme and remarkably self-referential case of the incorporation of *ethopoïia* in a personal letter-collection are two letters by Gregory of Cyprus that bear the titles “by the same author [i.e. Gregory] to himself as if by an-

24 Demetrios, *On Style* 227, ed. and trans. Chiron, p. 64, l. 1–5: σχεδὸν γὰρ εἰκόνα ἕκαστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς γράφει τὴν ἐπιστολήν· καὶ ἔστι μὲν καὶ ἐξ ἄλλου λόγου παντὸς ἰδεῖν τὸ ἦθος τοῦ γράφοντος, ἐξ οὐδενὸς δὲ οὕτως, ὡς ἐπιστολῆς; Seneca, *Epistles* 75,4: “quod sentimus, loquamur, quod loquimur sentiamus”.

25 See Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*, pp. 133–35 with further bibliography.

26 See, e.g., Symeon Metaphrastes, *Life and Conduct of Theodore Graptos* 22, in *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 116, cols. 669D–672A (BHG 1746).

27 See e.g. Michael Psellos, *On the Different Styles of Certain Writings*, ed. Boissonade; trans. (with discussion) Papaioannou.

28 See, as one out of countless examples, the prefatory epigram by George Akropolites on an edition of the letters of emperor Theodore II Laskaris, where both serious content (σοφῶν νοημάτων) and playful form (σχημάτων ... φράσεως ἤδυσμα) are praised: George Akropolites, *Prefatory Epigram*, ed. Heisenberg, p. 9, l. 57–63.

29 See Malosse, “Éthopée et fiction épistolaire”.

30 John Doxapatres, *Rhetorical Homilies on Aphthonios' Progymnasmata*, ed. Walz, p. 646, l. 2–5: καὶ πρὸς τὸν ἐπιστολικὸν ἡμᾶς γυμνάζει χαρακτῆρα, εἶγε καὶ ἐν ἐκείνῳ δεῖ τοῦ ἠθους τῶν τε ἐπιστελλόντων καὶ πρὸς οὓς ἐπιστέλλουσι, ποιείσθαι πρόνοιαν. Cf. Nicholas of Myra, *Progymnasmata*, ed. Felten, p. 67, l. 2, and also Ailios Theon, *Progymnasmata* 115,20–22, ed. and trans. Patillon, p. 70, as well as John of Sardis, *Commentary on Aphthonios' Progymnasmata*, ed. Rabe, p. 195, l. 27 and p. 200, l. 8. On letter-writing and *ethopoïia*, see Riehle, *Funktionen der byzantinischen Epistolographie*, pp. 259–68.

other person” (τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ὡς ἀπ’ ἄλλου) and “by the same author to himself by another” (τοῦ αὐτοῦ πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ὑφ’ ἑτέρου).³¹ Similarly, a relatively popular manual of letter-writing, attributed to either Libanios or Proklos in the manuscripts, recommended some degree of self-fashioning; in the *Types of Epistolary Style*, the future letter-writer is expected to “appear” as expressing this or that feeling: the verbs φαίνεσθαι and δοκεῖν are used frequently in the definitions of the various types of letters.³²

Just as Byzantine readers were exposed to a large gamut of letter-writing and relevant epistolographic personae, which often co-existed in manuscripts or in libraries without any clear demarcation of fictive vs. true, playful vs. serious, entertaining vs. didactic, so also rhetorical theory offered somewhat contradictory advice, allowing both sincerity and fabrication simultaneously.

4 Publication and Manuscript Transmission

At the other end of the spectrum lay the realities of the production, reception, and circulation of letters in Byzantium. These too shaped the types of self mediated by Byzantine epistolography. For instance, letter-recipients were often alerted to whether a letter was handwritten by the author himself or dictated to someone else, as authorial authenticity was to be safeguarded by the recognizable handwriting,³³ by the private seal fastened to the letter,³⁴ or by

31 Gregory of Cyprus, *Letters*, nos. 48 and 50, ed. Eustratiades, pp. 197–98. Cf. the title to Gregory’s *Autobiography*: Γρηγορίου τοῦ ἀγιωτάτου καὶ μακαριωτάτου οἰκουμενικοῦ πατριάρχου περὶ τοῦ καθ’ ἑαυτὸν βίου ὡς ἀπ’ ἄλλου προσώπου, ed. Lameere, p. 177 and the discussion in Kotzabassi, “Περὶ τοῦ καθ’ ἑαυτὸν βίου ὡς ἀπ’ ἄλλου προσώπου”.

32 Pseudo-Libanios/Pseudo-Proklos, *Types of Epistolary Style*, ed. Foerster.

33 The terms ἰδιόχειρον and αὐτόγραφος are often used in this context; see, e.g., a remarkable story regarding a letter exchange between the living and the dead, involving Synesios of Cyrene, recorded in hagiographical contexts; see *Synaxarion of Constantinople*, June 27, ed. Delehay, pp. 772–76 in the apparatus, based on Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Par. Coisl. 223, dated to 1300/1301: Δύγησις Συνεσίου ἐπισκόπου Κυπρίνης [sic!] περὶ Εὐαγρίου τινὸς φιλοσόφου (this synaxarial notice, we may add, can be found in a large number of manuscripts, not considered by Delehay; see further Papaioannou, “The Philosopher’s Tongue”). The story derives from John Moschos, *Spiritual Meadow* 195, *Patrologia Graeca*, vol. 87.3, cols. 3077–80; see also George Kedrenos, *Synopsis of Histories* 414, ed. Tartaglia, vol. 2, pp. 648–50, and further references in the relevant BHG entry (1322r).

34 Related may be the common formula (with many variations) that we encounter in Byzantine seals: Οὐ σφραγίς εἰμί, τὴν γραφὴν βλέπων νόει (“Learn whose seal I am by looking at the *writing*” [which could mean anything from, primarily, the ‘text’ to, even, the ‘handwriting’]); see Wassiliou-Seibt, *Corpus der byzantinischen Siegel*, pp. 39–40.

the individual style of expression of the writer.³⁵ Regardless, such authenticity was to some extent compromised as soon as the letter was removed from the immediate context of the original private exchange between two people. As was noted above, letters were often read aloud to a larger group of people and circulated within a wider circle of friends and associates.³⁶ This potential publicity conditioned the approach of letter-writers with respect to what they might reveal about themselves. By the very nature of Byzantine letter-writing culture, the epistolographic self was inevitably always also a *public* persona.

When letter-writers, or people in their immediate circles (such as students or friends), or, even more so, later compilers (often teachers of rhetoric) created “publishable” collections of someone’s letters, the drive either to de-concretize and de-individualize letters or create a certain public image of the writer or the collector came further into play. The effects of this “publication” process could lead to very different results. There are cases, for example, when letters are preserved, but the identity of their authors was falsified or lost for ever; the most famous instance of the latter is that of a professional Constantinopolitan teacher from the tenth century, whose collection survives in a contemporary manuscript (British Library Add. 36749), most likely belonging (in my view) to the teacher himself, yet whose name remains unknown.³⁷ From the next century, we have the different case of John Mauropous who produced his own letter-collection (this original manuscript also survives: Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. gr. 676), for which he made a selection of his letters and arranged them chronologically, but also removed the names of addressees or concrete forms of address. The intention behind the collection was thus to create both an autobiographically inflected self-representation, and a carefully crafted public image of Mauropous, somewhat stripped from the triviality of historical details.³⁸ Similar examples of authorially-produced letter collections may be cited both from the early and, especially, the late Byzantine period.³⁹

35 See Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos’ Letter B3 (ed. Tziatzi-Papagianni, pp. 87–88) to Theodore of Kyzikos, in which the emperor clarifies that, though the letter was not hand-written by him but by someone else, his authorship will be evident to those who know his personal style (χαρακτῆρα).

36 For relevant references see Chapter 13 in this volume; see also the introduction to Michael Psellos’ *Letters*, ed. Papaioannou, pp. xxxv–xxxvii.

37 Anonymous professor, *Letters*, ed. Markopoulos.

38 See the introduction in John Mauropous, *Letters*, ed. and trans. Karpozilos, pp. 28–32; see also Bernard, *Writing and Reading*, pp. 128–48.

39 The collections of Gregory of Nazianzos (see the programmatic Letter 52, ed. Gallay, vol. 1, pp. 68–89) and Synesios of Cyrene (see his programmatic Letter 1, ed. Garzya, pp. 3–5) may be cited as examples from the early period, Nikephoros Choumnos and Demetrios

5 Exemplary Models: Typology and Autobiography

Beyond types of subjectivity in “biblical” and “literary” epistolography, beyond epistolary theory, or the realities of letter-writing practice, one factor which also dictated the genre of letter-writing and, consequently, the Byzantine epistolographic self was the epistolary canon. This canon was comprised primarily of collections of “real, rhetorical” letters produced during the first hundred years or so of the increasingly Christian Roman empire of Constantinople in the fourth and early fifth centuries; these include in particular the letters of Libanios, Gregory of Nazianzos, Basil of Caesarea, and Synesios of Cyrene, that survive in large numbers and in numerous manuscripts.⁴⁰

A brief digression is in order here. If we approach these early epistolary corpora from the perspective of literary history, one thing that becomes immediately apparent is that we catch the history of Greek self-representation in “real, rhetorical” letter-writing *in medias res*. By the fourth century, Greek epistolographic discourse and the consequent types of self-representation were already well defined. This is manifested by recurrent common places, repeated themes, and replicated wording. The studies of, in particular, Koskenniemi (*Studien*) and Thraede (*Grundzüge*), have delineated the prehistory of these fourth-century patterns in Greek papyri, apostolic letters, and the Latin tradition.⁴¹ Yet we cannot study their prehistory in collections of “real, rhetorical” letters as no such collection survives in Greek before the letter-corpora of Libanios, Gregory, and other contemporary writers (such as the emperor Julian, Basil’s brother Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom). The sources do make reference to earlier examples – see for instance the several letter-collections by Greek writers dated prior to the fourth century AD, cited in the *Suda*⁴² – yet none of these have been preserved. Whatever the case, it was the fourth-century variety of epistolary typology that was to prove influential for centuries of letter-writing practice, indeed, beyond the collapse of the Byzantine state in the fifteenth century.

Kydones from the late; on the latter two, see Riehle, “Epistolography as Autobiography” and Hatlie, “Life and Artistry”. See also Chapter 17, pp. 477–89 in this volume.

40 See Papaioannou, “Fragile Literature”.

41 Koskenniemi, *Studien*; Thraede, *Grundzüge*.

42 E.g., *Suda*, ed. Adler, α 528 (Adrian), 3745 (Aratus; notably his letters are listed after his *ethopoiiai*), 3918 (Aristocles), η 545 (Herodes Atticus), θ 166 (Theocritus of Chios: ἐπιστολαὶ θαυμασταί), λ 825 (Lycurgus). Certain texts, usually treatises, from the pre-Byzantine period do survive in epistolary form, but never as part of letter-collections per se; see, e.g., Plutarch, *Consolatio ad uxorem* (608a–612b).

We may also ask how does the fourth-century epistolary typology appear from the perspective of literary subjectivity. We are essentially dealing with the discursive formation and articulation of the elite, learned self,⁴³ with an added flavor of Christianity, a flavor that was bound to increase in later centuries. In this respect, the co-existence of non-Christian with Christian writers in the Byzantine epistolary canon – with Libanios (together with his student, Julian) occupying the one extreme, Basil and Gregory the other, and Synesios placed somewhere in the middle – was crucial. The Christianity of Basil, Gregory, and Synesios, however different it may have been in reality, provided later readers with the alibi for the preservation of what united these authors and their fellow non-Christian rhetoricians: their passionate devotion to Hellenism as the cultural capital of learnedness of Grecophone elite writers in the Roman Empire.

This Hellenic pedigree was not abandoned – in favor of biblical discourse, for example – by Christian learned gentlemen in later centuries, particularly in the aspects which pertained to his epistolographic production. The display of learnedness was usually an ineluctable aspect of a letter-writer's self-staging; Prokopios of Gaza, Niketas Magistros, Michael Psellos, John Tzetzes, Theodore Prodromos, Michael Choniates, and Maximos Planoudes are perhaps among the Byzantine masters of such displays, following in the footsteps of Gregory and Synesios in particular.⁴⁴ These latter two writers had also established that, in letters, rhetoric would often submit self-representation to the joys of literary playfulness – what the Byzantines called *παιδιά*, a core feature of the otherwise serious business of showcasing one's refined urbanity.

A simple way to map the major preoccupations of the expression of self in the Byzantine epistolary canon and its later variations would be to review the lists of commonplaces gathered in the earlier studies of Koskenniemi and Thraede, but also Tomadakes, Karlsson, Hunger, and Mullett,⁴⁵ since these commonplaces facilitated what may be regarded as different rhetorical masks of the writer's self. I will not go through these lists here, but will instead highlight anew a few of aspects of this epistolary typology that were especially conducive to self-representation.

43 See, e.g., the list of superior qualities pronounced in a letter attributed in the manuscripts to either Gregory of Nazianzos (*Letters*, no. 249.32, ed. Gallay, pp. 139–48) or Gregory of Nyssa (*Letters*, no. 1.32, ed. Pasquali, p. 12, l. 2–6; ed. and trans. Maraval, pp. 102–05): “family” (γένος), “education” (παιδείσεις), “free-birth” (ἐλευθερία), and “knowledge” (γνώσις).

44 As is well known, John Tzetzes went so far in his display of learnedness as to produce a verse commentary to his letter collection, the so-called *Chiliades* (ed. Leone).

45 Tomadakes, *Βυζαντινή ἐπιστολογραφία*, pp. 108–22; Karlsson, *Idéologie*; Hunger, *Die hochsprachliche profane Literatur*, vol. 1, pp. 214–33; Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid*, pp. 98–161.

What must be said at the outset is that these rhetorical masks could simultaneously enact a double effect: they exhibited one's ability to create carefully wrought objects of high verbal art to be placed within the diachrony of the *literary* tradition, but they also constructed an immediate *social* persona, positioning their writer within a complex network of friends, associates, patrons, competitors, and opponents. Literary and social objectives were mutually reinforcing, and these epistolary commonplaces offered opportunities to show, as was remarked above, that one belonged, and also excelled and differed.

Perhaps the most common such theme was part of the Byzantine rhetoric of friendship: the imagined unity between sender and addressee. Letter-writers frequently insisted on the metaphor of sharing one soul in two bodies or indeed sharing everything with the addressee, thus highlighting their deep devotion and affection for their friend; the verb *ποθέω* and the noun *πόθος* are common in epistolographic first-person discourse.⁴⁶ Occasionally, explicitly erotic discourse is employed, rendering the self a subject of desire, a *μανικός ἐραστής* as Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos wrote in the mid-tenth century.⁴⁷ This was a self-representation that not only aimed to foster social ties, but also continued an explicitly learned idiom, namely the Platonic discourse of spiritualized homoerotic desire.⁴⁸

In the same framework of rhetoricized friendship belongs the constant interplay between self-abasement and the effusive praise of the addressee in letters, a discursive role-play between the inferior self and the superior other. Indeed, so often are Byzantine letters brief encomia of the addressee (the most

46 In Michael Choniates' letter collection, for instance – to cite just one example: Michael Choniates, *Letters*, ed. Kolovou.

47 Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos, *Letters*, no. B3, ed. Tziatzi-Papagianni, p. 88, l. 19. For the Byzantine rhetoric of friendship, its motifs as well as its eroticization, see Papaioannou, "Michael Psellos on Friendship", where also further bibliography. See also – to cite at least one among numerous relevant post-Psellian examples – John Apokaukos' Letter 18 that begins with an adoption of the first-person rhetoric of the *Song of Songs* (ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, p. 279) and Letter 21 (*ibid.*, p. 285) that starts with a favorite Nazianzenic quote in the Byzantine discourse of desire: "for those who suffer from desire a single day equals an entire life" (Gregory of Nazianzos, *Oration* 24.3, ed. and trans. Mossay, pp. 42–45, l. 3–4 and *Oration* 26.2, *ibid.*, pp. 226–29, l. 5–6: βίος ὅλος ἡμέρα μία τοῖς πόθῳ κάμνουσιν).

48 See, e.g., Libanios' self-styling as Socrates with whom "young lads were in love" (ἦρα τὰ μεράχια): *Letters*, no. 435, ed. Foerster, pp. 425–28. It may be noteworthy to add here that, in the *Types of Epistolary Style* attributed to either Libanios or Proklos, in the definition of the "erotic" epistle as that letter "through which we address words of love to our beloved" (Pseudo-Libanios/Pseudo-Proklos, *Types of Epistolary Style* 44, ed. Foerster, p. 33, l. 3–5: δι' ἧς ἐρωτικὸς πρὸς τὰς ἐρωμένιας προσφερόμεθα λόγους), some manuscripts attest the masculine form τοὺς ἐρωμένους (see the critical apparatus in Foerster's edition).

minute expression of this being the manifold encomiastic forms of address⁴⁹) that we might argue that the most imposing “self” of rhetorical epistolography is ultimately that of the “other”; the epistolary friend was, after all, defined as an “other self” (ἄλλος ἑαυτός).⁵⁰ It is in the mirror of the other and his idealized image that the author’s self hides or, in some cases, revels: this is particularly the case in instances where letter-writers placed encomia of themselves in the mouth of their addressees.⁵¹ And, to add one more aspect to this interplay between self and other, there existed a third denominator that facilitated the epistolographic construction of selfhood: the vilification of opponents who are set against the unity that is supposed to bind correspondents. Two notable examples are Synesios’ self-defense and simultaneous character assassination of Andronikos, a local governor of Pentapolis in several letters,⁵² and Leo Choirosphaktes’ own epistolary self-defense as well as invective of an effeminate eunuch.⁵³

Among these often stylized personae we also encounter autobiographical discourse: short, or occasionally extensive, stories about oneself. There are letters that narrate and describe, for instance, experiences of travel, various types of suffering such as exile, illness, or death, or glimpses of one’s inner life, such as dreams.⁵⁴ There are some spectacular examples in this field, such as Synesios’ letter to his brother Euoptios about his adventurous travel along the north African coast;⁵⁵ Theodore the Studite’s letter about his exile;⁵⁶ a letter

49 Surveyed in Grünbart, *Formen der Anrede*.

50 The most influential statement is in Synesios’ Letter 100 (ed. Garzya, pp. 168–69), where the expression is attributed to Pythagoras; see further Papaioannou, “Language Games” for a particularly playful expansion of this notion in a letter by Michael Italikos (twelfth century).

51 E.g., Gregory of Nyssa, *Letters*, no. 19, ed. Pasquali, pp. 62–68; ed. and trans. Maraval, pp. 242–57 or Michael Psellos, *Letters*, no. 13a, ed. Papaioannou, vol. 1, pp. 26–32; the fact that the letter-collection of a writer sometimes also contained encomiastic letters by others addressed to him might have served a similar function; see, e.g., a letter by Anastasios Quaestor to Leo Choirosphaktes preserved in the latter’s collection (*Letters*, no. 23, ed. and trans. Strano, p. 89), where Leo is called “Orpheus, Odysseus, Nestor” (“τὸν ἡμέτερον Ὀρφέα καὶ Ὀδυσσεά καὶ Νέστορα”).

52 *Letters*, nos. 41, 42 and 79, ed. Garzya, pp. 52–75, 138–45.

53 *Letters*, no. 20, ed. and trans. Strano, pp. 78–85; see the discussion in Messis, *Les eunuques*, pp. 214–15.

54 For overviews of the Byzantine discourse on these subjects (with several examples from letter-writing), see Mullett, “In Peril on the Sea” (travel); ead., *Theophylact of Ochrid*, pp. 102–11 (illness) and 248–61 (exile); Angelidi/Calofonos, *Dreaming* (dreams).

55 *Letters*, no. 5, ed. Garzya, pp. 11–26. For a brief survey of Synesios’ “autobiographically” constructed epistolary self in general, see Roques, “Introduction”, pp. lxxxiv–xcv with Papaioannou, *Michael Psellos*, pp. 210–14.

56 *Letters*, no. 3, ed. Fatouros, vol. 1, pp. 11–16.

describing a wet dream in Theodore Daphnopates' collection;⁵⁷ Psellos' description of the births of his grandson and of a close friend's son;⁵⁸ Theodore Prodromos' self-sarcastic description of a stubborn malady;⁵⁹ Michael Choniates' mourning of the death of his nephew's young son;⁶⁰ or moving letters by Constantine Akropolites on the deaths of his child and of his brother, as well as his exceptionally detailed descriptions of an accident caused by a horse, and a frightening evening during an earthquake.⁶¹

To add a final element to this brief study, a concomitant feature of the wider autobiographical effect pursued in Byzantine letters is the insistent return to various types of emotion. It would require a separate study to survey these types in any detail. Here, let us simply highlight what is perhaps the most common context for the expression of emotion: the recording of the emotionally intense reception of a letter.

How often have I brought the letter to my lips, as mothers embrace their children? How often have I clung to it with those lips, as though I were embracing a dearest lover of mine? How often have I addressed and kissed even the superscription which had been signed by your own hand as though by a clear seal, and then fixed my eyes on it, as if clasping the fingers of that sacred right hand of yours through the imprint of the letters?

Such descriptions as this, in a letter attributed to Julian, are common.⁶² They convey a wider belief or desire or, indeed, fantasy: the letter, with its materiality and its world of words, functioned, or was expected to function, as a proxy

57 *Letters*, no. 17, eds. and trans. Darrouzès/Westerink, pp. 168–71.

58 *Letters*, nos. 51 and 128, ed. Papaioannou.

59 *Letters*, nos. 4 and 5, ed. and trans. Op de Coul, pp. 89–100.

60 *Letters*, nos. 88–89 and, especially, 100–101, ed. Kolovou, pp. 115–17, 133–53.

61 *Letters*, nos. 47–48 (child), 56–57 (brother), 24 (accident), 55 and 59 (earthquake), ed. Romano, pp. 142–44, 151–53, 124–26, 149–51, and 153–55.

62 *Letters*, no. 77 to Iamblichos, ed. and trans. Wright, pp. 246–252 (edition and translation revised): 'Ὅσαίς μὲν τῷ στόματι τὴν ἐπιστολὴν προσήγαγον, ὥσπερ αἱ μητέρες τὰ παιδιά περιπλέκονται; Ὅσαίς δὲ ἐνέφυον τῷ στόματι καθάπερ ἐρωμένην ἑμαυτοῦ φιλιτάτην ἀσπαζόμενος; Ὅσαίς δὲ τὴν ἐπιγραφὴν αὐτὴν, ἢ χειρὶ σῆι καθάπερ ἑναργεῖ σφραγίδι ἐσσημήναντο, προσειπῶν καὶ φιλήσας, εἶτα ἐπέβαλον τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς, οἶονεῖ τοῖς τῆς ἱεράς ἐκείνης δεξιᾶς δακτύλοις τῷ τῶν γραμμᾶτων ἔχει προσπεφυκῶς; For further examples see Michael Psellos, *Letters*, no. 16, ed. Papaioannou, vol. 1, pp. 41–44; Theodore Prodromos, *Letters*, no. 2, ed. and trans. Op de Coul; Eumathios Makrembolites, *Letter to Nikolaos Hagiotheodorites*, ed. Papadopoulos-Kerameus, to be read together with Makrembolites' *Hysmine et Hysminias* 9,10, ed. Marcovich, pp. 113–14; or Constantine Akropolites, *Letters*, no. 23, ed. Romano, pp. 123–24.

for the self. In other words, within the Byzantine epistolographic imaginary, the letter often *was* the self.

Acknowledgements

Thanks is owed to Charis Messis who commented on various aspects of this chapter, and to Alexander Riehle for his careful review.

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