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Prologue

The following passage in Plutarch's *Lives* neatly evokes the special status of letters, particularly personal letters, in the ancient world. In 305 BCE the inhabitants of Rhodes were under siege by Demetrius Poliorcetes, son of Antigonus I; Demetrius followed his father in trying, in vain, to reunite Alexander's empire by waging war against the divided rule of Ptolemy in Egypt and Seleucus in the East. In this instance, the Rhodians, who will eventually be victorious, intercept a ship containing things sent from Demetrius' wife (Plut. *Life of Demetrius* 22.2):[1]

> When Phila his wife sent him letters, bedding, and clothing, the Rhodians had captured the vessel containing them, and sent it, just as it was, to Ptolemy. In this they did not imitate the considerate kindness of the Athenians, who, having captured Philip's letter-carriers when he was making war on them, read all the other letters, but one of them, which was from Olympias [his wife], they would not open; instead, they sent it back to the king with its seal unbroken. However, although Demetrius was exceedingly exasperated by this, when the Rhodians soon after gave him a chance to retaliate, he would not allow himself to do so.

The Rhodians intercept Demetrius' personal letters and reroute them to his rival Ptolemy I, but do not treat the documents in any way differently from the rest of the ship's contents: the whole vessel is sent to Ptolemy "just as it was," for inspection by the enemy. The letters here are treated as booty, and the Rhodians ignore the potentially private nature of the correspondence between husband and wife. By contrast, in similar circumstances two generations earlier, the Athenians open all their enemy's letters except the one from his wife, hoping to discover, one assumes, secret campaign plans, news of supplies coming from Macedonia, or other military

[1] Text and translation from B. Perrin, *Plutarch's Lives* (London 1920).

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information from Philip's allies. They also may hope to learn something more about the man himself, his character and thoughts, from his own letters or those addressed to him: anything that could help them outwit and conquer their attacker. But they treat the personal letter differently: even in war the Athenians respect the private nature of a written message from wife to husband, and they forward Olympias' letter to the king with its seal unbroken.

The passage in Plutarch raises a number of issues around Olympias' letter. Plutarch seems to imply that the Athenians act decently by scrupulously declining to eavesdrop on a private conversation. But further issues arise. Olympias' letter is singled out from "all the other letters" in the possession of the letter-carrier presumably because it is written by a woman, in this case Philip's wife. Do the Athenians assume that this is a love letter, a private message between a married couple that could refer only to their relationship, their family, and other purely personal matters? Or do they suppose that the purportedly innocent cover of a wife's letter might possibly hide within itself military or political information, but are nevertheless restricted by some universal code of behavior to respect the privacy of the couple's mail? Plutarch, by mentioning the letter but not reporting its contents (which realistically he could not do, since the letter was sent straight on to Philip), exploits the tension between his readers' desire to open and read someone else's mail, and their knowledge that it is a gross violation of privacy to do so.

The issue of epistolary decorum seems as relevant today as it did in Philip's fourth-century Macedonia. Is a private letter meant for the eye of its addressee alone or written with a sense of a larger readership? Do all letters become public property once out of the hands of their original correspondents? What is so intriguing about a person's private thoughts expressed on paper? The Athenians in Plutarch's example treated such a letter as taboo, and honored its privacy by sending it on to its intended addressee without breaking its seal. In modern times, the commercial appeal of the confessional or romantic epistolary mode seems too great for publishers to resist. Thus Ted Hughes defines his last collection of poems as "letters" addressed to his famous wife, and the jacket blurb of *Birthday Letters* (New York 1998) claims that, "[i]ntimate and candid in manner, they are largely concerned with the psychological drama that led both to the writing of her [Sylvia

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Plath's] greatest poems and to her death." Hughes' poetic letter form incorporates formal verse and "psychological drama," intimacy with a careful editorial hand.

An even more striking example is a group of fourteen letters actually sent from J. D. Salinger to his lover during a brief but intense romance in 1972–73. When, more than twenty-five years later, the former lover announced plans to auction the letters in the public arena of Sotheby's New York, *The New York Times* published a story on the controversy about the ownership of the documents, teasing its readership by printing a photograph of the letters, some typed and others handwritten but all partially legible, spread out as if someone had just begun reading them, and topped by a stamped and postmarked envelope with Salinger's return address:[2]

> On the one hand, the letters, like a high-intensity flashlight beamed into a musty attic, are a startlingly intimate glimpse of the most private and reclusive of American authors. Because Mr. Salinger, now 80, has so zealously guarded his private life and last wrote for publication in 1965, the letters will surely intrigue scholars and others interested in his work.
>
> On the other hand, they are as private as correspondence can be, essentially love letters to someone he describes almost from the start as a kindred soul. As such they will no doubt strike many as a grievous invasion of Mr. Salinger's consistently and insistently stated desire to maintain his privacy.

For Mr. Salinger, the question of epistolary decorum is frighteningly real, but for most of the letters treated in this book, the issue is less of reality than of literary or fictional effect. Of course, the distinction between "real" and fictive letters is often unclear, both in antiquity and now. For example, can we count as "real" the letters of Cicero, although they were quasi-public compositions, clearly written with a view to eventual publication? In most cases, we are dealing with two sets of readers: the actual addressee, the first reader who expects some glimpse at intimacy, and the wider public, secondary readers, reading over the shoulder, who may expect and achieve something entirely different from their reading experience. But the epistolary mode encourages both sets of readers and critics towards the misguided assumption that let-

[2] P. Applebome, "Love Letters in the Wind," in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, May 12, 1999, B1.

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ters necessarily reveal a kind of "pure" emotion, the depths of the writer's soul. Thus the critic Demetrius of Phalerum, whose work is dated between 100 BCE and 100 CE, tells us that "one writes a kind of image of one's soul when one writes a letter" (*On Style* 227), and Basil, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea agrees: "words are truly the images of the soul" (*Letter* 9).[3]

The image of epistolary immediacy persists through the ages. Heloise turns to letters to communicate with her beloved Abelard because "they have soul, they can speak, they have in them all the force which expresses the transports of the heart."[4] Much later Dr. Johnson echoes her words:[5]

> A man's letters ... are only the mirror of his breast, whatever passes within him is shown undisguised in its natural process. Nothing is inverted, nothing distorted, you see systems in their elements, you discover actions in their motives.

So, too, Samuel Richardson, in the preface to *Clarissa*, describes his idea of "writing to the moment," in which letters are used to embody an emotional situation still in process, revealing a character in the middle of a crisis. Letters represent the ongoing experience of the present as a critical moment, seized and recorded by the letter writer:[6]

> ... the letters on both sides are written while the hearts of the writers must be supposed to be wholly engaged in their subjects: the events at the time generally dubious – so that they abound not only with critical situations, but with what may be called *instantaneous* descriptions and reflections, which may be brought home to the breast of the youthful reader; as also, with affecting conversations, many of them written in the dialogue or dramatic way.[7]

The letter has always seemed a particularly personal and immediate mode of expression, as if its very form encouraged intimacy and directness.

My approach in this study will be to attempt to challenge

[3] The image is discussed in H. Koskenniemi, *Studien zur Idee und Phraseologie des griechischen Briefes bis 400n. Chr.* (Helsinki, 1956) 40–42.
[4] Quoted in C. M. Gillis, *The Paradox of Privacy: Epistolary Form in "Clarissa"* (Gainesville FL 1984) 129.
[5] Quoted in I. P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley CA 1957) 191.
[6] See J. Preston, *The Created Self: The Reader's Role in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York 1970) 39.
[7] Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa*, ed. A. Ross (London 1985) 35.

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these assumptions of epistolary "honesty." Epistolary technique always problematizes the boundaries between fiction and reality. While this issue is not limited to the epistolary genre – lyric poetry, for example, creates a different *ego* upon each occasion of reperformance – it has a huge impact on our reading of letters, whether literary or practical (i.e., actually sent). Whenever one writes a letter, one automatically constructs a self, an occasion, a version of the truth. Based on a process of selection and self-censorship, the letter is a construction, not a reflection, of reality. Thus the slippery question of sincerity may be bypassed for a closer look at epistolary self-representation, the function of the letter form, and the nature of the relationship between writer(s) and reader(s).

The very word "letter" encompasses a huge variety of epistolary forms in antiquity. There are no ancient Greek words to distinguish government from private letters, business contracts in letter form from love letters, St. Paul's epistolary sermons from Alciphron's sophistic epistolary fictions. Even when epistolary theorists in antiquity did attempt to categorize letter writing, they restricted themselves to descriptions of practical and functional forms: letters of recommendation, letters to a superior, and so on. It was the discovery of large numbers of non-literary papyrus letters at Oxyrhynchus in Egypt at the turn of the last century that precipitated the first real crisis in classical scholarship about the nature of letters. At stake was not just an issue of classification and historical accuracy. These scholars turned to the papyrus letters as keys to the past, documents they hoped would allow them unmediated and direct access to classical antiquity. But not all the letters answered their intellectual needs or fitted their images of the past they had previously inherited, and the ensuing debate raised issues of continuing relevance.

Adolf Deissmann, a biblical scholar working in the early 1900s, felt that a distinction needed to be made between such rudimentary "documents of life" as were being uncovered at Oxyrhynchus, and the related but very different "products of literary art" that had become canonical reading for generations of schoolboys.[8] The former he labelled a true "letter" ("Brief"), while the latter he

[8] A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, 4th edn., trans. L. Strachan (New York 1927) 227, originally published as *Licht vom Osten* (Tübingen 1923).

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termed an "epistle" ("Epistel"). His main goal was a reevaluation of the epistolary writings of Paul in the New Testament (which he argued were true letters), but his views strongly influenced contemporary classical scholarship.[9] He identified spontaneity as the defining characteristic of the true ancient letter, and created a Paul who was a champion of the lower classes, passionately arguing directly from the heart, his reported speech untouched by literary or rhetorical conventions.[10] In his zeal to recover the "true" Paul, he molded the evidence to suit contemporary German tastes.

According to Deissmann, a letter ("Brief") is first and foremost non-literary. It is confidential, personal in nature, intended for a specific addressee, and concerning only the writer and the reader, not a wider public; its message is private, yet essentially ephemeral, not meant to last beyond the moment of comprehension. He goes on to state that "there is no essential difference between the letter and an oral dialogue," and, since "its contents may be as various as life itself," letters may be seen as the "liveliest instantaneous photographs of ancient life."[11] The image of the instant photograph elicits two critical observations: first, Deissmann avers that, just as a photograph can capture a scene straight out of lived experience, so a letter directly reflects "real life," not retouched, colorized, or edited in any way. Second, the composed nature of the letter is ignored and its ephemerality underscored in order to emphasize the contrast between a letter and a literary epistle.

Meanwhile, an epistle "differs from a letter as the [Platonic] dialogue from a conversation."[12] An epistle resembles an oration, or a drama, or a variety of other artistic literary forms. It is precisely this dichotomy between natural and artistic, lifelike and artificial, that Deissmann sees as the decisive factor separating the two modes.[13] The epistle thus may have the *form* of a letter, but otherwise it is completely the opposite: it is public, its address functions merely as external ornament or pretext, and its message may be

[9] For an excellent assessment of the theological and scholarly positions against which Deissmann directed his arguments, see W. G. Doty, "The Classification of Epistolary Literature," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969) 183–99.
[10] S. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia 1986) 18.
[11] Deissmann (1927) 228.
[12] Deissmann (1927) 230.
[13] Deissmann (1923) 194–96: "Die Epistel unterscheidet sich vom Brief ... wie die Kunst von der Natur. Der Brief ist ein Stück Leben, die Epistel ein Erzeugnis literarischer Kunst."

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understood by a wider audience without any knowledge of the author or the nominal addressee. Deissmann thus divides letter and epistle by intent of the author (private vs. public), style (artless vs. sophisticated), and occasion (ephemeral vs. permanent). The letters of Paul are valued precisely for their privacy (we are merely the lucky eavesdroppers), for their artlessness (as if Paul had written directly from the heart), and their historical occasion; it is a fortunate accident that they survived to influence later generations. The idea that Paul's letters were written with a wider public in mind, that they followed strict epistolary conventions and formulations, or that they were specifically written to outlast their author, was untenable to scholars of Deissmann's generation.

When he acknowledges the existence of letters that fall in between his strict categories, Deissmann reveals the full extent of his assumptions about epistolary style and content: "letters ... more than half intended for publication, are bad letters; with their frigidity, affectation, and vain insincerity they show us what a real letter should not be."[14] But it is not enough to admit that *some* letters straddle the categories; in fact, *no* letters fall neatly into separate categories of wholly literary constructions or wholly natural and unedited outpourings of the heart.[15] The most personal and intimate letter depends on highly stylized epistolary conventions for its form, while the more literary productions are still inevitably connected to an individual, his addressee, and his society. Deissmann's distinction between what is natural and what is conventional, and the high ethical value he placed on "nature," were typical of his Victorian era, but are, in the end, misleading. It is counterproductive to define the letter so narrowly that we miss the larger phenomenon of what people actually did with letters in antiquity.[16]

[14] Deissmann (1927) 230.

[15] For objections to Deissmann, see Koskenniemi (1956) 88–95; K. Thraede, *Grundzüge griechisch-römischer Brieftopik* (Munich 1970) 1–4; and Stowers (1986) 18–20.

[16] Stowers (1986) 20. G. Luck, "Brief und Epistel in der Antike," *Das Altertum* 7 (1961) 77–84, while criticizing the inflexibility of Deissmann's formulation, remains firmly under his influence, comparing a "real" letter with its "einfache Nachricht eines unbekannten Mannes an seine Frau" favorably with the "künstlerische Objektivität" of one of Pliny's epistles to his wife (80–81). He also unquestioningly retains the idea of the superiority of nature over art: "Überhaupt soll der Briefstil möglichst anspruchslos und natürlich sein" (82).

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As Deissmann's theories were debated by new generations of scholars, the impulse to categorize did not disappear. We intuitively feel some substantive difference between letters that are actually exchanged between historical persons, and letters that are written as more self-consciously "literary" products for an audience not limited to that particular place and time, but we are hard pressed to explain which particular aspect of the letter determines its affiliation to one group or the other. Scholars turned to classification according to the writer's education,[17] to chronology, or to content or substance.[18] In his authoritative entry on epistolography, written for Pauly-Wissowa in 1931, J. Sykutris retained the distinction between private (i.e. "real") and literary letter, but went on to offer five separate letter types: official, literary-private, the letter as formal "disguise" for philosophical musing or other didactic purposes, the letter-in-verse, and the fictive letter.[19] In the 1950s, Heikki Koskenniemi investigated epistolary content and the writers' relationship as criteria for his typology.[20] He divided "real" letters into three types: (1) the impersonal letter containing news (2) the letter combining news and personal information and (3) the purely personal letter motivated by friendship rather than by the need to communicate specific information. Positing the relationship of the writer to the reader as a guideline, he differentiated between letters sent among friends and family, and those written by superiors to inferiors, or vice versa.[21]

In the late 1960s, pursuing Deissmann's interest in the Pauline letters but abandoning the letter/epistle opposition, W. G. Doty concluded that the basic differentiation between epistolary types is that some are primarily more private and others primarily less private in nature. He then established a classificatory system straight out of the ancient rhetorical handbooks: less private letters may be official (administrative, commercial), public (news, propaganda), "non-real" (pseudonymous, fictive), discursive (sci-

[17] See S. Witowski's (1906) division of papyrus letters as "epistulae hominum eruditorum," "modice eruditorum," and "non eruditorum"; his theories (*Epistulae privatae Graecae* xiii–xv) are discussed in Koskenniemi (1956) 12.
[18] See the analysis in Doty (1969) 195 and note 14.
[19] J. Sykutris, "Epistolographie," in *RE* suppl. 5 (1931) 185–220.
[20] Koskenniemi (1956) 88–95.
[21] This system recalls Cicero's divisions between public and private letters (*Pro Flacco* 37), and his argument for different writing styles according to category and addressee (*Ad Fam.* 15.21.4).

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entific, literary-critical), or other special types (erotic, poetic, inserted, dedicatory, etc.).[22]

The most recent attempt at epistolary classification rejects issues of content and privacy as defining criteria, and instead bases its division on the occasion or setting of the letter writing: according to Luther Stirewalt's *Studies in Ancient Greek Epistolography* (1993), "letter-settings are either normative, extended, or fictitious. They differ according to the degree to which the correspondents and the contexts move from reality to imaginary construct."[23] Thus, both official and personal letters are defined as "normative" because they are developed in actual correspondence between real people, and act as basic models for "derivative" uses of the form. Stirewalt emphasizes that this sort of letter writing is a social or political act, a communicative exchange conducted in both the private and the public sectors. Extended letters are characterized by an extension of both the audience – a personal letter may be passed around to a wider group, publicized in some fashion, or permanently displayed in the community – and the subject matter: "extended settings provide the contexts in which writers publicize non-epistolary topics for a group of people, identified or unidentified, and known or assumed to be interested. Such activity is represented by letters on technical and professional subjects and for propaganda."[24]

Stirewalt is quick to remind his readers that normative and extended letter settings do not by definition exclude acts of imagination or visualization: "Even in these settings the writer models the letter's reception, feels the presence of the recipients, anticipates their reaction ... he is engaged in creative activity through the medium of a letter."[25] But the shift from extended to fictitious hinges on the degree of imagination involved: "Imagination apart from reality, and conscious creativity move the letter from the normative settings into fictitious settings."[26] A fictitious letter is one in which the writer invents a persona or impersonates another writer, and may even manipulate responses; the actual sending of the letter is not required, and the audience may be a classroom (in the case of a fictional letter written as a school assignment) or a reading public.

[22] Doty (1969) 196–99. [23] Stirewalt (1993) 1. [24] Stirewalt (1993) 3.
[25] Stirewalt (1993) 3. [26] Stirewalt (1993) 3.

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There are several aspects of Stirewalt's classification that strike me as problematic. First, the labels "normative" and "derivative" inevitably carry with them a value judgment, just as a social or political agenda is to be understood as somehow more serious than a letter whose main role is entertainment (as if entertainment did not depend equally on a shared social or political context). This classification is as strictly hierarchical as Deissmann's distinction between the "real" letter and the literary epistle. A related problem is that Stirewalt's definitions are closely tied to the sender's intentions and the occasion of the first reading, but the recipient's reactions and potential second or third readings will blur some of his boundaries. Thus a "normative" letter can shift into the "extended" category when a spatially or temporally removed second reader chooses to use the letter as a window into the world of the sender and first reader, or if either sender or recipient decides to publish the letter in a collection. Second, Stirewalt acknowledges the workings of imagination in even his so-called "normative" and "extended" settings; he speaks of a difference according to degree, as the correspondents and contexts move from reality to imaginary construct. But the point is, if imagination and creativity function at the very root of the epistolary experience, and surface in even the most "normative" official correspondence – as, for instance, when the junior officer decides what to tell and what to hide from his superior – can they be used as reliable, objective criteria in distinguishing between epistolary types? When Stirewalt tries to differentiate between conscious and unconscious creativity ("conscious creativity move[s] the letter from normative settings into fictitious settings ... He consciously invents a persona ..."),[27] his categories begin to self-destruct. All letter writers consciously participate in the invention of their personas; there is no such thing as an unself-censored, "natural" letter, because letters depend for their very existence on specific, culturally constructed conventions of form, style, and content.

A letter precludes any sense of objective truth such as might be produced by the presence of an external commentator who establishes "reality," such as the narrating poet in epic, or by the interaction of voices, found in choral response or dialogue in drama. The letter writer thus is free to present himself in whatever light

[27] Stirewalt (1993) 3.

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