LETTERS IN PHILOSTRATUS’ *LIFE OF APOLLONIUS OF TYANA*

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According to Philostratus of Lemnos, Philostratus’ nephew, Apollonius is, alongside Dio Chrysostom, the model of the epistolary genre with philosophical content.¹ This judgement implies that there existed one or several collections of letters by the sage, which provided a first-hand source of information for the author of the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Philostratus indeed writes at the beginning of his work that he found information especially “from [Apollonius’] own letters” (1.2). Like Plutarch, who uses his characters’ correspondence to recount certain facts, Philostratus relies on Apollonius’ letters to attribute certain words or actions to him. But similarly to letters in Plutarch, the authenticity of Apollonius’ *Letters* is questionable,² not only from the viewpoint of modern criticism, but also sometimes in the author’s own opinion.³ A question we must therefore ask concerns the role which Philostratus plays in their reception, transmission, or even their creation. The relationships between the letters Philostratus uses, whether quoted or mentioned, and those that are transmitted by other means are varied. If Philostratus used existing letters, did he borrow them from one or several collections, or did he collect them in isolation?⁴ Did he retranscribe, paraphrase or rewrite them? Or, inversely, did he invent some of them, in particular from facts belonging to the legend of his character? It is impossible to answer this question, particularly since Philostratus adopts a many-sided and sophisticated attitude vis-à-vis the tradition, which in its turn often has a complex relationship with the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Philostratus, a versatile writer and author of the *Love Letters*, which also include fictitious letters addressed to historical figures, did not confine himself to collecting the letters passively. In the same way that a large number of the *Love

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¹ Philostratus of Lemnos, *Dialexis* on epistolography (text and translation in Malherbe 1988).
² When in italics and upper case, the term *Letter* refers to the corpus of Apollonius’ *Letters* that manuscripts have transmitted independently of the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.
³ It is, for example, the case for the letters of Brutus: cf. Moles 1997.
⁴ He says that he himself assembled a large number of letters (7.35) and explains that a collection kept by Hadrian did not include all the letters (8.20).
Letters were subjected to formal transformations which makes their epistolary nature almost unrecognizable,\textsuperscript{5} Philostratus engages in a series of generic, structural and enunciative manipulations of Apollonius’ letters, by inserting them in a narrative text and a precise dramatic context, which tend to alter radically their form, content, function and meaning. Philostratus thereby aligns himself with the ancient tradition of manipulating letters as objects and as texts, but using a particular strategy and—rather paradoxically—obscuring the voice of the person whose letters he is quoting.

I. LETTERS AND STRUCTURE OF THE \textit{LIFE OF APOLLONIUS OF TYANA}

The \textit{Life of Apollonius of Tyana} contains around forty passages in which a letter, an exchange of letters, or the correspondence of one person (generally Apollonius) is mentioned.\textsuperscript{6} These passages are distributed evenly throughout the work, with a greater concentration in the two central books (3 and 4).\textsuperscript{7} If we take into account only those letters quoted partially or in full, this concentration is even more marked, particularly in books 4, 5 and, to a lesser extent, 6.\textsuperscript{8} While it is unlikely that Philostratus sought a perfectly balanced distribution of the letters, it is clear they have a structuring function in the \textit{Life} as a whole: letters appear at the end of six books out of eight, a proportion which appears too high to be coincidental; even if these letters are not always the final point, their presence at important points in the structure of the work is striking. The sending of letters often accompanies the hero’s journeys which constitute a major process in the symbolical construction of the \textit{Life},\textsuperscript{9} and which mainly coincide with the division into books.

So in 2.40–41, the Indian king Phraotes writes a letter of recommendation to the gymnosophists just before the departure of Apollonius, who is about to visit them. The letter asks them to send back Apollonius only after bestowing their knowledge on him, which he announces precisely at the end

\textsuperscript{6} Cf. 1.2, 7, 15, 23, 24, 32; 2.17, 32, 40; 3.16, 28, 38, 51; 4.5, 22, 26, 27, 33, 40, 46; 5.2, 10, 31, 38, 39, 40, 44; 6.18, 27, 29, 30, 31, 33; 7.8, 10, 31, 35, 42; 8.7 (\textit{bis}), 20, 27, 28.
\textsuperscript{7} The distribution is as follows (the first figure corresponds to the number of passages in which letters are mentioned, and the second to the number of letters): book 1 = 4 / 3; 2 = 3 / 4; 3 = 4 / 4; 4 = 7 / 11; 5 = 7 / 10; 6 = 5 / 6; 7 = 5 / 5; 8 = 5 / 7.
\textsuperscript{8} They have 6, 4 and 3 occurrences respectively, compared with 1 for books 2, 3, and 7, and 2 for books 1 and 8.
\textsuperscript{9} Cf. Elsner 1997.