The Rhetoric of Desire in Philostratus's *Letters*[1]

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Since P. Rosenmeyer's groundbreaking 2001 study on Greek epistolography [49], the collections of pseudonymous and fictional letters written during the first centuries C.E. have begun to attract some scholarly interest.[2] Philostratus' *Letters* has not benefited from this renewed attention; it still remains a relatively neglected text. In the following pages, I want to suggest a new reading of these short vignettes. I will propose that they should be understood as sophisticated texts that reflect and mirror their own status as love letters on several levels. In particular, I want to argue that R. Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse* (first published in 1977 [9]) shares a number of traits with Philostratus's text and that we arrive at a better understanding of the ways in which Philostratus's *Letters* establishes its own special discourse of desire when we read these two texts side by side.

Looking at Barthes's book alongside Philostratus's *Letters*, readers will immediately be struck by a number of obvious similarities. However, as trained classicists, we have learned to mistrust analogies which may be purely serendipitous. When modern poets such as Ezra Pound or H. D. recreate the aesthetics of Greek lyric fragments,[3] they react to a state of | the text produced by the vicissitudes of transmission, not (or not only?) to some quality inherent in Sappho's or Alcaeus's poetry. The same is true for Philostratus's *Letters*, and it would be naïve to base interpretive approaches on such contingent factors. The textual history of Philostratus's *Letters* is complex and muddled. It will be necessary to summarize a few of the problems so readers will be able to distinguish fortuitous resemblances from meaningful parallels.

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As Jaś Elsner [17:6] writes, the textual transmission of Philostratus's *Letters* creates a "nightmare for the modern editor." There are (at least) five areas that present major difficulties: (1) The text of numerous *Letters* is transmitted in a shorter and a more elaborate version, and it is unclear whether we are looking at later additions to the original text or whether an original version has later been abbreviated. Older scholarship [44:I] suggested that these versions might represent two different recensions, the shorter one written by Philostratus in his youth, the lengthier one a new edition undertaken late in his life. More recent studies have rejected this hypothesis as pure speculation.[4] (2) Different manuscripts contain different letters, and it is unclear whether all the transmitted letters form a unified corpus which was meant to be read as a whole. (3) The order of the letters varies in our manuscripts. (4) The usual signs of epistolary style, such as formulas of greeting and closing, are present in part of the manuscript tradition only, and they are inconsistent across textual witnesses.[5] (5) All these difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that no satisfactory critical edition is available. The Loeb edition [1], which most scholars use today, is based on Kayser's second edition [43], which

1 Earlier versions of this paper were read at Durham University and Ruhr University Bochum; the discussions were extremely helpful and stimulating, and I wish to thank all participants. In the fall term 2014, I had the opportunity to present it to graduate students in a seminar that I taught at Stanford University; again, I learned much from the discussion and am grateful to all those who helped me rethink my argument. Owen Hodkinson read the manuscript and made some important suggestions. Rita Felsky provided helpful advice at a crucial moment; for this, too, I wish to express my gratitude.

2 See, e.g., the edited volumes Morello/Morrison [41]; Hodkinson/Rosenmeyer/Bracke [32]; Vox [61].

3 See Gregory [26].

4 I have not been able to consult Raïos [47] and have to rely on reviews and reports, see Vox [60]; Vancamp [57]; Radif [46]; Declerck [13]; Stefec [53:67 n. 15].

5 Follet [18] tries to make use of the variations in titles and addressees to establish a stemma of the manuscripts.

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in turn is based on his 1844 edition [44].[6] Kayser's editorial work was deficient even for its own time, and its shortcomings are of such nature that a completely new edition is badly needed.[7] Follet [18:135] announced work on such a new edition, but so far, it has not been published.

258 — 259 These uncertainties make it difficult to consider Philostratus's *Letters* a "book" in the sense of a structured collection of shorter texts tied | together by authorial (or even editorial) intention. Nevertheless, a case can be made for reading at least the greater part of the transmitted letters as a somewhat coherent corpus. A group of fifty-three letters is shared by most manuscripts;[8] these are exclusively "erotic" texts, addressed to (mostly anonymous) boys and women. Most of the remaining twenty letters are not "erotic": they are addressed to named individuals and treat subjects other than love and desire. In some cases, the names of addressees of this latter group are those of well-known Greek writers, and modern readers are left wondering if these texts are fictitious letters addressed to these authors (most of whom lived long before Philostratus).[9] A thorough study of the transmission may be able to provide more certainty, but given the fact that the "erotic" letters are shared across most textual witnesses, there is some support for the tentative assumption that they form one collection. In the following pages, I will be concerned with these erotic letters and explore the ways in which they construct desire and love by considering the similarities to Barthes's *Lover's Discourse*.

Roland Barthes published his *Fragments d'un discours amoureux* [9] in 1977 (English translation *A Lover's Discourse. Fragments*, by Richard Howard [5], published in 1978), at a point in his long and illustrious career when he was deeply disillusioned with the scientific and systematic aspirations of his earlier structuralist work. A number of books and articles written during these last years of his life (Barthes was killed in an accident in March 1980) deliberately and carefully avoid all "totalities," all gestures claiming narrative or scientific coherence; instead, Barthes chose shorter forms of expression, fragmented and discontinuous.[10] Moreover, Barthes emphasized his subjectivity and personal voice in these new writings. *A Lover's Discourse* is the most striking example | of this new style, and it was immensely successful; Barthes (who had published works for a larger intellectual public before) suddenly became a celebrity and was interviewed and reviewed in mass media.[11] The book originated in a seminar Barthes taught in Paris, but it eschews most scholarly apparatus; instead, it presents, under sometimes mysterious titles such as "atopos" or "Gradiva," and in an emphatically subjective manner, situations, emotions, quotations, images that depict the isolation, the desire, and the affective language of a person in love. In marginal notes, Barthes often points to the origin of the material he treats, but he does not give precise references, and he is always quick to connect these bits and pieces with his own authorial persona.

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Before looking at the parallels, we should acknowledge that there are of course a number of fundamental differences between Barthes's project and the corpus of Philostratus's *Letters*; I want

6 I will quote the text of the *Letters* after [1]; I have occasionally modified their translation so as to be closer to the Greek text.

7 See [1:404–5]; Stefec [53:64–7]; for the unusual editorial history of the *Letters* in the seventeenth century, see Hägg [27].

8 A clear overview of these complex questions can be found in [1:397–404].

9 The most famous names are Epictetus (42, 65, 70), Chariton (66), and Philemon (67); cf. Follet [18:140–2]. *Letter* 73, preserved in only two manuscripts, has elicited more scholarly interest than the rest of the collection: it is addressed to the empress Julia Domna and asks her to "persuade Plutarch […] not to take offence at the sophists." Scholars have been divided over the question whether this remark refers to Plutarch of Chaironeia (who had been dead for more than a century when the letter was written) or to a namesake who was a contemporary of Julia and Philostratus, with a majority of interpreters now accepting that Philostratus is asking his addressee to hold a "dialogue with the dead." A good summary of the question with additional bibliography can be found in the latest discussion, Demoen/Praet [14].

10 Barthes [6] is a profound reflection about this new turn in his own career; see further Coste [12].

11 See Dosse [15:2.233].

to begin by pointing out some of the most important ones. If Barthes constantly quotes modern authors such as Freud and Lacan, Sartre and La Rochefoucauld, and, above all, Goethe's *Werther*, this is not only an evident sign that his world is historically separate from Philostratus's, but also a clear indication of fundamental differences in the way both writers construct human existence. Barthes writes against the backdrop of modern subjectivity and the ideal of Romantic love on the one hand, the modern deconstruction of these concepts by psychoanalysis and philosophy on the other hand, and his text expects readers to be fully aware of all the ideological baggage they carry. His fragmentary discourse can tap into a wealth of topoi and figures [5:5], an entire "encyclopedia of affective culture" [5:7] that he shares with today's readers. This is obviously not the case for Philostratus, whose model of love and desire was accessible to his contemporaries, yet remains opaque and difficult to understand for modern readers, even when they are professional classicists, even after so many years of brilliant scholarship on ancient sexuality and ancient *erōs*.

One area where the gap between Barthes's modern perspective and Philostratus's ancient view on love and desire becomes glaringly obvious is gender. In the Philostratean world, there can be no doubt that the writer of the *Letters* and thus the subject of desire is male (see Vicente Sánchez [59:37]). Transmitted ancient documents, be they literary or archeological, overwhelmingly display an elite male perspective. It would be rash to infer that ancient society as a whole had no place for expressions of female desire, but overall, it is certainly correct to say that the ideological construction of sexuality saw the male as the active, pursuing, desiring subject while the | female was relegated to the role of the object.[12] For Barthes, the configuration of gender roles is fundamentally different, and he emphasizes that this is a product of historical developments, not due to some illusory "human nature" ([5:13–4]; italics in the original text): "Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the Woman […]. It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so […]. It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized." These constructions of femininity and masculinity again derive from the gender ideology of Romanticism and of bourgeois society and are different from gender roles in Greco-Roman antiquity.

There are areas in which Philostratus and Barthes seem to use a similar approach to gender roles: when Barthes talked about his work on *A Lover's Discourse* in an interview, he pointed out that he had consciously avoided all hints which would have identified the gender of the object of desire ([7:5]; emphasis in the original text): "[…] I was careful to de-emphasize the sexual difference. Unfortunately, French is not a language that makes this kind of thing very easy. 'The beloved object' has the advantage of being an expression that doesn't take sides on the sex of *whom one loves*."[13] Philostratus's *Letters* are addressed to women as well as to boys, and Barthes would have found it congenial that some of the *Letters* are addressed to a woman in one part of the manuscript tradition, to a boy in another part.[14] Nevertheless, this is merely a superficial similarity that conceals underlying differences. Philostratus's indifference to the gender of his "beloved object" should be understood within the terms of his own society: in the first centuries C.E., pederasty had become a contentious issue among Greek intellectuals,[15] and Roman attitudes towards homoeroticism had always been ambivalent (MacMullen [37], Veyne [58]). In the presence of these controversies, addressing letters to both women and boys, without any distinction, can be seen as exhibiting a "classical Greek"

12 Some exceptions prove the rule; see Toscano [56].
13 For this aspect of Barthes's text, see Kauffman [33:109–10].
14 Follet [18:138–9] sensibly suggests that this may be due to the moralizing intervention of Christian scribes.
15 See Goldhill [22:46–111]; Swain [55:102–30]. Against Foucault's [19:189] claim that "reflection on the love of boys lost some of its intensity, its seriousness, its vitality" during the imperial period, see the convincing refutation in McGlathery [40].

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identity.[16] The position | of this particular form of homoeroticism within the ideological framework of antiquity is quite unlike the role of homosexuality in late twentieth-century Western society.[17]

There are other similarities between Barthes and Philostratus that are superficial or shallow rather than meaningful. Barthes, who famously proclaimed the "death of the author" [8:142–8] and who was careful to avoid any hint of autobiographical writing in *A Lover's Discourse*, would have appreciated the confusion about the authorship of Philostratus's *Letters*: there is no certain way of knowing if the *Letters* were written by the same author as the *Life of Apollonius* and the *Lives of the Sophists* (who may also be the author of the *Gymnasticus*, the *Heroicus*, and of the first series of *Images*) or by another writer named Philostratus.[18] However, the fact that we are no longer able to tie the *Letters* to a certain author does not mean that their origin was mysterious to contemporary readers.

Furthermore, Barthes begins his essay with a chapter "How this book is constructed" [5:3–9]. In some manuscripts, Philostratus's *Letters* are similarly accompanied by a letter to one Aspasius that gives a few hints on epistolary style.[19] Such a treatise on epistolary writing is mentioned by Philostratus in his *Lives of the Sophists* (2.33; 628) as a work of the sophist Philostratus of Lemnos. However, this treatise has not been transmitted with the other *Letters* and can thus not be considered a part of the "collection," even in the loosest sense of the word. The parallel that both "books" begin with a methodological introduction is thus a mere artifact of the transmission of Philostratus's works.

A more meaningful similarity is the random order in which the short sections or letters appear in both collections. For Barthes, this is an important aspect of his book, as he explains in his introduction: "the lover speaks in bundles of sentences but does not integrate these sentences on a higher level, into a work; his is a horizontal discourse: no transcendence, no deliverance, no novel (though a great deal of the fictive)" [5:7]. To further emphasize this discontinuity, he "cut the work up into fragments | and put them into alphabetical order" [7:286]. In Philostratus's case, the question is more complex: when we read these texts, we realize that the topics treated in them are highly repetitive, that there is a certain number of motifs that occur again and again; Rosenmeyer [49:323] has rightly called them "a sophistic exercise in *variatio*." Variation seems indeed one of the most important principles guiding this collection of letters, as a few examples will demonstrate: *Letter* 19 is addressed to a boy, 38 to a woman; both addressees are prostitutes. Yet both letters surprise their readers by praising prostitution instead of condemning it: 19 emphasizes that the boy's beauty is common to all like water and the sun; 38 praises the beautiful woman by citing mythological examples that vindicate her promiscuity (cf. Rosenmeyer [49:328–8], Suárez de la Torre [54:120–1]); a common argument is thus applied in a surprising manner to both genders.

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In other cases, the variation consists in stark contrast: *Letter* 58 commends a boy for shaving ("As eyes that are shut are not a pleasant sight, so it is with a handsome fellow's cheeks if they are hairy"); 15, to the contrary, emphasizes that the first beard makes the addressee even more beautiful ("now that you are showing your first down, you are more manly than you were and more nearly perfect").[20] These texts appear to refer to each other and expect readers to perceive their similarity or polarity, but there are no obvious narrative developments that would impose a certain structure on these related letters—they can be read in any order. One could even argue that the author went

16 This interpretation holds true even if, as Williams [63:69–78] has argued, the Romans did not see pederasty as a particularly "Greek" attitude.

17 Halperin [28] may have overstated the difference between ancient pederasty and modern homosexuality, but I believe that his basic argument is valid.

18 See [1:387–94], Rosenmeyer [49:322–3], Goldhill [23:287–8], Vicente Sánchez [59:19–20]; on the vexed question of the Philostrati, cf. de Lannoy [16].

19 Not in [1]; text in Philostratus [43:2.257–8], text and translation in [38:42–3]; cf. [45:32–3].

20 On this motif, see Suárez de la Torre [54:119–20].

out of his way to prevent readers from perceiving any narrative progress: in *Letter* 54, the writer asks the addressee to accept a gift of roses and sleep on them; *Letter* 46 praises the addressee for having used the roses as a bed. At first sight, this would look like a story unfolding. However, while 54 is addressed to a woman (cf. οἵαν γυναῖκα), 46 is addressed to a boy (cf. χρησάμενος): the cohesion is deceptive; these letters seem to frustrate any expectation of narrative continuity and warn their readers against any attempt at connecting the dots.

Hence, while the random order of the *Letters* in the manuscripts is a result of an unreliable and problematic transmission, these texts cannot be arranged in any definitive order that would be inherently superior to any other.[21] The random order is not merely siginificant, it mir|rors an important quality of the *Letters*: every letter appears to exist in isolation; there is no narrative progress or obvious cohesion of these texts. This can be compared to "the radical discontinuity of [the] linguistic torment unfolding in the lover's head" which Barthes [7:286] mentions: by refusing order and continuity, both texts defer narrative and sexual fulfillment.

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One of the very few features of the *Letters* that provides some cohesion appears to be the voice of the writer, which seems to be uniform across the entire collection. However, we soon realize that this writer (who remains anonymous) does not provide enough information about himself to get a clear picture of his identity. Some of the *Letters* depict him as poor (7. 23) or as an exile (8. 28. 39),[22] but while there is nothing in the other letters that is completely incompatible with this presentation, it is not prominent across the entire corpus. While the uncertainty about the historical author of the *Letters* is a consequence of the vicissitudes of transmission, this refusal to provide the speaking subject with any hint of a life outside of the text is a meaningful analogy to Barthes's avoidance of autobiography: Philostratus's writer is reduced to his role as a lover,[23] "in his nakedness" (Barthes [7:303]. In both cases, this one-dimensionality of the desiring subject is caused by similar circumstances. Barthes's book is not meant to be autobiographical, but wants to reproduce the discourse of any lover, of the archetypical lover; the end of his introductory chapter reads [5:9]: "So it is a lover who speaks and who says." In Philostratus's case, the writer is archetypical as well: fictitious letters mostly developed out of rhetorical exercises of the "what would X say or write in a given situation" variety, the so-called *ēthopoiia*.[24] Hence, these short texts are meant to capture the typical words that a lover might write in a letter; they want to convey a general impression of how he reacts to different circumstances. The analogy to Barthes's approach is thus much more than a fleeting similarity. |

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Philostratus's writer is forever engaged in a monologue: a number of *Letters* contain pleas or invitations, especially in their concluding words (cf. the end of 17 μετάδος ἡμῖν ὧν ἔχεις "share with me what you have" and 19, 24, 26, 34, 36, 45, 46, 47), yet we never hear of any reply or reaction to these requests (Goldhill [23:294–5]). Other letters point to future actions or developments; as an example, I quote the end of *Letter* 39, in which the writer presents himself as an exile and asks the addressee to have mercy on him:

21 See Goldhill [23:289]; for a similar argument about the (lack of) order in Alciphron's *Letters*, see König [34:271–2].

22 See Suárez de la Torre [54:118–9].

23 Cf. Goldhill [23:296–7].

24 On the connection between letter-writing and *ethopoiia*, see Rosenmeyer [49:259–66], Schmitz [51:90–1], Malosse [39], Goldhill [23:297], Vicente Sánchez [59:26–8], Gallé Cejudo [21:328–30]. Rosenmeyer [49:324] is wrong to write that "we are invited to imagine the author Philostratus himself in love, not hiding behind an invented persona": learned contemporary readers of the *Letters* would have been aware of the rhetorical tradition of the *ethopoiia*, and of the many ways in which authors of the Second Sophistic played with different identities.

> ἀνάστησον καὶ σὺ τὸν βωμὸν καὶ κακῶς πράττοντα ἐλέησον ἄνθρωπον, μὴ δὶς γένωμαι φυγὰς καὶ τῆς πατρίδος στερηθεὶς καὶ τοῦ πρὸς σὲ ἔρωτος σφαλείς· ἐὰν γὰρ ἐθελήσῃς, κατελήλυθα.
> Do you also erect this altar [of Compassion] and show pity on a man who is in distress, so that I may not be twice exiled, both deprived of my country and foiled of my love for you; for, if you take pity, I am forthwith restored.

Yet readers never learn whether the recipient did indeed show pity and answered the writer's prayers. The fact that so many of the *Letters* thus point to the future, but never follow up on these hints highlights the isolation and static nature of the writer: unlike a collection of "real" letters, in which we would expect to find traces of actual contact between the correspondents (such as references to prior requests denied or fulfilled), Philostratus's *Letters* take pains to present a purely one-sided conversation.[25] In this case, Barthes himself describes the parallel between love letter and erotic discourse that helps us understand this feature of Philostratus's *Letters* [5:158]: "Like desire, the love letter waits for an answer; it implicitly enjoins the other to reply [...]." The unanswered references to a common future uniting lover and beloved in Philostratus's *Letters* make this structure of erotic discourse explicit; they represent gaps (indeterminacies, in W. Iser's terminology) that challenge the audience's sense of narrative development and thus lay bare the device of what constitutes a love letter. | 265 / 266

In *Letter* 25, we see that a request made in the text appears to be fulfilled: the letter admonishes a woman that anger makes her features less pleasant and asks her to relent. At the end of the text, we get the impression that she follows the writer's advice: εἰ δὲ ἀπιστεῖς οἷς λέγω, τὸ κάτοπτρον λαβοῦσα ἴδε σου τὸ πρόσωπον ἠλλαγμένον· εὖγε, ὅτι ἐπεστράφης. "And if you don't believe what I say, take your mirror and see how your countenance has changed. Good for you for turning around!"

It is not easy to imagine the setting in which this letter has been written and read:[26] is the writer in the same room as the addressee and watches her looking into the mirror? Why does he write a letter if he could talk to the addressee? And what exactly is meant with ἐπεστράφης?[27] Even here, readers remain puzzled and are left wondering if the letter has actually been successful in its appeal.

Similar observations can be made about the *Letters'* relation to "past" contacts. It is relatively rare that the writer refers to previous communication, and when he does so, it is generally to point out that this earlier exchange was incomplete or negative. As an example, I quote the beginning of *Letter* 14: Χαῖρε, κἂν μὴ θέλῃς, χαῖρε, κἂν μὴ γράφῃς, ἄλλοις καλέ, ἐμοὶ δὲ ὑπερήφανε. "My greetings, even if you do not wish them; my greetings, even though you do not write, for others fair, for me contemptuous!"

In this case, the isolation of the writer is highlighted by the lack of communication: the recipient has not written. It is thus more than a superficial similarity when we compare this isolation and fragmentation of Philostratus's first-person writer to Barthes's project, which insists on offering "fragments" of a lover's discourse and on highlighting the discontinuity and absence of reciprocity in this discourse; in Barthes's own words [5:7], it is "the site of someone speaking within himself,

25 Cf. Goldhill [23:296]: "[...] there is little sense of any developing relationship or active exchange between the 'ego' of the letter and the recipient of the letter." On similar "fragile communication" in Alciphron's *Letters*, see König [34:267–8].

26 Cf. Rosenmeyer [49:330–1]; for similar implausibilities in Alciphron's *Letters*, see Schmitz [51:95–6]; cf. Hodkinson [30:289–95].

27 The majority of manuscripts transmits the reading ἀπεστράφης, which Kayser adopts into his text; in this case, we would have to translate "you did well to look away." Benner and Fobes [1] read, with some manuscripts, ἐπεστράφης, but the meaning is less obvious than their translation "Good for you for heeding the warning!" The best translation in *LSJ* seems to be "pay attention" (ἐπιστρέφομαι II.3.a), but this could refer to looking into the mirror as well as to modifying her behavior.

amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.”

266 — 267 For the reader of Philostratus’s *Letters*, this impression of isolation and frustration is further highlighted by narrative hints that seem to | adumbrate a fuller love story, but do not provide enough information to reconstruct or even imagine what this story could be like. *Letter* 32 seems to give us a fleeting glimpse of a sympotic setting:[28]

> Τὰ μὲν ὄμματά σου διαυγέστερα τῶν ἐκπωμάτων, ὡς δύνασθαι δι’ αὐτῶν καὶ τὴν ψυχὴν ἰδεῖν, τὸ δὲ τῶν παρειῶν ἐρύθημα εὔχρουν ὑπὲρ αὐτὸν τὸν οἶνον, τὸ δὲ λινοῦν τοῦτο χιτώνιον ἀντιλάμπει ταῖς παρειαῖς, τὰ δὲ χείλη βέβαπται τῷ ῥόδων αἵματι, καί μοι δοκεῖς καὶ τὸ ὕδωρ φέρειν ὡς ἀπὸ πηγῶν τῶν ὀμμάτων καὶ διὰ τοῦτο εἶναι Νυμφῶν μία. πόσους ἱστᾷς ἐπειγομένους; πόσους κατέχεις παρατρέχοντας; πόσους μὴ φθεγξαμένη καλεῖς; ἐγὼ πρῶτος, ἐπειδὰν ἴδω σε, διψῶ καὶ ἵσταμαι μὴ θέλων, τὸ ἔκπωμα κατέχων· τὸ μὲν οὐ προσάγω τοῖς χείλεσι, σοῦ δ’ οἶδα πίνων.
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> Your eyes are more translucent than drinking cups, so that even your soul can be seen through them; and the blush of your cheeks is lovelier than the color of wine itself; and this linen dress of yours reflects the brilliance of your cheeks; and your lips are tinged with the blood of roses; and you seem to me to give men drink from your eyes as if your eyes were fountains, and therefore to be one of the Nymphs. How many men hastening on their way do you bring to a halt? How many men speeding by do you detain? How many do you call to yourself when you raise your voice? I first and foremost, when I see you, feel thirst, and against my will stand still, and hold the cup back; and I do not bring it to my lips, but I know that I am drinking of you.

Drinking cups and wine, a sexy dress, and a company of men admiring the addressee appear before 267 — 268 our eyes as we read this *Letter*. It seems to depict some complex setup in which the writer and the recipient share the same physical space (as seems to be indicated by the present tenses), yet the | hints are not sufficient to imagine the story behind this fleeting scene. Why would the first-person narrator write a letter if he can see the recipient?[29] Is he just one of the men present at the banquet, or is his relationship with the woman privileged? Our questions remain as unanswered as those formulated in the letter, and our longing for a full love story remains as unquenched as the writer’s thirst.

This feature of Philostratus’s text can be compared to Barthes’s insistence that his “lover’s discourse” is quite different from a love novel: “[…] I took Draconian precautions so that my book *would not be* a ‘love story.’ So that the lover would be left in his nakedness, as a being inaccessible to the usual forms of social recuperation—the novel in particular” ([7:303]; emphasis in the original text). In both cases, this repudiation of narrative (and thus erotic) fulfillment achieves a similar effect: our reading process is not marked by suspense (“will the lover secure the love of his addressee?”) or by contentment about a happy ending, but we focus exclusively on the speaking subject and his desire. Epistolarity as a genre relies on discrete narrative units that are tied together into a continuous whole by the process of reading. In her study of the epistolary novel, Altman [2:183] rightly states that “narrative continuity in epistolary works is as illusionistically possible as pictorial continuity in pointillist paintings […].” By treating each letter as a moment frozen in time, Philostratus frustrates our longing for this sort of (perceived) continuity, just as his first-person writer’s longing for erotic fulfillment is constantly disappointed.

Ancient fictitious letters often mention physical aspects of their epistolary nature, such as instruments and materials of writing, messengers carrying the letters, or the precise circumstances in which they were written; these references serve to enhance and maintain “epistolary verisimilitude”

28 On this letter and its companion piece, *Letter* 33, see Walker [62:139–41], Gallé Cejudo [21:356–7].

29 See n. 26 above; on the motif of the erotic gaze, see Walker [62].

(Rosenmeyer [49:204–9]; Hodkinson [31:262–6]). Such references are surprisingly rare in Philostratus's *Letters*. What we do see instead are numerous allusions to objects that serve as intermediaries between the writer and his addressees. It is true that letters accompanying objects are a staple of both epistolary fiction and actual epistolary communication (König [34:262–5]), and we find some examples of this trope in Philostratus's texts, such as letters accompanying a gift of pome-grenades (45) or of figs (49): Ἔπεμψά σοι σῦκα ἠρινά, θαυμάζοις δ' ἂν αὐτῶν ἢ τὸ ἤδη ἢ τὸ ἔτι. "I am sending you spring figs; you may wonder at their coming already or at their coming still." |

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However, such objects have a more substantial function in many of Philostratus's *Letters*: instead of being simple gifts or offerings, they often serve as means of communication in their own right. A love letter usually contains a message to the beloved, attempts to move her or him, convey emotions, or express desire. In Philostratus's case, the letter is a mere pointer to another medium that carries the "real" message; it is a signifier of a signifier, so to speak. Hence, by adding a further layer of indirectness, these letters increase the distance between writer and addressee, between lover and beloved. We as readers witness the lovers' connection only through these texts, yet the letters are not themselves the medium of this communication, but just a companion to the real exchange; lovers and their emotions, gifts and objects all have disappeared like some Cheshire cat, leaving behind the empty grin of the text.

Roses are a type of object that recurs in a number of texts.[30] They are sent as tokens of admiration and love, and they serve as signifiers (46):

> Εὖ πεποίηκας στρωμνῇ χρησάμενος τοῖς ῥόδοις· ἡ γὰρ πρὸς τὰ πεμφθέντα ἡδονὴ σημεῖον μέγα τῆς πρὸς τὸν πέμψαντα τιμῆς, ὥστε κἀγώ σου δι' αὐτῶν ἡψάμην, καὶ γάρ ἐστιν ἐρωτικὰ καὶ πανοῦργα καὶ κάλλει χρῆσθαι εἰδότα. […] εἰ δὲ βούλει τι φίλῳ χαρίζεσθαι, τὰ λείψανα αὐτῶν ἀντίπεμψον μηκέτι πνέοντα ῥόδων μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ σοῦ.
> You have done well to use the roses for a bed also; for pleasure in gifts received is a clear indication of regard for the sender. So through their agency I also touched you, for roses are amorous and artful and know how to make use of beauty. […] If you wish to do a favor for a lover, send back what is left of them, since they now breathe a fragrance, not of roses only, but also of you.

As in 45 or 49, readers are to imagine that this letter accompanied a gift (in this case, of roses), but this letter takes the conceit one step further: the flowers are described as a stand-in for the sender (cf. "through | their agency ," δι' αὐτῶν); the qualities attributed to them are those of the lover: "they are amorous and artful and know how to make use of beauty." It is only through these intermediaries that the lover/writer will be able to "touch" the object of his love (which is a boy in this letter). Moreover, the roses serve as signs in both directions: pleasure about this gift will be a clear "indication" (*sēmeion*) of respect for the sender, and they will carry back the fragrance of the beloved boy. Direct contact between lover and beloved is thus replaced by semiological play; sexual desire is transformed into textual discourse.

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We observe a similar function of roses in 55, which can be read as a companion piece to 46. Here, the letter writer asks his (female) recipient to use the roses as a bed:

30 For a list of Philostratus's *Letters* mentioning roses, see Suárez de la Torre [54:115–6], Gallé Cejudo [21:358–9]; on roses in Greek erotic poetry in general, see Gow [25] on Theocritus 10.34; for the motif of the "bed of roses," cf. Nisbet/Hubbard [42:74].

> Εἰ κἀμὲ φεύγεις, ἀλλ᾽ ὑπόδεξαι κἂν τὰ ῥόδα ἀντ᾽ ἐμοῦ, καί σου δέομαι μὴ στεφανοῦσθαι μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ κοιμηθῆναι ἐπ᾽ αὐτῶν, καὶ γάρ ἐστιν ἰδεῖν μὲν καλά, οἷαν τὸ πῦρ ἔχει τὴν ἀκμήν, ἅψασθαι δὲ μαλακὰ καὶ πάσης στρωμνῆς ἁπαλώτερα ὑπὲρ τὸν Βαβυλώνιον κόκκον καὶ τὴν Τυρίαν πορφύραν, καὶ γὰρ εἰ σπουδαῖα ἐκεῖνα, ἀλλ᾽ οὐ πνεῖ καλόν. ἐνετειλάμην αὐτοῖς καὶ τὴν δειρήν σου φιλῆσαι καὶ τοῖς μαστοῖς ἐπελθεῖν καὶ ἀνδρίσασθαι, ἂν ἐφῇς, καί, οἶδα, ἀκούσεται. ὦ μακάρια, οἷαν γυναῖκα περιβάλλειν μέλλετε. ἀλλὰ δεήθητε αὐτῆς ὑπὲρ ἐμοῦ καὶ πρεσβεύσατε καὶ πείσατε, ἐὰν δὲ παρακούῃ, κατακαύσατε.
> If you avoid me, accept at least these roses in my place. I ask you not only to use them for a wreath, but to sleep on them, for they are beautiful to look at (they have a splendor like fire) and soft to the touch and more delicate than Babylonian scarlet and Tyrian purple; these are indeed magnificent, but don't smell good. I told them to kiss your lips and cling to your breasts and act like a man, if you allow them, and I know they will obey. Happy roses, what a woman you are about to embrace! Beg her on my | behalf, be my ambassadors, persuade her, but should she not listen, burn her.

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In this letter, the roses are not merely "amorous" as in 46, they are asked to "act like a man" (ἀνδρίσασθαι): the only way the writer can fulfill his sexual desire is by proxy (ἀντ᾽ ἐμοῦ). Hence, the roses are called "blessed" (μακάρια), since they will be able to touch the beloved woman who "avoids" (φεύγεις) the writer: for the reader, then, these roses become the ultimate symbol of the distance and lack of contact between writer and addressee. The letter ends on a note of uncertainty, as we have already seen in other cases: the roses are asked to beg on behalf of the writer, but if the addressee fails to react favorably, they should "burn" (κατακαύσατε) her (their "fiery" nature has been mentioned in the first part of the *Letter*). This underlines the writer's helplessness and distance: not only the imaginary fulfillment of his desire, even revenge for his failure is delegated to an intermediary and remain symbolic.

Barthes's *A Lovers's Discourse* revolves around the concept of absence; amorous discourse develops only because of the absence of the beloved and can be understood as a manipulation of absence [5:14–7]. Hence, love letters are probably the best example of this sort of discourse: they are usually written because of a separation between lover and beloved. Philostratus mirrors this separation within the text of his *Letters*: not only are the letters themselves traces of a communication between distant partners, in many cases, they mention other means of (often failed) communication. A "regular" love letter is a substitute for the writer, pleading his cause, professing his love. Philostratus's *Letter* 55 doubles this game of substitution: it talks about roses who are a substitute of the writer; it can thus be understood as a *mise en abyme* of letter-writing. This is the most important parallel between Barthes's book and Philostratus's *Letters*: like Barthes, Philostratus presents not an individual love story; instead, his *Letters* depicts the archetypical lover who struggles in vain to overcome the distance between himself and the object of his desire. By mirroring the absence of the letter writer within the structure of the text, Philostratus appears to be making the same point Barthes makes ([5:100]; italics in the original text): "[…] to know that writing compensates for nothing, sublimates nothing, that it is precisely *there where you are not*—this is the beginning of writing."

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Letter 62 is perhaps the most sophisticated and ingenious expression of this insight in the corpus (see Rosenmeyer [49:119–20], | Goldhill [23:301–2]). In it, we find another type of (physical, yet fictional) object to express the absence of communication between lover and beloved:

> Ὅτε δὲ ἔκρινε καὶ τὰς θεὰς ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος, οὔπω παρῆν ἡ ἐκ Λακεδαίμονος, εἰ δ᾽ οὖν, μόνην ἂν καλὴν ἀπεφήνατο, ἣν αὐτὸς ἐβούλετο. ὅπερ οὖν ἐκείνῳ τότε πρὸς τὴν κρίσιν ἐλλιπῶς ἔσχεν, ἐμοὶ νῦν ἐπανορθωθήσεται· μὴ κάμνετε, ὦ θεαί, μηδὲ ἐρίζετε, ἔχω γάρ, ἰδού, τὸ μῆλον. λαβέ, ὦ καλή, ᾗ καὶ νικᾷς τὰς θεάς, καὶ ἀνάγνωθι τὰ γράμματα. τά τε ἄλλα καὶ ἐπιστολῇ τῷ

μήλῳ κέχρημαι· ἐκεῖνο Ἔριδος, τοῦτο Ἔρωτος, ἐκεῖνο ἐσιώπα, τοῦτο φθέγγεται. μὴ ῥίψῃς, μὴ φάγῃς· οὐδὲ ἐν πολέμῳ πρεσβευτὴς παρανομεῖται. τί οὖν ἐπέσταλκα; αὐτὸ ἐρεῖ· "Εὐίππη, φιλῶ σε·" ὑπόγραψον ἀναγνοῦσα "κἀγὼ σέ." δέχεται τὸ μῆλον καὶ ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα.
When Alexander was sitting in judgment on the goddesses, the woman from Lacedaemon was not yet present; if she had been, he would have given the award for beauty to her, and to her alone, whom he himself desired. So, then, the defect in his judgment shall now be set right by me. Do not strive, ye goddesses, nor vie with one another; for lo! I hold the apple. Do you take it, my fair one, and be the vanquisher of the goddesses, and read the inscription. I have used the apple as a letter too. That former apple was an apple of Discord (Eris), this is an apple of Love (Eros). The former was silent; this one speaks. Don't throw it away, don't eat it: not even in war is an ambassador ill-used. What, then, is my message? The apple itself will tell you: "Euhippe, I love you." Read it and write underneath, "And I, you." There is room on the for these letters also.

This challenging text is typical of the literary tendencies of the second sophistic: it blends a number of classical intertexts and highlights its own textuality. It begins with a somewhat enigmatic reference [272 | 273] | to the judgment of Paris whose relevance to the situation of writer and addressee is not immediately clear. The reference is counterfactual: had Helen been present at the famous judgment, Paris would have chosen her over the three goddesses. It is not until the second sentence that the writer draws a parallel between the mythical narrative ("then," τότε) and the situation now (νῦν): he wants to "set right" (ἐπανορθωθήσεται) the mistake Paris made when he chose Aphrodite as the winner of the beauty contest. In this sentence, the central concept "absence" is emphasized: the shortcoming in Paris's judgment was his failure to take Helen into account because of her absence (οὔπω παρῆν). The writer of this letter will not make this mistake; his judgment will not be influenced by the absence of the addressee.

Moreover, this sentence demonstrates a feature that will be paramount throughout the text: the boundaries between different narrative (or rhetorical) levels are constantly blurred. The seemingly illogical statement "I will now correct the error that Paris committed" could be understood as a metaphorical way of saying "I will not make the same mistake Paris made." Yet when we read on, we see that the writer is addressing the goddesses (Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite, who were present at Paris's judgment) as if they could hear his words: "Do not bother, do not quarrel" (μὴ κάμνετε, ὦ θεαί, μηδὲ ἐρίζετε)—the reader (who does not yet know that the letter is written with a peculiar persuasive strategy) is here in doubt about the identity of the writer/speaker and of the addressee. It is only with the vocative "my fair one" (ὦ καλή) that the argumentative structure of the text becomes apparent: the writer claims that in his eyes, the addressee Euhippe (whose name will not be revealed until the end of the letter) is as superior to the goddesses as Helen would have been if Paris had been able to see her. The reason for this choice is made clear: both the addressee and Helen are objects of desire (ἣν αὐτὸς ἐβούλετο).

In the following sentences, this blurring of boundaries is taken even further: the writer "holds" (ἔχω) an apple, which he "offers" to his addressee. This apple is loaded with numerous cultural and literary references that make it a multidimensional object:

1. First and foremost, the apple is described as a gift to the beloved woman ("take it, my fair one," λαβέ, ὦ καλή). Apples are often mentioned in Greek erotic literature as gifts and tokens of sexual attraction.[31] In this function, [273 | 274] | the apple in this text is equivalent to the roses in other *Letters*; it is again described as a go-between to enable communication (πρεσβευτής, cf. πρεσβεύσατε in *Letter* 55).
2. The "Apple of Discord" (μῆλον [...] Ἔριδος) plays an important part in the myth of the judgment

31 There is a full documentation with annotated bibliography in Littlewood [36], supplemented by Harder [29:2.658–9].

of Paris. Like the apple in Letter 62, it bears an inscription; in Lucian's version (Dear. Jud. 7 and DMar. 7.1), it is inscribed with the words, "May the fair one take it" (ἡ καλὴ λαβέτω).[32] The myth describes the apple as both the origin of the conflict between the three goddesses and the award that Paris hands over to Aphrodite; it serves as the main intertext in this letter.

3. The motif of the inscribed apple used as a love letter has its origin in the story of Acontius and Cydippe, treated at length in Callimachus's *Aetia* (fr. 67–75 Pf.).[33] The story was subsequently picked up by a number of Latin poets (most notably Ovid, *Her.* 20–21) and by the late antique epistolographer Aristaenetus (*epist.* 1.10). However, Philostratus uses this motif in a different way: the words that Cydippe reads on her apple oblige her to marry Acontius; they are written in her voice ("I swear by Artemis that I will marry Acontius");[34] in Philostratus's *Letter*, on the other hand, the first person of the "inscription" is the male lover ("Euhippe, I love you!" Εὐίππη, φιλῶ σε); the apple serves as a "regular" letter.

As in *Letters* 25 and 32 (see n. 26 above), it is not easy to see what situation the text presupposes. On the one hand, the appeal to "take the apple" (aorist imperative λαβέ) and the interjection "lo!" (ἰδού) seem to depict the writer and the addressee as sharing a common space; the recipient appears to be in a position to accept the physical apple (Rosenmeyer [49:334]). Yet again, why would the lover write a letter in such a situation? Moreover, the letter oscillates between addressing Euhippe (λαβέ, νικᾷς, μὴ ῥίψῃς, μὴ φάγῃς, ὑπόγραψον) and apostrophizing the mythical goddesses | (μὴ κάμνετε, ὦ θεαί, μηδὲ ἐρίζετε), thus highlighting that this is not a straightforward conversation, but a highly stylized rhetorical showpiece.

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More importantly, however, we see that again, the physical object puts another layer of indirection and distance between writer and addressee: the writer seems engaged in a game of Russian dolls; instead of a straight declaration of love, Euhippe receives a letter mentioning an apple containing a written declaration. And the status of this apple remains precarious: in the fictional universe of this text, it is a physical object that holds the real message, the declaration of love to the addressee, and has thus more substance than the letter, which merely accompanies it; for the extradiegetical readers of Philostratus's *Letters*, the apple exists only in their imagination, shifting between myth, literary allusion, and tangible gift. It is thus no surprise that the aim of the writer's desire consists in receiving a written reply ("write underneath," ὑπόγραψον): as in *Letter* 46 (above, p. 13), erotic fulfillment is replaced by semiotic substitution; sexuality becomes textuality. In the case of our text, this movement is even more visible than in other cases since the letter draws the reader's attention to its status as a written text (cf. ἀνάγνωθι τὰ γράμματα, ἐπιστολῇ τῷ μήλῳ κέχρημαι, ἐπέσταλκα, ὑπόγραψον ἀναγνοῦσα, ταῦτα τὰ γράμματα): writing and reading become metaphors and replacements for making love.[35]

When Philostratus decided to write a series of letters about love, he had a wide range of cultural models available to depict such relationships: love affairs had been one of the central themes of New Comedy, and comic figures such as the rash young lover and the innocent girl, the cunning courtesan and the greedy procuress, or the effeminate parasite and the braggart soldier had become stock characters in texts of the second sophistic, as the writings of Lucian and Athenaeus, Alciphro and Aelian demonstrate. The Greek novel was immensely popular and offered an image of idealized love.

32 This is the form of the inscription that Lucian mentions twice, *Dear. Jud.* 7 and *DMar* 7.1; cf. *Dear. Jud.* 1 ἡ νικῶσα λαβέτω τὸ μῆλον; an alternative version "[gift] for the fairest one" or "for the fair one" ([δῶρον] τῇ καλλίστῃ/καλῇ) seems implied Schol. ad Lycophr. 93, *Clementin.* 6.2.9, Libanius, *Prog.* 2.27.1; cf. Hygin. *fab.* 92 *quae esset formosissima*. Philostratus's λαβέ, ὦ καλή looks at first sight like a reference to Lucian's text, but it seems more probable that both refer to a common source.

33 Harder [29:2.658–9] mentions other occurrences of inscribed apples; none of them is as prominent as the story of Acontius and Cydippe. On Philostratus's adaptation of this story, see Rosenmeyer [49:98–130].

34 Aristaenetus 1.10 ~ Callimachus *Dieg.* Z 1.3–4 = fr. 75a.3–4 Harder μὰ τὴν Ἄρτεμιν Ἀκοντίῳ γαμοῦμαι.

35 Cf. the puns on several meanings of the words γράφειν/γραφή in *Letter* 40.

Hellenistic love epigram provided an obvious model for shorter erotic texts, as did pastoral and lyric poetry. I contend that Philostratus's choice of the letter as a literary medium for love was motivated by his insight that a lover's discourse and epistolary writing have something important in common, viz. the absence of the recipient.[36] The | lover is most eloquent when he has not yet achieved the fulfillment of his desire, when his beloved is absent (as Barthes [5:15] writes: "the other is absent as referent, present as allocutory"); writing a letter presupposes the absence of the addressee. Both the lover and the writer thus replace immediate (oral/physical) contact with symbolic communication; instead of actually reaching their object, they can merely send signs of their emotions and intentions (see Barthes [5:74]). Philostratus draws our attention to this parallel by mirroring this lack of unmediated communication within the structure of his *Letters*: even the letters themselves have to rely on objects such as roses or apples to convey their message, and there is hardly any trace of real contact between lover and beloved.

Philostratus's Ἐπιστολαὶ ἐρωτικαί (if this is the title he gave to his collection) are "letters of (unfulfilled) desire" rather than "love letters." They can be understood as illuminating the very nature of the language of desire: the indifference towards the beloved's gender, the random order of the short vignettes and the refusal of narrative progress, the lack of response and the isolation of the writer, the lack of immediacy and the mirror images of writing and reading within the *Letters* all point in the same direction. Like Barthes, Philostratus opens up a "site of someone speaking within himself, *amorously*, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak" Barthes [5:3]. Like Barthes, he eschews the use of analytical language (Greek philosophy offered a wide range of theoretical approaches to the phenomenon of erotic desire) and instead used "the single action of a primary language (no metalanguage)" [5:3].

These observations might be seen as a fitting conclusion to this paper, and yet I want to end by pointing out another fundamental difference between Philostratus and Barthes, one that is at the heart of Philostratus's place in his culture. We have seen that Philostratus uses numerous quotations and allusions, intertexts and references in his *Letters*. At first sight, this may appear to be similar to Barthes: his *Lovers's Discourse* quotes a number of erotic texts, such as Goethe's *Werther* or John of Ruysbroeck; Barthes even puts the names of the authors he quotes in the margin of his book. Like Barthes, Philostratus is quite lavish with these references, as an example will demonstrate (*Letter* 39):

> Μηδὲ γράφειν φυγάδα ἀνέξῃ; […] ἔφευγε καὶ Ἀριστείδης, ἀλλ' ἐπανήρχετο, καὶ Ξενοφῶν, ἀλλ' οὐ δικαίως, ἔφευγε καὶ Θεμιστοκλῆς, ἀλλ' ἐτιμᾶτο καὶ παρὰ βαρβάροις, καὶ Ἀλκιβιάδης, ἀλλὰ καὶ παρετείχιζε τὰς Ἀθήνας, καὶ Δημοσθένης, ἀλλ' ὁ φθόνος αἴτιος. […] ἐδέξαντο | καὶ Ἀθηναῖοι Δήμητραν φεύγουσαν καὶ Διόνυσον μετοικοῦντα καὶ τοὺς Ἡρακλέους παῖδας ἀλωμένους […].
> Won't you suffer an exile even to write? […] Aristides too was an exile, but he returned to his native city; and Xenophon, but not justly so; Themistocles too was an exile, but he was held in honor even among non-Greeks, and Alcibiades, but he built a fortress by the side of Athens itself; and Demosthenes, but malice was the cause. […] the Athenians welcomed Demeter when she was in exile, and Dionysus when he was shifting his abode, and the sons of Heracles when they were wandering about.

For the educated reader in Philostratus's time, all these names would conjure up an abundance of cultural references to philosophical and historical texts, to poetry and drama. Above all, every reader

36 Writing thus becomes a "natural" part of being in love; see *Letter* 29: the eyes tell the soul ἧκε, ἀνάβηθι, ἀλλὰ καὶ κλαῦσον καὶ γράψον καὶ δεήθητι "Come, stand up and speak; yes, write and weep and beg." A similar motif can be found in *Letter* 39; cf. Rosenmeyer [49:325].

would feel reminded of the rhetorical exercises he had produced during his formative years in school; on the spur of the moment, he would be ready to improvise a speech on a topic such as "Themistocles on trial for treason" or "After the victorious battle of Cyzicus, Alcibiades makes a proposal to attack Sicily again."[37] Philostratus could be confident that this was shared cultural knowledge and that such references would create a common ground between himself and his reading public. This is clear from the way in which such references are used: as we have seen (above, p. 8), *Letter* 39 ends with an appeal to the addressee to "erect an altar of Compassion and show pity." Readers never know whether this appeal is successful or not; the writer himself seems to be in doubt about it. However, he never doubts that these references to a common culture, to a shared heritage, and to classical literature will reach the recipient of the letter: the common ground of such intertextuality appears to be the only level of communication within the *Letters* that is unproblematic. This can be seen in *Letter* 47, where the writer is in doubt which mythological example is most likely to move his addressee:

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> Εἰ Λάκαινα ἦσθα, ὦ καλή, Ἑλένης ἂν ἐμνημόνευσας καὶ τῆς νεώς, εἰ Κορινθία τῶν Λαίδος κώμων, εἰ | Βοιωτία, τῶν Ἀλκμήνης γάμων, εἰ τῶν ἐξ Ἤλιδος, οὐκ ἤκουσας τὸν Πέλοπος δρόμον;
> If you were a Spartan, you lovely creature, I should have mentioned Helen and the ship; if you were a Corinthian, I should have mentioned the revels of Laïs; if you were a Boeotian, the nuptials of Alcmene.

The text continues with a lengthy list of mythical characters that would have been able to sway the recipient. While the best "fit" of example is unclear, there seems to be no doubt that both writer and addressee share knowledge about these names, that they are familiar, that they can serve as erotic arguments; hence, the question is not *if* such cultural references will be able to convince the addressee, but *which* examples will be most suitable for this purpose. Unlike most other forms of contact in the *Letters*, this shared code seems to present no fundamental difficulties.

This is not always the case in second sophistic texts. To name just two examples: in his *Lives of the Sophists*, Philostratus develops a literary persona that is much more allusive and intimidating and challenges his audience to understand his recondite allusions and references (Schmitz [52]); Lucian's texts often put his reader to the test (Goldhill [24:60–93], esp. 92–3). In the *Letters*, on the other hand, the shared values of *paideia* seem a secure foundation that connects letter writer and addressee as well as reader and author.

The case is different for Barthes: even though he often refers to what he calls "the amorous Image-repertoire," his attitude to these references is shaped by modern subjectivity. His references come from a fragmented culture where certain "figures" of discourse form an "encyclopedia" of love, and he emphasizes that they work on a very personal level [5:8–9]: "The references supplied in this fashion are not authoritative but amical: I am not invoking guarantees, merely recalling, by a kind of salute given in passing, what has seduced, convinced, or what has momentarily given the delight of understanding (of being understood?)." Barthes [5:6–7] compares this manner of accumulating a "thesaurus of figures" to Flaubert's Bouvard and Pécuchet, the ultimate amateurs, collectors of undigested (and indigestible) tidbits of knowledge who cannot but fail in their attempt to gain a complete vision of the modern world. |

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Philostratus's use of references, on the other hand, is secure in the knowledge of a surrounding culture, of a *paideia* that defines a common Hellenic identity. While all other forms of communication remain unsuccessful or precarious, this shared cultural outlook allows him and his letter writer a

37 The topics are in Apsines, *Ars rhet.* 1.323 Spengel-Hammer (= 1.420 Spengel) and 1.253 Spengel-Hammer (= 1.355 Spengel); on such declamations, cf. Russell [50:106–27].

fulfillment that is denied to postmodern writers and readers. In the end, this may be another reason why all these letters remain unanswered: their real recipient is not the beloved woman or boy, but the cultural elite of Philostratus's time that will recognize the discourse of tradition and *paideia*. Its textual desire is fulfilled in these texts: while erotic communication may be elusive and frustrating, cultural identity seems secure and unproblematic.

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