

Perotti's Latin Letters: Style in Theory and Practice

JOHANN RAMMINGER

Estratto da:

Studi Umanistici Piceni – XXIX/2009

Istituto Internazionale di Studi Piceni – Sassoferrato

Perotti's Latin Letters: Style in Theory and Practice

JOHANN RAMMINGER

1. Introduction

Ever since Petrarch rediscovered Cicero's letters, humanist epistolography had two rival models at its disposal: the one propagated by the medieval *ars dictaminis* and the other which could be deduced from the letter *corpora* of Cicero and other ancient writers.¹ As letter writing in the Italian Renaissance distanced itself more and more from the former and humanists with ever increasing proficiency imitated the latter, a number of humanist manuals attempted to formulate a 'modern' theory of letter writing. One of the most successful among these was the *De epistolis componendis* written by Niccolò Perotti (1430-80), who gave the following rules:²

Quid in primis obseruandum est in epistolis scribendis? Vt stilus inferior sit et quasi familiarior quam cum uel orationes uel historias scribimus, et tamen sit subiectae materiae conueniens. Nam ut in caeteris tres sunt dicendi characteres, amplus, medius et infimus, ita etiam epistolae tres suos characteres habent, ab aliis tamen diuersos, hoc est illis inferiores. Nam qui in aliis mediocris est, hic est summus, qui in aliis infimus, hic mediocris. Infimus uero in epistolis, quo dicendi genere in familiaribus utimur, erit ab infimo illo omnino diuersus, hoc est leuis, facilis, uerbis quotidianis et quasi uernaculis contextus, in quo tamen nihil barbarum sit aut ineptum. Amplo igitur illo atque sublimi utemur, cum de rebus altis atque diuinis epistolas scribemus, ut Plato facit. Mediocri cum de maioribus, de rebus gestis, de bello, de pace, de consilio capiendo aut rebus aliis seueris et grauibz tractabimus. Infimo cum materia erit de rebus familiaribus atque iocosis. (fol.97r-v)

What should be primarily observed in letter writing? That the style be inferior and more low-key than when we write speeches or histories, but nevertheless fits its subject matter. For as there are in other writings three kinds of speech, splendid, middle, and lowest, so also letters have their three types, different from the others, i.e. lower. The middle type in others is the highest here, the lowest in others here is the middle. The lowest type in letters – which we use in letters to family and friends – is completely different from the lowest style in other writings, it is light, easy-going, uses every-day and common words; it should, however, not be uncul-

¹ Cp. Ronald Witt, "Medieval *Ars Dictaminis* and the Beginning of Humanism. A new Construction of the Problem," *RQ* 35 (1982), 1-35.

² All quotations from the *De componendis epistolis* are from Perotti's autograph, (Vat. Lat. 6737). I have largely retained the orthography (*e* caudata is rendered as *ae*) except for punctuation and capital letters. All quotations from Perotti's letters are taken from the database which I have compiled for the edition of Perotti's letters.

tured or crude. We use the splendid and sublime style when we write letters about august and divine things, as does Plato. The middle style we use about our forbears, historical events, war, peace, political decisions, or other serious and grave matters. The lowest is suitable for everyday and not so earnest matters.

In this passage Perotti is not specific about the two higher styles, only the lowest is described in more detail. If the *genus dicendi infimum* may use *verba quotidiana et quasi vernacula*,³ clearly the two higher genres have to use a more carefully chosen vocabulary. The definition of the low style echoes a passage in the *Familiares* (9.21.1) of Cicero, and he is also the one single author who according to Perotti should be emulated:

Quis maxime proponendus est quem studeant adolescentes imitari? Marcus Cicero. Hic in omni dicendi genere omnium optimus fuit. Hunc solum praeceptores legant. Hunc discipuli imitentur, nec modo verba eius hauriant sed etiam clausulas, quin etiam partes ipsas epistolarum interdum furentur et suis inserant. Ita enim fiet ut, suco Ciceronis quasi lacte nutriti, ueri illius imitatores euadant. (*De epistolis componendis*, fol. 97v)

Who is the author to set before the young students for imitation? Marcus Tullius Cicero. He is the best in every genre of writing. He should be the only one whom teachers explain and students imitate. They should drink in not only his words, but also his sentences, they should even steal whole parts of his letters and insert them into their own. Thus nourished by the spirit of Cicero like milk they will develop into true imitators of his style.

Even though this passage seems to claim that Cicero's letters could serve as a model for letters in all registers,⁴ problems quickly arise if we try to apply Perotti's categories to his own letters. The highest of the three categories we can eliminate altogether: Perotti has not written any letters about *res divinae et altae* similar to the letters of Plato, whom he suggests as a model for this category.⁵ But neither do we find correlations between theory and practice in the middle and low styles – reserved for historical/political and for private and less than serious matters respectively. We notice that some letters are elegantly formulated missives even the most demanding of grammarians might be proud of, others are letters whose Latinity seems incompatible with the aspirations to classical style so often

³ On the meaning of *vernaculus* see the entry in the *Neolatin Wordlist* (NLW, www.neulatein.de) and my "Humanists and the vernacular: Creating the terminology for a bipolar universe," *Acta of Texts & Contexts IV. The Role of Latin in Early Modern Europe*, Sandbjerg, 17–20.5.2007, forthcoming in *Renaissanceforum*, www.renaissanceforum.dk.

⁴ How and to what degree Perotti imitated Cicero's epistolary style, due to the lack of pertinent studies remains an open question for the moment. The tactic to lift whole phrases from Cicero is of course neither new nor especially revolutionary; we find many phrases from Cicero's letters in the correspondence of Perotti's teacher Guarino (e.g. Guarino *epist.* 10 l.54 ed. Sabbadini vol. I p.25).

⁵ See Giuseppe Marini, "Perotti e le epistole di Platone," *SUP* 26 (2006), 67–86. For Leonardo Bruni's translation of the *Letters* (dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici in 1427) see James Hankins, *Plato in the Italian Renaissance* (Leiden 1991²), 74sqq.

professed by humanists. We have letters which contain *verba quottidiana* – a criterion of the lowest stylistic level. They, however, only seldomly refer to private (other than his financial worries), never to iocose matters, but discuss political problems of the papal state. Letters to his brother and nephews, on the other hand, which might be about *res familiares et iocosae*, are in impeccable Latin and certainly do not use *verba quasi vernacula*. Thus, while we recognize individual elements of the tripartite theory of epistolary style proposed by Perotti, the system in its entirety does not seem to be applicable without modifications.

While the proposed imitation of Cicero also regarded parameters of style such as word order and syntax, the only aspect Perotti had emphasized was lexical choice. In the following I will try to show that in practice Perotti's lexical choices are influenced by a variety of factors and only partially depend on classical models. Perotti himself had emphasized that contents must influence the style of a letter. In addition we will look at two other aspects, the addressee and the expected public of a letter. The addressee can either be someone of equal social status (another humanist, friends, family), or a social superior (a patron, a more powerful administrator), esp. the pope (the social superior *par excellence* for a humanist at the curia). The expected public of a letter can either include a larger, humanistically educated readership (as is the case with the prefaces of Perotti's translations which were distributed together with copies of the translations themselves), or be restricted to the actual addressee (even more so if a letter contains confidential information whose dissemination would harm either the sender or the addressee). I will focus on two aspects of Perotti's lexical choices: unclassical words and the phraeseology used to address the recipient of a letter.

2. Choice of vocabulary

2.1 Unclassical words

Perotti had in theory admitted *verba quottidiana et quasi vernacula* in the lowest type of letter, even though words which were *inepta et barbara* still were to be avoided. In the letters to fellow humanists and his patrons Perotti carefully avoided non-classical words or, as in the following example, excused their use with necessity:

(27) To Francesco Giustinian, defense of Bessarion's *Adversus calumniatorem Platonis*, 1469

[...] *potentia quadam infinita, non modo extensiuia – necesse est enim ut theologorum nostrorum uerbis utamur – sed etiam intensiuia* (God created the world with an infinite power, which is not only ampliative – since we cannot avoid the terminology of our theologians –, but also intensifying)

The letter to the Venetian legate in Rome Giustinian is clearly intended for a wider public, responding, as it does, to an anonymous (or generic?) critic to whom Giustinian is asked to convey Perotti's answer – presumably by passing on Perotti's letter hurling insults against the *monstrum* who in his ridiculous ignorance had had the audacity to criticize the learned prince of the church. The contents (leaving aside the insults) comes as close to a philosophical letter as any Perotti has written.

We hear Perotti use an unrestrained vernacular voice not in the letters to family and friends, but in administrative letters, such as a letter to the pope detailing his ruinous expenses since arriving at his post in Perugia:

To Sixtus IV., 30. 1. 1477

Exposui, postquam sum hic, deo teste plus quam centum quinquaginta ducatos in mittendis caballariis et cursoribus de meo (I have expended, since I am here, God be my witness, more than five hundred ducats to send riders and messengers from my own money)

Caballarius is a medieval coinage⁶ and comes dangerously close to being *barbarum [...]* *aut ineptum*. It has as little claim to elegance as “*deo teste*” – not a phrase Cicero would have been glad of.⁷ In the following examples, amongst other *verba quottidiana et vernacula* we find *refirma*, confirmation,

To Antonius de Medicis, asking a favor for his nephew Giovanni, 1468

quia cupimus habere refirmam officii pro alio semestri (because we want a confirmation of the office for another six months)

conducta, condotta, often in letters to the pope detailing the political manoeuvres of Niccolò Vitelli and Carlo Fortebraccio:

To Sixtus IV., 30. 1. 1477

antequam de conducta uerbum fieret (before the employment is discussed)

importantia, importance, a word first appearing in Latin texts from early Italian humanism and current in contemporary Italian:

To Sixtus IV., 22. 10. 1475

Ciuitas Castelli magnae importantiae est ecclesie (Città di Castello is of great importance to the Church)

⁶ TLL III 3,3sq. has some examples from glossaries and Theophylaktos Simokates (early 7th cent.), where the word still designates a servant.

⁷ The use of *postquam* to introduce a state which is still continuing is not Ciceronian; it is, however, frequent in Plautus. See TLL X 2 247,60sq.; the only exception is Cic. *Quinct.* 70 “Alfenus cum eis et propter eos periit quos diligebat, tu, postquam qui tibi erant amici non poterant vincere, ut amici tibi essent qui vincebant effecisti”. See also J. B. Hofmann, A. Szantyr, *Lateinische Syntax und Stilistik, Lateinische Grammatik* II (München 1965), 598-9. Medieval Latin also has examples for *postquam* + present tense for actions which are finished, see Peter Stötz, *Formenlehre, Syntax und Stilistik. Handbuch zur lateinischen Sprache des Mittelalters* IV (München 1998), 317.

All these are letters concerning administrative matters (the first is petitioning for a personal favor), in which the public is excluded (consequently none of these letters is transmitted in more than one contemporary copy). In none of the letters there is even a pretence of social equality or at least equal (if different) merit (as in the cases of humanists addressing a patron in literary matters). We may add that in some cases precision also will have been a factor guiding the choice of vocabulary: *refirma* as well as *conducta* designate specific contemporary administrative procedures and thus could not be replaced by classical 'equivalents' without loss.

2.2 Addressing the recipient of a letter

A special case of contemporary vs. classical usage was the form of address of a letter. Ever since Petrarch reestablished the use of 'tu' instead of 'vos' as the correct style,⁸ addressing the recipient of a letter correctly was fraught with aesthetic as well as social pitfalls. Given that humanist letters often were destined for a wider audience than solely the addressee, humanists, when writing to a social superior, had the choice between sounding either incompetent (if they used traditional formulas of respect in the second person plural or the third person singular) or impertinent (if they used the classical 'tu'). In theory Perotti took an uncompromising stance on how to proceed correctly:

Illud etiam summo studio fugiendum est ne ad unum scribens pluratiuo numero utaris. in quem errorem omnes fere nostrae aetatis homines incurrerunt putantes se magis honorare eum ad quem scribunt, si barbaramente loquantur. in qua re non tam ignorantiam hominum admiror quam stultitiam. nam si id honoris causa non faciunt, cur barbaramente loquuntur? si uero id honoris causa agunt, cur eo quoque sermone deum non honorant? quem singulari numero affantur. (*De componendis epistolis*, fol.98r)

Also to be utterly avoided is the use of the plural if you write to one person. This is an error committed by nearly all people in our age, who think they honour somebody more if they speak barbarously. What astonishes me in this is less people's ignorance than their stupidity. For if they don't do this to honour somebody, why then write barbarously? If this has to do with honouring somebody, why not speak to God in the same way? Him they talk to in the singular.

Since we even address God in the second person singular (e.g. in the *Pater noster qui es in coelis*), pope or king cannot feel honoured if they are addressed barbarously in the plural. We should understand *pluratiuus numerus* here as 'a word which implies a plural'. Perotti means using 'uester' for a single person (with the verb in the third person singular).

⁸ Petrarch, *Familiares*, 23.14.1.

The actual plural he uses only if he addresses a plurality of people, like the town councillors in the letter to Sassoferrato: “Vestrae Magnificentiae” (in such cases with the verb in the third person plural).

In reality Perotti had a sophisticated range of expression – of which the classical model was only one –, which he applied as demanded by the situation.⁹ The classical model, the second person singular without modifications, is used when he writes to his humanist friends, but also in other letters which have a humanist flavour, even if they are addressed to people who are socially superior, such as Buonconte da Montefeltro, an illegitimate son of Federico, in a letter where Perotti extolls the progress of the young nobleman in his *studia*:

To Buonconte da Montefeltro, 1455-1457

Vellem libenter ita ad te posse scribere, ut [...] (I wish I could write to you so that [...])

or to his employer Bessarion, in a letter aimed at the readership of the *In calumniatorem Platonis*:

To Bessarion, concerning the *In calumniatorem* 12. 11. 1469/1465

En tibi remitto diuinum opus tuum (Here I send you back your divine work)

Also Tortelli, the humanist and papal chamberlain, is addressed in the second person singular:

To Giovanni Tortelli, 5.12.1453

Tu doctissimorum hominum refugium, tu surgentium iuuenum spes, tu adhuc iacentium fomes atque incitabulum, tu decus aetatis nostrae, tu portus atque profugium bonorum omnium, tu in omni genere laudis preclarissimum antiquitatis exemplar (You are the refuge of the learned, you the hope of the aspiring youth, you kindle and excite those who as yet lie idle, you are the glory of our times, you the harbour and sanctuary of all worthy people, you splendidly represent every kind of distinction of antiquity)

The letter also bears the impeccable classical headline “Nicolaus Perottus Ioanni Aretino suo sal.” and ends with the Roman date “Bononie Nonis Decembris M.CCCCLII”. It contains a praise of the renaissance of letters under pope Nicolas V, and construes for Tortelli a central role as a *Maecenas alter* after the pope. Clearly this letter is meant for the consumption of a wider public.

In the case of a letter addressed to an eminent humanist like Tortelli, and at the same time aimed at a wider public of equally humanist formation, the exquisite classicism of the letter blends perfectly with the expectations of both its audiences and the selfrepresentation of the sender.

⁹ That Perotti was extremely sensitive to the response of the readers of his letters has been shown by Marianne Pade, “La forza del destinatario,” *SUP* 26 (2006), 11-21.

This picture changes dramatically as soon as the wider public recedes from view. Suddenly Perotti addresses Tortelli with “Reuerende pater et domine mi honorande” (Reverend father and my honored master) or similar formulas. The “tu” shifts to “dominatio tua”, and the Roman date is dropped in a letter from 1452:

To Giovanni Tortelli, 6. 6. 1452

Bononiae die vi Junii MCCCCLII. Nicolaus Perottus Tue Dominationis Seruus (Bologna, June 6, 1452, Niccolò Perotti, Your Lordship’s servant).

The letter contains an update on Perotti’s progress with the Polybius-translation; at the end there are some verses submitted to the recipient’s judgement. Thus it might very well be a humanist’s letter to a friend; the hyperbolic expressions of anxiety, the appeal of his “son” for the “fatherly” favour of Tortelli could equally well be public demonstrations of the kind of rapport humanists had with their more potent friends. Nevertheless, important elements (meant to show to the public that sender and recipient belong to the republic of letters) like the greetings for a common friend (such as for Valla in another letter of Perotti to Tortelli) are absent; instead we have an appeal for a recommendation to the pope. In the place of *Ioanni Aretino suo* which in other letters to the same demonstratively suggests friendly affection between social equals, Perotti expresses the social superiority of the recipient by writing *domine mi precipue*. Clearly Perotti, rather than worrying about the correct classical salutation formula, is concerned with the proper expression of respect for the addressee. Whether or not a reader might think that Perotti writes ‘good’ Latin is clearly not a consideration here.

Instead of the second person singular he uses the even more formal “paternitas vestra”, combined with the verb in the third person singular, in a letter from 1453, which also begins with “Reuerende in Christo Pater et domine mi precipue” (Reverend father in Christ and my principal lord):

To Giovanni Tortelli, 13. 11. 1453

Placebit, ni me animus fallit, incredibiliter et Domino Nostro et Paternitati Vestrae (The third book of Polybius will, unless I am much mistaken, please our Lord [i.e. the pope] and Your Fatherliness).

The same letter is signed with

Bononiae, die decima tertia Nouembris MCCCCLIII. Reuerendissimae Dominationis Vestrae Seruitor¹⁰ Nicolaus Perottus (Bologna, November 13, 1453. Your most venerable Lordship’s servant Niccolò Perotti).

¹⁰ *seruitor* makes its first appearance in late antiquity; it is, however, frequent in medieval Latin, and, as *servitore*, in the volgare.

We can observe the same difference in the letters of Perotti to Cardinal Ammanati at the beginning of the 1470ies, where the two ‘philological’ letters carefully use the classical “tu”, whereas a letter of recommendation from the same period addresses the cardinal as “reverendissima dominatio vestra” (your most venerable Lordship).¹¹

2.3 Addressing the pope

Letters to the pope posed special problems of etiquette. If they were meant to showcase the erudition of the writer and praise the interest in the *studia* of the recipient for a wider audience (such as the letters of dedication of Perotti’s translations), complete avoidance of the “tu” was naturally impossible:

To Nicolas V., Preface to Polybius

Absolui tandem aliquando delegatum mihi abs te munus, Pontifex Maxime (I have now finally brought to an end the duty assigned to me by you)

But addressing the pope directly in the vocative with the unadorned classical “tu” was not the norm, no matter how barbarous other forms of address might be. Often, if the second person singular is preserved, the implied familiarity is mitigated in various ways. The pope is not only addressed as “Beatissime Pater” or “Summe (Sanctissime) pontifex”, but also with “Sanctitas Tua”, retaining the verb in the second person singular:

To Nicolas V., Preface to Plutarch, *De fortuna Romanorum*

Quod (*sc. opus*) si tardius quam oportuit Sanctitati Tuae obtuli, dabis mihi pro tua singulari benignitate atque clementia ueniam (If I have offered this work to Your Holiness later than I should have, you will pardon me with your unique benevolence and clemency)

To Nicolas V., Preface to Polybius

Opus perfeci, ut optatum Sanctitati Tuae, ita, nisi me animus fallit, gratissimum futurum (I have finished this work, which Your Holiness has long wished for and which, unless I am much mistaken, will please you very much)

With their carefully crafted style, these letters in Perotti’s categorization may best be assigned to the middle category, even though their contents is not covered by one of Perotti’s criteria, but comes under the default label “de [...] rebus aliis seueris et grauibus”.

Even though the missives to the pope of Perotti as papal governor

¹¹ See Jean-Louis Charlet, “Les relations entre Niccolò Perotti et Jacopo Ammanati d’après leurs correspondance,” *SUP* 25 (2005), 93-101.

about the manoeuvrings of the pope's political adversaries most certainly concern "war, peace, political decisions, or other serious and grave matters", stylistically they are written in a much lower register (as I have shown above concerning their vocabulary). The same is apparent in the form of address of the pope. Instead of the classical "tu", Sixtus IV. is without exception addressed as "Vestra Beatitudo" or "Sanctitas Vestra", with the verb in the third person:

To Sixtus IV., 23. 1. 1477

Supplico igitur Sanctitatem Vestram ut dignetur in tanta calamitate subuenire mihi (Therefore I implore Your Holiness to come to my aid in this calamity)

On the same occasion Perotti improves on the signature "Your servant" which he had used to Tortelli; the letters to Sixtus IV are signed with "inutile mancipium" (your useless slave).

Conclusion

Some conclusions can be drawn from these examples. There is no correlation between style and chronology. We can neither observe a significant development of Perotti's style (where earlier letters would be less competently written, the later ones in more polished Latin), nor a correlation between the style and Perotti's professional career (where earlier letters would reflect the humble position as Bessarion's secretary, the later ones the dignity of the archbishop). On the contrary, as we have seen with the letters to Tortelli, even those written within the range of some months can exhibit significant differences in style.

The addressee (understood as separate from the public) influences the style of a letter in various ways. Certainly letters to the humanist Tortelli, even when they show unclassical traits such as traditional formulas of address, generally are written in humanist Latin exhibiting none of the 'lapses' of syntax and lexicon of some of the administrative missives to the pope. On the other hand, letters to the pope never have a purely classicising form, but always retain some expressions of respect due to the exalted position of God's vicar on earth (even though, as Perotti emphasizes, we speak to God much less respectfully).

Only between the style and the perceived public a clear correlation can be found. Letters which have a wider expected public such as letters of dedication (no matter whether the addressee is a social superior or not) generally follow the example of classical usage: the vocabulary is strictly classical (with an "ut dicitur" as excuse for unavoidable exceptions), the date might be given according to the ancient Roman custom (*Calendae*, *Idus*, etc.), the recipient is addressed as *tu*, with the verb in the second

person singular (always excepting the case of the pope). Letters which are not intended for a wider audience can use contemporary vocabulary (e.g. technical terms), the date will often be the ordinal number counting from the beginning of the month, the recipient (we have no informal letters to people whom Perotti would normally address as *tu*) is addressed either in the second person plural or the third person singular (with no clear hierarchy of deference).

Concerning contents – the sole factor identified by Perotti himself – the evidence is less clear, since some differences may be too subtle to permit generalizations. Certainly the presence of elements such as a plea for a favor coincide with a more respectful (and less classical) form of address. Generally, contents largely shift parallel with the presence or not of a wider public. Letters of dedication, prefaces, discussions of philological questions invariably speak to a wider public, letters written by Perotti in the execution of his duties as papal governor only want the attention of the actual recipient.

The observations proposed above only cover a small part of the wide spectre of Perotti's theory and practice of letter writing. For a deeper understanding of Perotti's choices the traditions of public and private letter writing, especially the continuing, if limited, influence of the medieval *ars dictaminis*, need to be considered. Furthermore we need to look at the levels of epistolary style in comparison to Perotti's oratory. Perotti's lexical choices have to be compared with those of contemporary humanists, esp. with those of his correspondents, some of whom have left sizeable letter *corpora* (e.g. Ammanati). The vernacular will in all likelihood emerge as a major source of inspiration for Perotti's Latin lexicon.¹² More research will be needed to develop a comprehensive picture of Perotti's epistolary style.

¹² "La conception du vulgaire chez Lorenzo Valla et la signification du *Cornu copiae* de Niccolò Perotti," Conference "Le radici umanistiche dell'Europa.

Lorenzo Valla e la riforma della lingua e della logica", Prato, 4–7 June 2008. I would like to thank J.-L. Charlet, who let me have a copy of his paper.