

Antun Vrančić's „Occasional“ Letters in the Light of the Humanistic Treatises of Letter-Writing

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ABSTRACT

Croatian humanist, diplomat and Primate of Hungary, Antun Vrančić (1504-1573), in a period of 35 years, i.e. from 1538 to 1573, wrote about 800 letters, mostly in Latin, and only in a few cases in Italian and Hungarian. In this corpus I identified a considerable number of letters that could be called „occasional“ as they are written on some specific events or occasions, for example, letters of consolation (*epistolae consolatoriae*), letters of recommendation (*epistolae commendaticiae*), letters of petition (*epistolae petitoriae*), etc. Some of these letters will be examined in the context of the rules given in the theories of letter-writing of humanistic treatises *ars epistolandi* (especially treatise *De conscribendis epistolis* of Erasmus Rotterdamus, and the same named manual of Franciscus Niger) in order to determine their possible influence on composition of Vrančić's letters.

Keywords: Antun Vrančić, humanism, epistolographic treatises, ars epistolandi

August 14, 1549 Antun Vrančić (1504-1573), a Croatian humanist and diplomat, wrote a letter to his friend Ioannes Bonarus due to the death of his father in order to console him. The letter begins with the following words:

Patrem tuum optimum et clarissimum virum e vivis excessisse nunc primum sane ad me perlatum intellexi, plurimumque displicet, quod tam sero. Videbor enim in hoc officio declarandi doloris mei apud vos negligentior quodammodo, quam sit par, exstitisse. Quem quidem dolorem etsi mihi non parem, neque tantum usurpem, quantus est filiorum, tamen in deflendo homine mihi benevolentissimo et prope altero parente nulli amicorum eius concessero... Contentus itaque propria conscientia, qua scio, te nihil dubitare de mea erga domum Bonariam voluntate, quodque non solum consolari te et revocare a luctu vellem... (MHH. VI. 337-338) These words of Vrančić mirror the instructions of the epistolographic treatises of that time showing what letters of consolation should look like. Namely, in accordance with these instructions, it is extremely important that the sender, respectively the person who consoles, takes on a part of the pain of the person mourning at the very beginning of the letter. Vrančić's letters of consolation began in this manner.

During the period of 35 years, respectively from the year 1538 until 1573, Vrančić wrote around eight hundred letters, mainly in Latin, and only in a few cases in Italian and Hungarian. The majority of the letters were published in the Hungarian issue Szalay-Wenzel

in the series *Monumenta Hungariae historica*, and a large part of the manuscripts are preserved in the Budapest library Széchényi. We have identified quite a number of letters in Vrančić's epistolographic corpus which could, in a narrow sense, be called occasional since they were written in the occasion of a specific event. We will perceive those letters in the context of the rules on composing letters of humanistic treatises *ars epistolandi* in order to determine their possible influence, i.e. show how inclined Vrančić was toward the use of these rules and in what matter.

But before this, it was necessary to determine which epistolographic treatises Vrančić could have consulted with. Since he mentions neither authors nor epistolographic treatises, we started off with the assumption that the key role could have been played by those treatises which were the most popular at that time and were included in study programs during Vrančić's education. Namely, James J. Murphy in his study „One Thousand neglected Authors: the Scope and Importance of Renaissance Rhetoric“ mentions thousands of rhetorical textbooks, treatises and texts which are just waiting for someone to deal with them and offer us a more complete image of humanistic rhetoric.¹ On the other hand, Judith Rice Henderson, who was inspired by Murphy's comment, researched 150 Renaissance textbooks on letter writing and established that „Many are compilations or adaptations of the works of already famous rhetoricians,...“.²

What treatises were the most popular and based on what factor can their popularity be established? An important criterion for this is surely the number of editions of a particular treatise. Henderson, for example, mentions more than 50 editions of Erasmus' treatise *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* and notes that „This treatise was one of the most influential Renaissance rhetoric by the most famous humanist of northern Europe.“³ That Vrančić read Erasmus, we know based on his letters, but we only have a confirmation for Erasmus' collection of proverbs *Adagia*, which is mentioned and commented in the letters of Vrančić. However, we do not have indisputable evidence that he read Erasmus' epistolographic treatise. Besides Erasmus, the Italian-Croatian humanist Franciscus Niger had written a slightly smaller and simpler theoretical work *Modus epistolandi*. His popularity was also great, and the work had about 59 editions published from 1488 until 1573.⁴ According to Peter Mack, Niger's treatise was one of the most popular and had instantly become a bestseller among epistolographic treatises in the period of Humanism,⁵ but we still do not have certain evidence that Vrančić had read Niger's treatise.

Furthermore, with regard to the textbooks which Vrančić could have been in contact with during his education, we know for sure that Perotti's *Rudimenta Grammatices*, in which there is a chapter on the rules of writing letters (*De epistolis componendis*), was a mandatory textbook at the University in Krakow from 1504 until 1517, and that it was also included in the curriculum of the study program until 1530.⁶ After the year 1530, the mandatory treatise at the University in Krakow was the aforementioned Erasmus' *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, and Niger's *Modus epistolandi* was included in the study's curriculum by the decision of the

¹ Murphy (1983), 20-36.

² Henderson (2007), 141.

³ Henderson (2007), 142.

⁴ Jurić (1984), 126-139 and Perić (1991), 180-187.

⁵ Mack (2011), 238-239.

⁶ Cytowska (1999), 61.

Academy in 1538.⁷ All these facts are in favor of the claim that Vrančić's educational process of the rules on letter writing definitely rely on the listed treatises, i.e. that Vrančić probably read and researched Perotti, Erasmus and Niger.

A corpus of 86 „occasional ones“ were considered in the context of epistolographic theory out of a total of 790 Vrančić's letters. We speak about letters of consolation (*consolatoria*), letters of recommendation (*commendatitia*), complaint (*invectiva*), apology (*expurgativa/purgatoria*), petition (*petitoria*), appeal (*lamentatoria*), gratitude (*euharistica*), warning (*monitoria*) and letters of deterrence (*dissuasoria*). By analysis of the letters, it has been found that not all of them have a rigid structure which was prescribed by the treatises, but their influence is obvious in some of them. The analysis is more focused on the structure of the inner part of the letter itself, respectively on the very structure of the content, and not so much on the „outer“ features of the letter such as the greeting formulas at the beginning and the end. Vrančić immaculately respected humanistic epistolographic elements in this segment of the letter and he, particularly in friendly correspondence, used simple and not too kitschy greeting formulas. Therefore we are especially interested what the composition of these letters is like and if it overlaps with the one recommended in the treatises. We will take this opportunity to present several occasional letters where there is a clear influence of Niger's⁸ and Erasmus'⁹ treatises, while Perotti's grammar won't be particularly taken into consideration since the rules which refer to the letter structure are less represented in it.

Let us begin with the letter of consolation. We have already mentioned Vrančić's letter of consolation to his friend Bonarus in the beginning, but now, the letter he wrote to his friend Francesco Capelli on June 15, 1547 due to the death of his father Carlo, will be reviewed. The letter is structured in the exact way that had been taught by Niger, yet there are some guidelines from Erasmus' treatise that are observed. Niger suggests that the letter contains of three parts, the first states taking onto oneself the pain of the addressee, i.e. show how saddened by the death of that person we are ourselves,¹⁰ in the second part it is necessary to console the addressee by stating several reasons why not to grieve¹¹ and in the third part of the letter, the person must give hope of a better future and offer their help.¹² Erasmus gives a more detailed explanation on writing letters of consolation in his treatise,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ All quotations in this paper will be from this Niger's edition: F. Niger (1578), *De conscribendis epistolis tractatio*, Apud Altobellum Salicatum, Venetiis, MDLXXIII.

⁹ All quotations in this paper will be from this Erasmus' edition: Erasmus von Rotterdam (1980), *De conscribendis epistolis*, Anleitung zum Briefschreiben, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt.

¹⁰ In quarum prima quae similiter epitaphis appellatur, declarabimus quantum dolorem perpessi fuerimus, cum talem fortunam vel casum ipsius amici intellexerimus quem nostrum proprium existimavimus propter amorem et benevolentiam qua in ipsum afficimur, et in hoc conabimur ipsum dolorem augere quantum possumus. (Niger, 21)

¹¹ In secundam partem... convertimus omnem orationem nostram ad consolationem ostendendo duas, tres, aut plures rationes propter quas probemus non esse dolendum, et sic concludimus ipsum amicum debere omnem maestitiam relinquere et consolationem ex hac re capere. (Niger, 21)

¹² In tertia autem et ultima conabitur deducere amicum ad quem scribimus in aliquam spem quod scilicet omnia ista mala sunt futura meliora, simulque offeremus omnem operam nostram quam libentissime paratam, dum possimus ei esse conspirationi et utilitati. (Niger, 21)

but he also recommends, just like Niger, that the letter should begin with taking over the grief upon oneself.¹³

Vrančić begins his letter just as suggested by Niger and Erasmus stating how touched he is himself by the death of Capelli's father:

De obitu patris tui Caroli viri praeclari atque optimi nuncio, quem ex tuis litteris intellexi, non aliter – mihi crede – affectus sum, quam quivis vestrum, qui ex eo procreati estis. Nec id quidem sine justa ratione. Amavit enim me et complexus est semper, non ut quempiam familiarem et amicum hominem, sed ut propinquum suum, aut unicum fratrem. Quare si sic accidisset, ut vobis gravissimo et funestissimo isto casu vestro adesse potuissem, junxissem sane lacrimis vestris fletus meos, nec luctus vestri tempus non atratus exegissem, ut, cum quibus complures saepenumero dies summa festivitate ac laetitia habuerim, iis in moerore constitutis, meum tum moerorem, tum dolorem non denegassem. (MHH. VI. 259)

In the second part he tries to console his friend by listing the virtues of his father which he should be proud of and not grieve:

Sed ne te, lento gradu avocans a moerore, diutius in moerore detineam, dum serius ad medullam consolationis accedo, quaeso te, mi Capelle, proponas tibi ob oculos prestantissimi patris tui virtutes, quibus ille in ista vestra republica, quamdiu vixit, semper cum summa gloria floruit. Mores enim habuit iucundos, graves et magna dignitate. Ille et vir et orator bonus, ille acutus philosophus, ille sublimis ac verax theologus, et ne ennarrem singula, in omnibus ille VII. liberalibus artibus fuit sane consummatissimus... (MHH. VI. 260-261)

In the third part of the letter Vrančić gives him hope of a better future, just as advised by Niger:

Laus itaque haec magna, Capelle, profecto est, et majorem in modum celebris. Sed major ex ea vobis petenda est consolatio. Si enim et charissimo et optimo parente privatus es, ut es etiam praestanti, scito fuisse mortalem. Ea tamen tibi, ceterisque posteris suis de se reliquit monumenta, quae quum sint immortalia et gloria digna sempiterna, eorum memoria, abstersis tandem lacrimis, laetus cum tuis fratribus perfruire, simulque, ut jam vos quoque patres esse possitis, navate operam et contendatis, ut vestrum virtutibus meritisque in rempublicam aequiparetis, ac in posterum curetis, ut prudenter leges humanitatis perferatis... (MHH. VI. 262)

The next letter which truly mirrors Niger's and Erasmus' advice is the letter of recommendation. We have noticed sixteen letters of recommendation in Vrančić's epistolary yet we haven't noticed the same structure in all of them. Niger uses a cliché description of each type of letter in his treatise, i.e. he gives a definition at the beginning, and then he states the subtypes of that certain type of letter, followed by the rule of letter composition and in the end, an example of that type of letter. Thus, he states that a letter of recommendation may be *epistola epentica* and *epistola dicaeanica*, then advises how, firstly, it is necessary to write kind words to the addressee who you are recommending someone to – so called *captatio benevolentiae*, then one must emphasize the qualities of the person who is being recommended, the third part is reserved for the explanation of the reason for the recommendation and in the end there is a thank you. Vrančić had written several letters in which he recommends his brother Mihovil while he was passing through Venice on his way towards Šibenik. Since all of those letters which he sent to his Venetian friends and

¹³ *Priori incommodo sic medebimur, vt eius quem consolari volumus affectum in nos transferamus, sic attemperantes orationem vt nostro dolori magis obsequi quam illius aegritudinem mitigare velle videamur.* (Erasmus, 194)

acquaintances have a similar structure, it will be sufficient to show one from the year 1544 sent to Andrea Suriano. The letter begins with expected and recommended statements of friendly love by which he seeks to obtain the addressee's sympathy:

Quod a Pragensi nostro superioris anni congressu nihil ad te litterarum dederim, eadem causae, quae ne ad Marinum quoque Caballum quicquam scripserim, obstitere. Nec putes, id me aut incuria aut oblivione commisisse, quum te aequae atque ipsum Marinum memoria teneo amoque, ut charissimos, jocundissimos, suavissimos, ac immo etiam (ardentius non possum) ut soleam unicos. (MHH. VI. 173)

Then he passes on to the reasons why he is sending the letter, i.e. gives concrete information about the arrival of his brother in Venice:

... en tamen reparatorem ejus fratrem hunc meum Michaellem mitto, in quo non dimidium mei, sed me totum, sed utrumque potius nostrum habebis... (MHH. VI. 174) and in the end, he states his recommendation:

Quoniam autem senticosum aulicae genus vitae reliquit et domesticae nihilo sane minus laboriosum ingreditur, eum tibi commendo, idque paucis, nempe ut me, quem maxime amari abs te confido. Vale. (MHH. VI. 174)

Erasmus wrote about this type of letter in a rather detailed way, and at the beginning, emphasizes as an important component that the actors of these letters are three persons: sender, recipient and the person being recommended.¹⁴ He also notes that it is necessary to state in the letter whether the person being recommended is an acquaintance or a family member, if the person is a student etc., and it is also necessary to list some of their characteristics in terms of behavior, education, ancestry.¹⁵

In December 1539 Vrančić sent a letter of recommendation to the Bishop of Krakow Peter Gamrat in which he intercedes for his compatriot and acquaintance Marin Caboga. The elements emphasized by Erasmus as important segments of a recommendation letter are recognized in the letter. In the beginning, Vrančić mentions the person in question, stating his relationship with the person and how long they have known each other:

Is itaque Marinus Caboga Ragusinus, meus necessarius, ac mihi quum natione tum consuetudine ipsa pene a primis annis junctus, veniens nunc in Hungariam, ad me, veteri necessitudine nostra fretus, recta concessit. Eum ut germanum fratrem accepi et amanter habui... (MHH. VI. 54)

And later on in the letter refers the recommendation by describing Caboga as a person in the manner suggested by Erasmus:

Venientem itaque ad te fide ac spe rerum suarum non dubia, vehementer oro, habeas commendatum, et numero tuorum adjungas. Homo est aetate juvenis, sed ingenio atque maturitate vir, domi praeerea nobilis, moribus bonis et eruditione non exigua, qui se pro voluntate tanti episcopi probe in suo servitio gerere. (MHH. VI. 55)

¹⁴ Hic tres erunt considerandae personae. Nostra, eius cui scribimus, eius quem commendamus. (Erasmus, 210)

¹⁵ A nostra persona persuadebimus, si causas, a quibus ad hunc commendandum fuerimus commoti, iustas, magnas plurimasue ostendemus;... vel quod nobis cum ipso aut nostris cum illius maioribus vetus, et coniunctissima familiaritas intercesserit, aut hospitium, vel quod sanguine propinquus, patria, studiisue coniunctus... vel ita denique hominem describimus, vt ob modestiam, probitatem, eruditionem, integritatem, humanitatem, nobilitatem dignus sit, qui cum omnibus bonis, tum illi in primis debeat esse quam commendatissimus. (Erasmus, 211-212)

The so called *genus expurgativum* will be discussed last which implies the letter – apology, respectively excuses. Niger's treatise mentions two subtypes of this genus: *expurgativa criminis* and *expurgativa contentionis* and a customary three-part structure is recommended: in the first part, it is necessary that the doer of the crime makes it clear if he had been falsely accused of the executed act or if he had committed the act due to inadvertency,¹⁶ then in the second part facts are stated and the addressee is encouraged to objectively look at the situation¹⁷ and then in the final part a promise is made that in the future the individual will not fall into such a crime.¹⁸

The letter which will be presented dates back to the year 1540 and it was referred to Ivan Statilić, Vrančić's uncle, in which he apologizes to him and justifies himself because of his forbidden relationship with Uršula, a married woman. In an earlier phase of his life, Vrančić gave into the virtues of this woman and incurred upon himself his uncle's wrath and disapproval. In order to justify himself at least to some extent, he sends him a letter which substantially corresponds to the type called *expurgativa criminis*.

The structure of Vrančić's letter is in three parts. He admits to his immoral act at the beginning and does not try to hide the truth:

Fateor equidem me domi tuae, in qua tu celeberrimas virtutes exerceas, cui per me summa reverentia exhiberi debuerat, amoribus operam dedisse; partumque Ursulae ex me, nisi me ipsa fallit, meum esse non inficior, neque mentiendo alienum facio. Malo siquidem etiam mori, quam vel semel tibi negasse veritatem, cui nemo unquam feliciter dixit mendacium. (MHH. XII. 209)

Then he describes in detail under what circumstances it all took place without diminishing his guilt:

Mulier enim formosa sub unis mecum tectis morabatur, utriusque aetas integra, anni virides, amor mutuus, loci copia, et peragenda rei facultas aderat; soloque ipso obtutu vocitabat ferreum, arguebat marmoreum, urgebat adamantinum, et indignabatur ut statuae ac stipiti, nisi amore respondissem. Accedebat ad haec, qui Budensis erat, quod a praesentia mariti, et ab omni teste iam annum libera; ne aliud certe fuit sperandum a muliere iuvene, quam et venustas multum commendabat, et in oculis nequitiae totius libidinis oberrabant, et feriae Veneris nimis longae taedio verterentur quam quod peperit. At de me quid dicam? Si sic amabar, non redamasse? Si vocabar, non respondissem? Si complectebar, non complecterem? Assentior! Ais, non! Verum ubi fuit Salomonis sapientia, Davidis sanctitas, Aristotelis philosophia, Alexandri fortitudo, ceterorumque notae virtutis heroum constantia, quando de eis amor triumphabat? (MHH. XII. 209-210)

And finally, at the end of the letter, he asks for his uncle's forgiveness and promises that he would stay away from such a crime:

Oro et obtestor, per integritatem tuam, per fortunam, qua es felicissima, per mutuam demum nostri sanguinis necessitudinem, velis te pium ac indulgentem mihi demonstrare, et hanc noxam, ut

¹⁶ In quarum prima per aliquam rationabilem causam, aut veram, aut saltem verisimilem nos excusamus ab eo crimine quod fuerit obiectum, dicentes aut hoc non esse verum quo ab ipsa persona scribatur, aut per imprudentiam, vel ignorantiam, non maliciose id fecisse. (Niger, 34)

¹⁷ In secunda vero aut remisse, aut exandescerter secundum epistolae missae naturam ipsam personam ad quam scribimus, vel tali vel alio vitio criminabimur, dicentes quod boni viri officium est, antequam alios reprehendat, se ipsum inspiceret, ne caecus caeco illudat. (Niger, 34)

¹⁸ In tertia autem et vltima si remissa fuerit epistola, promitemus amico nostro in tale crimen amplius non esse lapsuros simul pro cohortabimur eum, ne et ipse in talem culpam incidat cuius eum accusauerimus... (Niger, 34-35)

homo homini, condonare. Etenim operam dabo, ut in posterum vacuum me ab his offensis contineam, neque indignationem tuam unquam exstimulem. Hac tantum sola vice pro magnitudine animi tui, paterne agas mecum teque mihi, tibi me restituas, et id criminis, quicquid id est, humane aestimes. (MHH. XII. 210-211)

Although based on only a few letters, we strived to prove and show the obvious influence of humanistic treatises on Vrančić's epistolary style, yet some questions are inevitably imposed. Did Vrančić indeed consult with Erasmus and Niger while he wrote his letters or had he held in his hands some other epistolary treatises of similar content and which? How much influence did theoretical rules have on the structure and content of his letters, and what kind of a role did the nature of the specific type of letter play etc.? Of course it is very difficult to answer these questions, but we can state with rather certainty that Vrančić wrote his own letters knowing and following the rules and that he certainly did not apply them as a fixed template, but he adapted them to the content and shaped them according to his own skills and style of writing.

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Le lettere occasionali di Antun Vrančić alla luce dei manuali epistolari umanistici

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RIASSUNTO

Parole chiave: Antun Vrančić, umanesimo, manuali umanistici, ars epistolandi

L'umanista croato, il diplomatico e il primate ungherese Antun Vrančić (1504 – 1573) nel periodo di trentacinque anni, cioè dal 1538 al 1573, ha scritto circa ottocento lettere, in maggioranza in lingua latina, ma anche nei pochi casi in lingua italiana ed ungherese. In questo corpus ho identificato tante lettere occasionali, dato che sono scritte in occasioni speciali e perciò possiamo parlare delle lettere consolatorie (*epistolae consolatoriae*), lettere di raccomandazione (*epistolae commendaticiae*), lettere di petizione (*epistolae petitoriae*) etc. Alcune di queste lettere saranno esaminate nel contesto di regole epistolari dei manuali umanistici *ars epistolandi* (specialmente di Erasmo da Rotterdam, ma anche di Franciscus Niger) per constatare il loro influsso possibile sulla composizione delle lettere di Vrančić.