

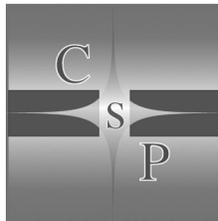
# Last Letters



# Last Letters

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## INTRODUCTION

### SYLVIE CRINQUAND

“I can scarcely bid you good bye even in a Letter. I always made an awkward Bow.”<sup>1</sup> Thus concludes John Keats’s last known letter to his friend Charles Brown, before a very uncharacteristic “God bless you” just above his signature. The poet is in Rome, and knows he is dying. Let us not forget he diagnosed his own tuberculosis a few months before, and the boat trip to Italy did little to cure him.<sup>2</sup> When he writes to Brown, he knows he will not meet his friend again, and that is why he starts the letter by confessing: “T is the most difficult thing in the world to me to write a Letter.” Reading his friends’ letters proved just as difficult, and he even refused to be shown the letters when they arrived. Between the letter to Brown, written at the very end of November 1820, and Keats’s death, almost three months elapsed, during which he would not even glance at the letters sent by his friends. In the last letter to Brown he refers to his present life as “a posthumous existence”.<sup>3</sup> The painter Joseph Severn, who had made the journey to Rome with him, wrote to Brown in December to ask him not to send Keats any more letters: “Will you, my dear Brown, write to me — for a letter to Keats now would almost kill him — ”<sup>4</sup> A man who had always proved eager to receive letters, a consummate letter-writer, now found it impossible to even consider such communication, because he knew that his own death was soon to put an end to all epistolary — as well as *in praesentia* — communication. He did, however, request that his friend Severn bury him with two unopened letters from his fiancée Fanny Brawne.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Charles Brown, 30 November 1820, *The Letters of John Keats 1814 – 1821*, II, 360.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the end of his life, see Motion, *Keats*.

<sup>3</sup> “I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence.” *The Letters of John Keats 1814 – 1821*, II, 359.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Severn to Charles Brown, 17 December 1820, *The Letters of John Keats 1814 – 1821*, II, 363.

<sup>5</sup> See Rollins, *The Letters of John Keats 1814 – 1821*: “... Severn at least twice mentioned that Keats made him put two of Fanny Brawne’s letters in a box unread.

This last letter, written just before approaching death, represents one form of last letters, the one that comes to mind at once, although not the most common. Apart from people about to commit suicide or to be executed, very few letter-writers consciously sit down to compose their ultimate letter. Keats, as a doctor, is fully aware that death will soon come and he is writing to say good-bye to his friends, even adding — uncharacteristically for a man who had smiled at the “pious frauds of religion” — “God bless you”, at the end of some of these last letters, perhaps also unconsciously remembering the etymology of “good-bye”<sup>6</sup>. The end being near, the letter is written to take leave, and to ensure that proper closure is attempted, by wishing his friends well. As Keats notes, this seems to test the intrinsic flexibility of the epistolary genre.

Writing a letter is an act of communication between a letter-writer and an addressee, and the letter-writer expects a response to his letter, so that the epistolary contract may be fulfilled. For this reason, the last letter seems to contradict the very essence of the epistolary genre, and it can thus be considered as far more dramatic than “ordinary” letters. Besides, because a letter is a means of communication, a last letter can be used to solemnly herald the end of a relationship, and breaking up by means of a letter then allows the letter-writer to avoid direct confrontation, and to use the distance created by the epistolary genre as a screen. Indeed, whereas a significant part of correspondences is devoted to ensuring that communication functions well, — although misunderstandings are often generated by the fact that extra-linguistic features of communication obviously cannot be conveyed by language and therefore necessitate some stylistic adaptations — breaking-up letters do not function as substitutes for conversation. In a letter, one may choose words, change sentences, and explain why the relationship has to stop without running the risk of being interrupted by an angry or sad listener. These letters exist in their own right, epistolary communication being felt as both less demanding and more final than face-to-face dialogue.

The aim of this book is to study the manner in which the epistolary genre reacts to the extreme situation which signifies the end of an exchange. In the case of death, this will occur because one of the correspondents will no longer be able to respond, and in the case of a break-up, because the real life relationship that originally nourished the

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(...) Again, in a manuscript printed by Sharp, p. 92, he says, “[Keats] made me understand that I was to place them [two letters] on his heart within his winding-sheet.” II, 366, n. 2.

<sup>6</sup> “A familiar (but meaningless) contraction of God be with you, the old form of farewell.” Skeat, *Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*.

correspondence is finished. While we do have to distinguish between these different situations, they share an attitude towards closure that is made more acute by the epistolary context. Because of their significance, last letters have also been widely chosen by writers in fiction, as a narrative device, often used to dramatic effect.<sup>7</sup>

However, the first difficulty lies in recognizing a last letter, and occasionally in deciding whether it is unique or part of a series of last letters. In Keats's case, the task is made easy: the letter to Brown quoted earlier is the last letter bearing Keats's signature in the correspondence edited by Rollins, and no later letter has yet been found. The same may be said about Sir Thomas More's last letter, written just before his execution. In this case the last letter can be clearly identified, and one may analyse how the letter-writer copes with the rhetoric of closure, at a time when theatrical display might seem out of place, and when finding the right words must seem essential. The letter is going to survive its writer, and as such will be entrusted with spreading the writer's words to people who are usually close friends or family. Many such letters have recently been published, alongside soldiers' letters commemorating the two world wars. One may, for instance, mention the beautiful collection of letters written on the eve of their execution by French resisters during World War II, edited by Guy Krivopissko. Most frequently, these letters express love for those who will live on, and offer some guidance, not unlike a will, on how to dispose of the letter-writer's belongings, and how to face the future once he has been executed.<sup>8</sup> The writer's awareness of entrusting the letter with his ultimate words makes these texts emotional, not so much because the letter-writers express their emotion in touching terms — very few of them mention their fear, for instance, although sadness is a common feature — but because the knowledge of what happened to them after writing the letter cannot be dissociated from the reading experience. Thus, the words "life writing" take on their full meaning, even in this case of approaching death. These texts cannot be read as pure artefacts.

Along with this human quality, however, letters written before an execution also betray some sense of history and the historical context; in fact, their writers often mention the certainty that they belong to a group,

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<sup>7</sup> This also raises the issue of the status of wills, the reading of someone's will being used as a narrative device in fiction and film. However, the will is by definition meant to be read after someone's death, which is not the case of last letters.

<sup>8</sup> See Krivopissko, ed., *La Vie à en mourir. Lettres de fusillés (1941 – 1944)*. Only one letter in the whole book was written by a woman. See Krivopissko, "Dernière(s) lettre(s)", in *Dernières Lettres*, ed. Crinquand, to be published.

now persecuted, but later to be vindicated. That is where mentions of the future take place.<sup>9</sup> For French resisters about to be executed, death could somehow be justified if victory were to follow. Moreover, expressing love for their country and the belief in higher ideals also helped to put their own death into perspective, however difficult that might have appeared. The letter thus transcends the individual and sometimes becomes emblematic of both human mortality and human resilience.

The other situation in which the writer can be sure of writing a last letter, also analysed in this volume, although indirectly, is the suicide note. Monica Girard here turns to the use made by Cunningham of Woolf's suicide letters, in which the feelings expressed are quite different. The only meaning to be found in suicide being that life has become unbearable, which Woolf expressed clearly in her letters, the note is above all meant to assuage the guilt induced in those who failed to prevent the suicide. These texts raise issues which differ from those of people about to be executed, because the writer has chosen his/her own death, and is offering apologies for an upsetting act. However, reading these texts also raises ethical issues, and this renders literary criticism harder to conduct.

Yet in most cases, instead of a last letter, we may notice several last letters, or a movement towards closure, or even ... nothing! Most frequently, letter-writers do not know they are writing a last letter, and the critic can only conclude retrospectively that the letter is the last one, simply because no other letter has thus far been found. This complicates the definition of a last letter. Not all writers are as thoughtful as Emily Dickinson, sending her famous "Called back" to her cousins. Some just stop writing with no words to punctuate the event. Contrary to letters consciously written to acknowledge the end, these letters in which the reader has to read between the lines to find the trace of a feeling of finality show the gap that lies between writing and life. This is made even more perceptible by letters like the one Coleridge sent to Southey, in which words attempt to act as a substitute for the original experience, so that the writer may have the last word.

Thus we can see that the field of last letters is a wide one, made up of very different texts; this book offers three different angles of analysis, going from the most artistic or fictional to the most intimate or personal.

In the first part of the volume, so as to begin the study with the representation of the last letter, or with a last letter as representation of the

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<sup>9</sup> Although these remarks refer to French resister letters, the same can be applied to other situations. See for instance Pernot-Deschamps, "Ultime écrits privés", about the texts left by Irish revolutionaries in 1916.

end, three articles are devoted to fictional versions of last letters. Quite naturally, the volume opens with Tilda Maria Forselius' piece on farewell letters in eighteenth-century periodicals. In the eighteenth century letter-writing was an art, both familiar and sophisticated, and her article is devoted to codified writing using the letter as the best means to take leave of a magazine's readers. Tilda Maria Forselius thus suggests that the letter written in the last issue of a magazine can be read using Genette's concept of a postface, and she proceeds to analyse the manner in which two journalists used the epistolary code of the *ars dictaminis* to express their gratitude and their emotion in a highly literary exercise. The form of the letter was selected by the journalist for its rhetorical potential.

Two centuries later, at a time when letters have been superseded by e-mails, and diaries by blogs, epistolary fiction is still thriving, and the next two articles are both concerned with novels based on letters, although in different manners. Marilyn Schuster first studies three contemporary novels, each of which presents letters which might not be sent, and where the letter is used as the conclusion to a love relationship. She shows how the characteristics of letter-writing are being used by a novelist writing a modern epistolary novel. The frontiers between correspondence, diary and fiction are played upon by the writers, and the concept of a last letter is here considered as a literary artefact, designed to create literary meaning. Finally, Monica Girard turns to Cunningham's *The Hours*, and to the manner in which the novelist inserted within his plot real letters, written by Virginia Woolf before killing herself, so as to focalise more effectively on his character and to lead his readers to identify more closely with her. This essay provides an original insight into the blurred frontier between reality and fiction, and into the use of mimesis in a contemporary, post-modern novel.

The second part then turns to professional writers, artists of the written word, who from different perspectives all wrote what may be called last letters, although the meaning and scope of this term differ from one essay to the next. I start with my article on Coleridge's last letter to Southey, a letter sent to mark the end of a relationship, although I attempt to show that it does not aim at closure. Coleridge is one of those artists who uses the idea of a last letter as a rhetorical device; this is made clear at the beginning of his letter, self-defined as the last one. The letter is theatrical, and its effects are designed to act as a screen; a study of other letters related to it is therefore necessary for the reader to understand its real implications.

Marianne Camus then studies letters that mark the end of a phase in a relationship, in this instance Elizabeth Barrett's letters to Robert Browning

before their marriage. Here again, we are faced with a series of letters, which raises the issue of the definition of last letters. The sense of an ending — and of a new beginning — gradually finds its way through the correspondence. What comes to an end here is the epistolary exchange, which will give way to life together, where no letters will be needed. Her article then focuses on the parallels between these letters and *Aurora Leigh*, seeing how these last letters foreshadowed the creation of the later poem.

Finally Susan Van Dyne turns to the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes; she studies the manner in which some of their collections of poems can be read as letters to each other, always meaning to have the last word in rewriting their relationship. Here again life and text are set against one another, writing the text also means reshaping life together. This dialogue went on beyond Plath's death, with the publication of Hughes' *Birthday Letters* in 1998. Here having the last word obviously means the intended reader is also posterity.

The last part of the book turns to "real" last letters, first thanks to Terence McCarthy's article on Thomas More. This is an unfinished letter written with charcoal on a piece of cloth, in which the material reflects the extreme circumstances, since its author was about to be executed. Thomas More being a public figure, his letter could be expected to lean towards the public; however it is very private, although the danger of it being read by More's captors can be sensed. This very moving letter is a good example of some of the characteristics of last letters written before an execution.

Margaretta Jolly then moves to a more social level, by evoking the case of letters written to sever a relationship for political reasons. She takes the example of a lesbian writing to one of her male friends to cut off their relationship, on account of political separatism. The letter requires the addressee not to answer it, thus violating the main rule of epistolary exchange. The story develops since later the woman was to meet her friend again and the article provides insights into their feelings regarding the last letter.

The book concludes with a more personal article; Nicole Ollier turns to her grand-father's letters, over several years, to his wife and son, who had remained in France, while he was working in a mine in South Africa. In this context every letter betrays the awareness that it may well be the last, adding a tragic sense of the end to the anxiety of separation. The time which elapsed between each letter, due to postal conditions, and also to the war, made matters more acute. As in a novel, the real last letter reached its addressee after the letter-writer's death, but the point of Nicole Ollier's article lies in its dealing with reality, not fiction.

The movement of the book has thus been devised to start from the most fictive instances of last letters and then to reach the most private so as to highlight the similarities, thereby offering a variety of viewpoints on closure in last letters.

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**PART I:**  
**REPRESENTING THE END**

WHEN AUTHORS SAY GOOD-BYE  
TO READERS.  
LAST LETTERS IN *THE SWEDISH ARGUS*  
AND *LETTER EXCHANGE*, TWO SWEDISH  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ESSAY PAPERS

TILDA MARIA FORSELIUS

Over the course of the 1700s, more than 300 newspapers and periodicals were launched in Sweden. Around ten per cent of these were essay papers, i.e. in the *Spectator* genre. Initially inspired by Addison and Steele's *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, the Swedish essay papers were especially devoted to moral issues, such as upbringing, gender roles, the order of life in the city and so on. The letter is one of the recurring article forms, used for instance to portray everyday situations or for the author to address a special message or discourse to readers.

In the final issue of the publications there is often a farewell discourse, which may be epistolary, from the author to readers. What was the rhetoric and what were the arguments of such letters? I will discuss this further on the basis of two essay papers: Olof Dalin's *Then Swänska Argus* [The Swedish Argus] from 1732–34 and Catharina Ahlgren's *Brefwäxling* [Letter Exchange] from 1772–1773. By comparing the final messages in these periodicals, my purpose is to show that there were both common features and significant differences, especially in the figurative performances of the authorial personae. My observations will be related to theories of the sweeping cultural changes taking place in the eighteenth century — a transition that not only revolutionized relations in society and created new norms for communication, but also generated new understandings of the body and the self.

## The letter in Swedish essay journalism

The first essay papers were published in Sweden in the 1730s and the last in the 1790s.<sup>1</sup> The approximately thirty essay papers that appeared during this time were all short-lived, and the number of titles varied over time, with clusters in the 1730s and around 1770. Whereas the club-fiction that is significant of *The Spectator* is rather sparsely used, the Swedish essay papers generally follow the narrative model of their forerunners with a fictitious author who narrates and argues in the first person. Within this framework, different forms of articles appear: essays, dialogues, poems, tales and so on. The letter is one of the favoured forms since it appears in most of the publications and has many uses.<sup>2</sup> There is for instance the mimetic, novella-like situation painting, often satirically illustrating some kind of moral problem. There are authentic letters from readers as well as constructed ones, and letter exchanges that continue from issue to issue.

The use of the letter in the essay papers is part of a more general pattern of contemporaneous European literature.<sup>3</sup> In “the century of the letter”, as the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been called, the epistolary form emerged in all kinds of print products — in novels, philosophical discourses, newspapers, journals, pamphlets and so on. Naturally, this is due to the fact that the letter was the personal communication medium of the time. Even if the practice of regular letter exchange was for long only available to the polite and affluent social groups, it was generally a familiar form, connected to the life and values of the new bourgeoisie. Simultaneously, inventive authors were seeking new means to persuade and entertain, since earlier literary concepts seemed obsolete or — especially in the case of news mediation — controlled and authoritarian. By embracing the letter and other ‘authentic’ forms — like the travel narrative, the diary and so on — novels, journals and essay papers could obtain values associated with ‘truth telling’.<sup>4</sup> Credibility and authority were built upon the conception of an honest every-day ‘reporter’, transcending the conventions and censorship of feudal society. Thus, the remediation of letters in literature

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<sup>1</sup> See Oscarsson, “Med tryckfrihet som tidig tradition”, in *Den svenska pressens historia I. I begynnelsen (tiden före 1830)*, 98-215.

<sup>2</sup> A thorough background to the epistolary form in Swedish essay papers is given in Svanfeldt, *Posten 1768-1769 och dess författare. Ett litteraturhistoriskt bidrag till studiet av frihetstidens sista skede*.

<sup>3</sup> See for instance Beebee, *Epistolary Fiction in Europe 1500-1850*.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance Malm, *Textens auktoritet. De första svenska romanernas villkor*, 65.

and papers was a device to gain authority and to strengthen the illusion of truth. This assumption is significant to the following analysis.

One of the essential article categories in the essay papers is the authorial or editorial discourse addressed to readers. This is a communication in which the author, editor or publisher presents ambitions, intentions or problems with the publication project. This kind of discourse, often in the form of letters, is quite naturally used to introduce a new publication, as a sort of preface. It may also be used in the end-of-year issue and — my particular interest here — in the very final issue to draw the publication to a close. Since such farewells to readers are generally explanatory and often apologetical, they can be associated with the type of discourse that Gerard Genette calls an “original postface” (an afterword that appears in the first edition of a book). This paratextual variety is rare in novels, according to Genette<sup>5</sup>, but in Swedish eighteenth-century essay papers last speeches or letters to the readers seem to be a convention. Certainly, the reason that one finds authorial farewells in papers and journals rather than in novels might seem obvious: it was necessary to inform readers, some of whom were subscribers, that they would not receive any further issues. However, the outlines of the epistolary and semi-epistolary last issues that I will discuss here were not so literal and clear as to give this information.

### Authors and personas

My first source is *Then Swänska Argus* (hereafter called *The Swedish Argus*).<sup>6</sup> It was published weekly in 104 issues beginning in December 1732. The person behind it, Olof Dalin (1708-1763), was not the first to use *The Spectator* concept in Sweden, but he is known as the pioneer. The son of a priest, he was 25 years old and worked as a tutor when he launched the project. Later in life, he became a high-ranking state official and a diligent author of both prose and poetry. The outstanding linguistic variety and ingenuity of *The Swedish Argus* made Dalin famous in his own lifetime and made the publication a classic. It paved the way for a literary prose in the Swedish language; it has a given position in our national history of literature and it has long been the subject of scholarly studies.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, 237.

<sup>6</sup> Dalin's *Then Swänska Argus* has been reprinted a number of times. I have used *Then Swänska Argus utgifven af B. Hesselman och Martin Lamm*, I-III.

<sup>7</sup> For instance Lamm, *Olof Dalin. En litteraturhistorisk undersökning av hans verk*.

*Brefwäxling emellan twänne fruntimmer* and the following titles (below called *Letter Exchange I-III*) is my second source.<sup>8</sup> It was published three times weekly for a total of 68 issues during three periods in 1772-1773, i.e. forty years after *The Swedish Argus*. It is the first Swedish essay paper positively attributed to a woman. Catharina Ahlgren's life and accomplishments were not recognized and described in detail until recently, and the exact year of her death remains unknown.<sup>9</sup> She was born in 1734, the daughter of a local magistrate in the county of Östergötland, and, before her endeavours as an author, she was married to a soldier with whom she had four children. After their divorce, she also worked as a translator of novels from English and French. It has been assumed though not fully proven that in addition to *Letter Exchange* she was the woman behind other essay papers.<sup>10</sup>

Even if *The Swedish Argus* and *Letter Exchange* are clearly attributed today, we should bear in mind that at the time of publication both authors were anonymous. The official performances were all conducted in the guise of fictitious first-person narrators — the authorial personas. Undoubtedly, every contemporary reader would have known that 'Argus' in *The Swedish Argus* and 'Adelaide' in *Letter Exchange* were literary guises. The mask was part of the language, it was a convention of the time, and the authors' choice of anonymity seems generally to have been accepted. In Dalin's case it has been claimed that for a long time even the censor and the printer did not know the author's real name.<sup>11</sup>

Considerations about to what extent the personas articulated Dalin's or Ahlgren's 'real' opinions and experiences are not part of my analysis here. Ostensibly, journals and papers have some kind of reference to events in society, ongoing debates and suchlike, and might also expose biographical circumstances of the authors. However, such questions about the actual

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<sup>8</sup> The full titles of Ahlgren's essay papers are *Brefwäxling emellan twänne fruntimmer, den ena i Stockholm och den andra på landet i åtskillige blandade ämnen* (1772); *Brefwäxling emellan Adelaide och några wittre snillen i omväxlande ämnen* (1773); *Fortsättning af Adelaide's Brefwäxling, angående Fru Windhams Historia* (1773).

<sup>9</sup> One of the first to recognize Ahlgren's writings was Berger, *Äntligen ord från qvinnohopen! Om kvinnopress under 1700-talet*. For a recently published and very thorough monograph dealing with textual as well as biographical circumstances, see Björkman, *Catharina Ahlgren. Ett skrivande fruntimmer i 1700-talets Sverige*.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion, see Björkman, *Catharina Ahlgren. Ett skrivande fruntimmer i 1700-talets Sverige*, 99-102.

<sup>11</sup> The reason for Dalin's incognito is very much linked to the censorship in Sweden at the time. See Lamm, "Historisk inledning", in *Then Swänska Argus utgifven av B. Hesselman och Martin Lamm*, III. III-XXV, esp. VIII.

and contemporary backgrounds of these discourses have been dealt with elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> For my purposes in this paper, I regard Argus and Adelaide as imaginary performances, generated by the options and parameters of the rhetoric of their time. In that sense they are indeed ‘real’ as instruments and models to readers and they play a genuine part in the cultural scene.

Let us now turn to the characteristics of these personas and their rhetorical behaviour in their final words to their readers. What kind of explanations, arguments and emotions are brought up to end the relationship with the readers? How are the publication projects justified in review?

### *The Swedish Argus*

As it is an early publication and written by an educated man, *The Swedish Argus* is strongly linked to the old school of oral rhetoric. This is indicated already in the allegorical name of the persona, which is presented in the title. In classical Greek mythology, Argus was a strange man-like creature whose body was covered from head to toe with eyes, some of which were always open. The idea of a constant watcher is implied by this figure, as in the title of *The Spectator*.

In his discourses, which now and again take the form of letters, Argus depicts problems of the community and makes comments on decorum, upbringing and so on. In a way that is distinctive of the genre, illustrative prose pieces are inserted in the frame of his discourses and in these a range of forms characteristic of oral culture are used, for instance allegory and dialogue, rhymes, proverbs and set phrases. Another trait from the old school is that the portrayed characters commonly take the form of negative or positive examples. This is the case for instance for letters that serve as situation portrayals of the not-so-insightful men and women of everyday life. Furthermore, there is often a skilled orator’s tone to Argus’ discourses. For instance, when he addresses his readers he may use the plural, as if he is speaking to an auditorium.

Issue number 52 1734 comprises a well-prepared closure of *The Swedish Argus*. The previous edition announced that Argus was going to say his last good-bye, which is also indicated in the opening motto from Virgil: “Claudite jam rivus pueri, sat prata biberunt” [Stop the currents, young men, the meadows have drunk sufficiently], an allegory for ‘it is

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<sup>12</sup> Such matters are discussed by Lamm in *Olof Dalin. En litteraturhistorisk undersökning av hans verk*, and Björkman in *Catharina Ahlgren. Ett skrivande fruntimmer i 1700-talets Sverige*.

time to stop singing?. Although without an introductory salutation to readers, the issue as a whole has an epistolary character. It follows the rhetoric of *genus demonstrativum*, *gratiarum actiones*, a speech of gratitude for kind deeds, but in the simplified form for epistolary speech.<sup>13</sup>

The issue opens with Argus' exclamation that it is noisy around him. Turning to "min k. Läsare" [my dear reader], he explains the noise as a sudden situation of disorder and conflict among his previously published sheets. The fictitious figures from the earlier issues are fighting to be the most worthy one, when the accomplishments of the publication as a whole are to be evaluated. Argus tells them like a good father that they are of one nature and that he is their king, on condition that they do not quarrel.

This is the first part, then, the exordium, which is followed by a narrative that continues to establish the ethos of Argus. A rumour happens to fly by, bearing praise for the one that works for truth and without any thought of personal gain, namely Argus himself. Encouraged by this approval, Argus starts a solemn speech of gratitude, but begins to stutter and the oral ability fails (expressed as "– – –"). However, he regains control and starts again, in a simpler mode, expressing gratitude to various segments of society that have helped him in his publishing task. These are, in the following order: the four constituents of the parliament (nobility, priests, burghers and peasants), God, the King, highly-ranked state officials, the male reader, the Queen, the female reader, Argus' correspondents, the censor, his soon-dumped co-authors (although they were fictitious, he admits) and finally the printer.

After all these expressions of gratitude, which is really praise for Argus himself, there follows a short section on envious critics, which makes clear the petition of the speech, namely that envy and mockery should not be allowed to silence "en wälmenande Auctor, som will tiena det allmänna" [a well-meaning author who wishes to serve the public]. Thus, this petition repeats the subject matter of the exordium, namely that it is virtuous to keep peace, abolish envy and work for the common interest, just as Argus has done in his publication.

In the conclusion, Argus asks his readers to evaluate the 104 issues as they deserve to be valued, and he assures his dear readers of both sexes that on his part the leave-taking is painful. "Mina k. Läsare och Läsarinnor [...] på min sida betygar jag, at mitt Sinne i denna skillsmässan faller

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<sup>13</sup> The source for the rhetorical terms is Vossius, *Elementa rhetorica*, which was the basic manual used in Swedish schools from the middle of the seventeenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. The edition I have used has been translated into Swedish and with comments by Stina Hansson under the title *Elementa rhetorica eller retorikens grunder*.

liksom i en dwala; Mitt innersta uppröres och ögonen wattnas, när jag nu kastar min Penna” [My d. readers and female readers ... on my behalf I assure that this separation makes my mind seem to fall into stupor; deep down I am upset and my eyes are wet, when I now throw my pen]. The act of throwing away the pen is illustrated by the typography; the last four words appear to fall down over the page.

### *Letter Exchange*

In *Letter Exchange* the epistolary form dominates and, compared to *The Swedish Argus*, the less allegorical character is seen already in the name of the first-person narrating persona. Although it is obviously unusual, Adelaide as a name is not in itself allegorical, nor does it refer to the classical repertoire. Adelaide is a woman who writes letters and, as in an epistolary novel, the reader is merely invited to share in her correspondence with different persons with whom she has friendly relations. The moral messages are thus, through the features of the persona and the epistolary form, included in a rhetoric of autobiography and authenticity. However, Adelaide’s discourses are not always as persuasive as the personal letters they claim to be since they often take the character of monologues in which she gives her opinions on various moral matters such as upbringing, gender relations and suchlike. Alongside the epistolary discourses, the paper includes material from translated and reworked novels.<sup>14</sup>

The farewell letter to readers is found in the last issue of *Letter Exchange II*. Here Adelaide explains that she will close the publication. Unlike the general pattern of her discourse, she addresses the readers as one audience. To a high degree, it follows the same compositional pattern as the farewell letter of Argus, namely a letter-speech of gratitude and justification. Adelaide initially speaks very humbly of her “upriktiga tacksägelse” [honest gratitude] and “obeskrifweliga ärkänsla” [respect beyond words] for the reader, who has taken interest in her “ringa arbete” [insignificant work]. This ‘confession’ moves her, she narrates, so that she loses the ability to write coherently. The lost control of the communication is illustrated by “...”, as in the following sentence: “Förlåt mig, min Läsare...Jag är alt för rörd...” [Forgive me, my reader...I am too moved...]. Nevertheless, shortly thereafter the narrator has regained

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<sup>14</sup> For further information, see Björkman, *Catharina Ahlgren. Ett skrivande fruntimmer i 1700-talets Sverige*. Björkman discusses the possible background to the name Adelaide as well as the contents and form of *Letter Exchange*.

control and claims the noble motives behind her initiative. The petition or request of this letter is implicit in the narration, namely that she wishes to be thought of with respect, and in the conclusion she returns to this. Like Argus, she argues that she does not aim to justify only herself; rather she asks the Almighty to bless and reward “alla som finna smak i Årans utöfvande och den sanna årans afmålande” [all those who find taste in practising honour and in depicting true honour]. In this rhetoric she, like Argus, assumes the pose of an author who without self-centred interests serves the readers and works for the decency of society.

### Similarity and difference

These two farewells to readers thus resemble one another in basic rhetorical aspects. They follow the same mode of speech of gratitude and justification. In this respect, one recognizes the “curative, or corrective, function” which Genette considers is the best a postface can do.<sup>15</sup> What is to be cured or corrected are the potential public evaluations of Argus’ and Adelaide’s accomplishments, which include the publishing initiatives. They are both asking for retrospective sympathies in the eyes of the community by describing themselves as humble servants. To enhance the reasoning about this, they refer to strong emotion that has an impact on their ability to write. Argus and Adelaide stress that they are moved to tears by their own farewell, and in both cases there are some mimetic parts that represent the difficulties of speaking when emotion breaks through (hesitation, interrupted speech and crying in *The Swedish Argus*, crying and inability to articulate words in *Letter Exchange*). Of course, because *The Swedish Argus* was a celebrated forerunner to *Letter Exchange*, it probably served as a literary model for Catharina Ahlgren.<sup>16</sup>

However, there are also differences. Adelaide’s good-bye is more like a ‘real’ letter as it both salutes her readers and, at the end, is dated and signed. Furthermore, she does not turn to the same spectrum of society as Argus does for confirmation — the King, parliament and so on. Ostensibly true to the social limitations of a letter-writing woman — even if this particular woman is also an author — she only refers to the reader, to God and to her own emotional reflections. In her discourse no personalized rumour sails by with good tidings. Adelaide even states explicitly that she cannot write in such a funny, allegorical manner. Although some

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<sup>15</sup> Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, 239.

<sup>16</sup> This influence of *The Swedish Argus* is obvious in for instance the final letter of *Letter Exchange I*, when, in the last sentence, Adelaide lets her pen fall.

allegorical attempts were made in previous issues of *Letter Exchange*, for instance by naming one of the male correspondents “Altid ömhjertad” [Always tender-hearted], her remark seems to be confirmed if one considers the publication as a whole. The language of Adelaide and her fellow correspondents is less figurative and far more sentimental than that of Argus, more searching for expressions of emotion. A further difference between Adelaide and Argus is that her argument in the farewell letter includes a factual and plausible explanation for the closure of the journal, namely that there were too few readers and that her circumstances do not allow her to continue.

### Body conceptualizations

The differences between the discourses may at first seem vague, but the step from Argus’ skilled orality to Adelaide’s sentimental and, at least in some aspects, more realistic letter does involve some significant cultural changes. In my view, these correspond to the theories of for instance Michel Foucault and Walter Ong on how the comprehensions of the self shifted during the 1700s.<sup>17</sup> There was in early bourgeois society, as shown by Foucault, a growing interest in the physical body as an object open to empirical study — an interest that conveyed a new kind of control through social observation and self-government. The new focus on a self-aware subject that Foucault identifies is congruent with the perspective of Ong who argues that in this era, new reading and writing practices gradually changed people’s concepts of the self. The print culture led to quiet, meditative reading and to self-reflections of a new kind. So, too, did the writing of personal letters, as it incited skills to describe the self. Such practices became, according to Ong, a technology of a new kind of subjectivity — a comprehension of a deeper, more consistent inner identity, situated in the individual physical body.

In literature, the journey from orally-oriented culture to this impact of print culture was of course long and uneven. Nevertheless, during the 1700s the orator’s masquerade-like performance gradually changed to a narrator in body-like costume and to more intrusive self-reflective and self-descriptive modes. In my reading, both the differences and the similarities of the final messages in *The Swedish Argus* and *Letter Exchange* illustrate this ongoing cultural transition — it is not clear cut and complete, but in progress.

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<sup>17</sup> The theories related here are found in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, and Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the Word*.

To clarify the picture of how the rhetoric in these farewells is connected to ideas of the body, we can examine how the question of death is evoked. In *The Swedish Argus*, the matter of the persona's death is first raised in the issue before the last, where Argus prepares his passing away by delivering three open wills of epistolary character. One is addressed to his friend "publicum" [the public], one to the publicum's daughter and one to the publicum's son. What he asks them to attend to are aspects of gendered and societal order, such as the law, being a good spouse and so on. After encouraging them to take care of these virtues, the question of who shall inherit his pen remains unsolved. He announces that he will write one further issue to the reader: "Det sidsta och swåraste af alla dem Argus har skrivit" [the last and the most difficult of all those that Argus has written]. At the end of this final issue, which is the farewell speech that I have described above, Argus is allowed to close his eyes. He drops his pen. The performance or play is over. He dies but as an allegorical figure, figuratively.

In Adelaide's farewell letter addressed to her readers, although it follows the pattern of Argus, actual death is not mentioned. In my view this is connected with the fact that her performance is not allegorical. The persona represents a sensible and sensitive writing woman with a tender inner self, suggesting a body of flesh and blood. The reader knows this from many of the former issues of *Letter Exchange*, where pain, anguish and even death wishes are frequently mentioned, often in association with strong sentiment. It seems rather incongruous for a persona based on this body conceptualization to assume the pose of an author of reason that serves the public and simultaneously associates with her own death.

While this interpretation may perhaps seem tentative, there is another and more immediate explanation for Adelaide's temporary survival — namely, that the journal will remain, after all. At the end of the farewell letter, Adelaide announces that she will continue to publish a novel that has started as a serial in *Letter Exchange II*. Consequently, although the actual publication is closed, a third part would follow for this purpose.

### **Adelaide's swan song**

In the third part of *Letter Exchange* in which the translation is published, the discourse of Adelaide is still active. There are letters from Adelaide addressed to her friend Sylvie, and sometimes Adelaide also adds to the translation her own comments on topics raised in the narrative of the novel. Eventually, when the translation is published in full, we find the very last letter of the essay paper. This is not addressed to readers like

the farewell letter in *Letter Exchange II* — reasonably, the author found it unnecessary to repeat a formal good-bye in this addendum to the journal. Instead, Adelaide very intimately salutes her beloved Sylvie, and since in the first sentence she presents the letter as a “Swane-sång” [swan song], we understand that it is actually depicting a farewell to life. The following discourse is a speech of complaint and distress, partly in the form of verse. The disappointments and sufferings that Adelaide refers to are here not connected to the publishing task, but to her futile efforts in life generally. Interestingly, and in conflict with her previous farewell to readers, the celebrated values of the Enlightenment are here discarded. In vain I am diligent, hard working and noble, she complains. Virtue does not pay. Instead of the dignified souls and tender hearts that she spoke of — and to — in the farewell to readers, we now hear about false, selfish, unfaithful and heartless friends. Her soul is disturbed, the pen is difficult to hold and the only comfort is that she trusts she will be rewarded in heaven.

This dejected farewell to life most certainly borrows codified expressions from the religious confessional literature that was widespread at the time and is recognized for its importance in the flow of romantic emotionality in contemporary Swedish literature.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, it is characterized linguistically by a high degree of what Barbara Korte calls “body language”, i.e. a language that “impl[ies] the ‘unspeakable’ elements of many emotions”. In different forms, such language has “been a favoured mode for representing emotion in narrative literature” since antiquity, according to Korte, but its full expressive potential developed from the middle of the eighteenth century onward.<sup>19</sup> This epoch, which is the one that Ong identifies as the eventual changeover to literacy, brings as we know the emergence in literature of the epistolary novel and other sorts of personal narratives — i.e. fiction that conveys an interest in intimate and emotional relations, seen from ‘within’ the writing subject. Considering that the portrayal of subjective, personal emotions was a forthcoming literary mode of the time, it is not surprising that *Letter Exchange* demonstrates a high degree of what could be termed ‘disturbed’ or fragmented speech, meant to mimic profound conditions of the body subject. While mimesis of overwhelming emotion and subsequent failure of speech was seen also in Argus’ farewell, in sentences interrupted by “— —”, it is more forceful in Adelaide’s discourse. Throughout the three

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<sup>18</sup> See Lamm, *Upplysningstidens romantik. Den mystiskt sentimentala strömningen i svensk litteratur*. In Jarrick’s *Hamlets fråga. En svensk självmordshistoria*, 144ff, the self contempt of religious discourse in Sweden in the 1700s is read as a ‘suicidal theme’.

<sup>19</sup> Korte, *Body Language in Literature*, 40ff. and 200.

volumes of *Letter Exchange* there are frequent examples of, for instance, exclamations and disruptions that the reader understands are due to confusion or strong emotions.

### A rhetoric of bodily authenticity

In this respect there is also a noteworthy difference between Adelaide's two farewell letters. In the adieu to readers in *Letter Exchange II* that follows the pattern from *The Swedish Argus*, Adelaide once, like Argus, loses her ability to speak. However, she immediately comments on this as something that proves that she is speaking her heart. In other words, she is revealing an awareness of the mode as a rhetorical device. In the farewell to Sylvie the condition of lost speech is more integrated. The pain of emotion and the failure of argumentation are demonstrated with expressions like "Ack! ja, ja, ja" [Oh! yes, yes, yes], fragmented speech such as "Mitt tryckta hjerta. = = Ack Himmel! = = sötaste Sylvie" [My troubled heart. = = Oh Heaven! = = sweetest Sylvie] and a number of " = = " inserted in the discourse, indicating hesitation, interruption or something left out. Such partly non-verbal expressions, which are seen also in other epistolary narratives of the time, are means of representing the immediate emotional now rather than recounting and narrating.<sup>20</sup> They aim to portray the reactions of a living, feeling body for which coherent, rational discourse is not sufficient or adequate. Considering that this kind of language at the time functioned as a rhetoric of bodily authenticity in the narrator, it is significant that Adelaide in her last letter to Sylvie declares that her emotional body expressions override writing – her tears flow rather than the ink, she says.

Surely, associations with theatrical mimesis could be useful in interpreting the body language in *Letter Exchange*.<sup>21</sup> Apparently, it is impossible to read signs like " – – " aloud as in an orator's speech. To convey the communication in these signs, one would need to decipher and mimic the meaning with one's body. Actually, a similar interior modification takes place when one is reading silently — when one, as the

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<sup>20</sup> Compare the discussions in Svanfeldt, *Posten 1768-1769 och dess författare. Ett litteraturhistoriskt bidrag till studiet av frihetstidens sista skede*, 299-300, and Björkman, *Catharina Ahlgren. Ett skrivande fruntimmer i 1700-talets Sverige*, 136-139, 252-254.

<sup>21</sup> For instance, Singer suggests interesting similarities between epistolary novels and commedia dell'arte: "[...] in both the actors are supposed to write out their own parts as they go along". *The Epistolary Novel. Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence*, 152.

expression goes, “reads to one self”. Because “...”, “= = =” and “- - -” stand for something that is ‘unspeakable’, or at least for something left out, these signs function as an influential invitation to the reader to participate with his or her own thoughts and feelings. In the context of fragmented and emotional speech, they trigger reflection and inner responses in the reader. Thus, seen from the perspective that I relate to in this article, they are strongly connected to literacy; to the silent reading practices and the body conceptualization of print culture.

### From orality to literacy

To summarize, this comparison and discussion of farewells in *The Swedish Argus* and *Letter Exchange* have shown both patterns and significant differences. The concluding discourses of Argus follow each other as a sequence in the two final issues of the publication and are thematically held together. In *Letter Exchange*, farewell letters are found in the last issues of different parts and they are quite dissimilar. The first is essentially in the pattern of *The Swedish Argus*, a speech of gratitude and justification addressed to readers. Although Argus’ rhetoric is more elaborated, the definite impression is that Adelaide in her farewell letter to readers follows the model of Argus. If the *actual* last letter of Adelaide is added to the comparison, we get a complementary impression. Because of this letter’s address to a friend and its very sentimental and depressed tone, it differs considerably from the farewell to readers. This indicates that there were special codes for letter-speeches to readers that lasted over time, while mimetic letters had other parameters and incited other themes.

Nevertheless, the topic of death is raised both in the farewell to readers in *The Swedish Argus* and in the final letter to Sylvie in *Letter Exchange*. A closer consideration of the depictions, however, confirms that the implicit body conceptualizations differ a great deal, and that this difference is deeply anchored to differences in the rhetoric. The figure of Argus, associated with a mythological giant, takes an authorial pose well grounded in the forms of oral culture. In his well-articulated and rather patriarchal appearance, he speaks with eloquence and authority even when his figure is dying. Since the death is staged as a performance, there is no illusion of a ‘real’ dying subject. In contrast, in *Letter Exchange* forty years later the Adelaide figure pertains to a human corporeal concept. The potential persuasiveness is built on the impression of a living woman who writes letters, and the idea of authenticity and immediacy is generated by a high degree of affective, mimetic body language. Hence, Adelaide seems to be a vulnerable body with an (over)emotional inside, and the suicidal