

Exchanging *Logoi* for *Aloga*: Cultural Capital and Material Capital in a Letter of Michael Psellos

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*In a letter to his friend Iasites (Sathas 171), Michael Psellos proposes that he give the letter itself in exchange for a horse. Exploiting the polysemy of *alagon* and *logos* in Greek, Psellos is able to frame this playful representation of a gift exchange in a philosophical opposition between materiality and reason. This allows him to present his intellectual competences as an exclusive kind of cultural capital that deserves material support from other members of society.*

Don't look a gift horse in the mouth¹! Michael Psellos, the famous author and statesman of the eleventh century, could have had this commonsense saying in mind when about to receive a horse (in fact, a mule) from a friend of his: he requited his friend with another present. This should not surprise us: gifts such as flowers, fruit, perfumes and animals circulated among letter-writing Byzantines². What is special about this particular gift exchange is the nature of Psellos' gift: nothing more and nothing less than the letter itself. Words are all he has to offer.

In this study, I shall read this letter as part of a discourse which aims to underpin the validity of an exchange of cultural goods in return for material ones. Words are not only words in this argument: they are *logos*, that word with so many philosophical, religious and socio-cultural overtones. The horse plays its own role: its name, *alagon*, can conveniently be opposed to *logos*, thus triggering a playful, and perhaps unusually explicit, enunciation of the exchange between cultural and material goods.

The argument of the letter

In essence, Psellos' letter is intended to thank his friend Iasites for a mule which he is about to give³. But the elaborate word play used turns it into a discussion about rationality and irrationality, which is indeed how the letter was described in the invaluable project 'Prosopography of the Byzantine World'⁴. Iasites, the addressee, is known to us from some other letters of Psellos. In one of them, he is addressed with the title of *kouropalates*; in another, he is described as a joyful companion⁵. The letter is tentatively dated to 1067 in the PBW, which is

¹ This study has greatly profited from the advice and suggestions of Kristoffel Demoen. I am also grateful to the anonymous referees for their valuable and insightful comments.

² H. Hunger, *Die Hochsprachliche profane Literatur der Byzantiner*, II [Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft ; Abt. 12, Teil 5] (München 1978) 231-232, and A. Karpozelos, 'Realia in Byzantine Epistolography X-XIIC', *BZ* 77 (1984) 20-37.

³ The letter is edited in K. Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική βιβλιοθήκη*, V (Paris / Venice 1876) 434-438 (letter 171). It is briefly mentioned in Karpozelos, 'Realia' 27-28, where it is implied that Psellos asks for a mule because he could not handle a horse. This might not be wholly correct: Psellos asks for a mule that is not too young and rash (cf. *infra*).

⁴ 'Narrative unit: Psellos sent Iasites a discussion of the rational & irrational, why only the horse among animals is *alagon*', Prosopography of the Byzantine World <<http://www.pbw.kcl.ac.uk>>, accessed 16 January 2009.

⁵ Michael Psellos, *Scripta Minora*, ed. E. Kurtz - F. Drexler, II (Milano 1941) 7-8 (letter 6 ; this edition is hereafter referred to as 'Kurtz-Drexler'), and P. Gautier, 'Quelques lettres de Psellos inédites ou déjà éditées', *REB* 44 (1986) 111-197 (letter 25). See 'Anonymus 2297', PBW.

plausible in view of historical data mentioned in the other letters where Iasites appears, but this dating can only be approximate.

Below, I first present the thread of argumentation that the letter develops, by translating the most relevant fragments and paraphrasing the rest. I try to describe the sense of the argumentation not only for its first reader, Iasites, but also for its implied readers, contemporary Byzantines steeped in classical reading. As the letter is deliberately equivocal and sometimes desperately vague, my translation of some words fluctuates depending on the prominence that one sense takes over the other, but sometimes I had to resort to leaving the Greek words as they were. While philosophical notions are surely omnipresent, I have only elucidated them as far as they were needed to follow the argument. Nor do I mean to lay bare every intertextual allusion. For such studies, the future full edition of Psellos' letters by Stratis Papaioannou will surely mark a new starting point.

The equivocation in which the letter indulges becomes manifest from its very first words:

ἄλογον ὡς ἀληθῶς, σεβασμιωτάτη μοι κεφαλή Ἰασίτα, εἰ λόγου βουλοίμην ἀνταλλάττεσθαι ἄλογον, ὡσπερ μελίην ἀντὶ πυροῦ, ἢ ψίανθον ἀντὶ ξυστίδος, ἢ βύρσαν ἀντὶ χρυσοπάστου στολῆς.

It would be 'alogical' indeed, my revered friend Iasites, if I would exchange *logos* for *alogon*, just like corn for millet, or a robe for a mat, or a gold-woven garment for a skin.

The first instance of the word *alogon* would be recognized by Iasites as referring to his gift, the mule, which Psellos equates here, as he does virtually throughout, with a horse. In vernacular medieval Greek, as in modern Greek, ἄλογο(v) means 'horse'⁶, whereas in ancient Greek, the adjective ἄλογος had the general meaning 'without *logos*', that is, 'without reason', or 'without speech'. Psellos, who elsewhere avoids vernacular words or significations as much as any other highbrow Byzantine author, makes a notable exception here for the sake of word play. The following words, ὡς ἀληθῶς, reinforce the pun: the proposition that Psellos makes in this sentence about 'aloga' is found to be truly 'alogical'. Word play is in this letter no mere verbal entertainment, but forms the heart of the rhetorical argumentation of the letter.

The second instance of the word *alogon* has a different function; here, it is opposed to its counterpart *logos*. A cultivated Byzantine reader would instantly recognize this juxtaposition as the opposition of rationality *versus* irrationality within the human soul; in this opposition, rationality (mostly referred to by the word *logikon*, as elsewhere in this letter) is always understood to be the superior part. This opposition was present in Greek thinking even before Plato⁷, and was elaborated on not only by Plato himself but also by other influential authors such as Aristotle, and Plutarch⁸. Christianity readily adopted this conception of the soul, and it is presented as such in some basic texts within the Christian tradition⁹. Psellos also expressed this antagonism in some of his compilatory philosophical writings¹⁰. The quality of λογικός, by extension, not only

⁶ See E. Kriaras, *Λεξικό τῆς μεσαιωνικῆς ἑλληνικῆς δημόδου γραμματείας 1100-1669*, Τόμος Α' (Thessaloniki 1969) 235.

⁷ W. W. Fortenbaugh, 'On the antecedents of Aristotle's bipartite psychology', *GRBS* 11 (1970) 233-250.

⁸ Plato, *Respublica* 439d, Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* 1102a-b, Plutarch, *Moralia* 442a, etc.

⁹ John Damascene, *Expositio fidei*, ed. Kotter (Berlin / New York 1973), §26, l. 92-93: Χρῆ γινώσκειν, ὅτι τὸ λογικὸν φύσει κατάρχει τοῦ ἀλόγου· διαιροῦνται γὰρ αἱ δυνάμεις τῆς ψυχῆς εἰς λογικὸν καὶ ἄλογον.

¹⁰ See e.g. the fragments *De anima et mente* and *Συλλογαὶ διάφοροι καὶ ποικίλαι* in Michael Psellos, *Philosophica Minora*, ed. D. J. O'Meara, II (Leipzig 1989) 2 and 30 (op. 2 and 13). These writings, even their wording, owe very much to Philoponos'

refers to ‘rational’ in this philosophico-religious discourse, but also to ‘spiritual’, as opposed to ‘material’, and to ‘intellectual’¹¹. Psellos switches back and forth between these three significations, often shifting smoothly from properties of the human soul in general to properties and dispositions of different individuals.

In view of the gift exchange that Psellos and Iasites perform here, it is clear that an additional word play is intended in this opposition, whereby the *alagon* - *logos* pair has a very concrete level of signification: *alagon* would be understood as the horse that Iasites gives, and *logos* refers to the gift that Psellos gives in return. In this way, the first sentence opens up a kind of playful competition between Psellos and Iasites about the question of which gift is worth more. In this competition, Psellos directly overbids his opponent by stating that the exchange is ill balanced.

The letter continues as follows (434.29-435.12):

Εἰ δὲ καὶ φιλόσοφος τις θεῖη τὸ χρῆμα, ἀλλ’ ὅμως ἐμπορικόν· καὶ πολλοὶ γε χεῖρονα μὲν κρειττόνων κατὰ γε τὸ ποιὸν ἀνταλλάττονται, τῷ δὲ ὑπερβάλλοντι τῆς ποσότητος κερδαλέωτερόν πως αὐτοῖς τὸ τῆς ἀνταμείψεως γίνεται· ἐγὼ δέ, εἰ μὲν αὐτὴν τὴν τοῦ λόγου στέρησιν τῆς λογικῆς ἀντηλλαττόμην ἔξεως καὶ δυνάμεως, ἄτοπός τις ἂν εἶην καὶ οὐ φιλόσοφος. Νῦν δὲ οὐ στέρησις ὁ ἀντιλαμβάνω τὸν λόγον διδούς, ἀλλ’ οὐσία τις ὑποστατική, χεῖρον μὲν καὶ οὕτω τῆς ἐν ἐπιστολαῖς λογιότητος, ἀυθύπαρκτον δὲ ὅμως πρᾶγμα καὶ οὐ στέρησις ἔξεως. Εἶτα, εἰ μὲν παντὸς τοῦ ἐν ἐμοὶ λόγου ἡλαττόμην τὸ ἀντικείμενον, εἶχέ τινα μοι μέμψιν ἢ ἄμειψις· ἐπεὶ δέ, ὡσπερ πηγῆς τὸ ἀποχετευόμενον οὐκ ἐλαττοῖ τὴν ἀρχὴν ἀφ’ ἧς τὸ ρεῖθρον, οὕτω δὴ κάμοι τὸ γραμματίον. Καὶ ἐὰν ἐλάττω τὸν λόγον ποιῆ, οὐ παρὰ τοῦτο μεμπτέος ἐγὼ, ἢ ἐπαινετέος, προσκτώμενος τῷ οἰκείῳ καὶ τὸ ἀλλότριον, ἴν’ ἔχω τὸ μὲν, ὄχημα τῆς ψυχῆς, τὸ δέ, τοῦ σώματος·

But nevertheless, even if a philosopher were to consider this transaction, it would remain a commercial one. To be sure, many people give things that are better in quality in exchange for worse things, but thanks to the greater quantity of those things, their act of exchange becomes for them more profitable in a certain way. But if I accepted nothing less than the deprivation of my *logos* in exchange for my intellectual (*logikos*) disposition and capacity, I would be a fool and not a philosopher. Now, however, it is not a deprivation that I accept by giving my *logos*, but a real thing. Even this way, it [this thing] may be inferior to refined letter-writing, but nonetheless it stands on its own, and it is not a deprivation of my disposition. Further, if I exchanged all the *logos* I have for its opposite, there would be some blame involved for me in this exchange. But just as water drawn off from a source does not lessen the origin from where the stream comes, so is it exactly with my letter. And if it [this letter] lessens my *logos*, I am not to blame for that; rather I am to be praised, because as well as what is my own, I receive something belonging to another, so that I have on the one hand a carriage for my soul, and on the other hand a carriage for my body.

Here, Psellos explains why the exchange, dismissed in the first sentence, is nevertheless an honourable transaction. It would not be so, if Psellos gave away for naught his superior quality of possessing *logos*. But in this case he gets something in return that is tangible, and in addition, his words have a source that is inexhaustible, unlike material commodities, which, when given away, are lost to the giver.

The expressions ‘τῆς ἐν ἐπιστολαῖς λογιότητος’ and ‘γραμματίον’ (435.7-8 and 12) clarify for the uninitiated reader—but surely not for Iasites or other insiders—the notion of *logos* that has hitherto remained vague: the thing that Psellos exchanges for Iasites’ horse is nothing more than a letter. Thus the word *logos*

commentary on Aristotle's *De anima*, as the editor remarks.

¹¹ See *LPG*, s.v. ‘λογικός’, significations A. rational; B. comprehensible by reason, logical; C. spiritual.

acquires different meanings dependent on its juxtaposition with *alogon*: it refers to a letter (in opposition to a horse), and to rationality (in opposition to irrationality). In many instances however, it can mean or connote both; and when Psellos speaks about a *logikos* disposition within him, he refers to an ability to create *logoi* like this letter, hence to an 'intellectual' disposition. In the last sentence, the 'carriage for my body' refers unequivocally to the horse, played out in an antithesis to *logos*, which is described as a 'carriage for the soul'¹².

Psellos then announces that he is going to give this small issue larger dimensions by joining rhetoric with philosophy. He proceeds to embark upon a philosophically styled description of how rationality (referred to with the more precise term *logikon*, see 435.19) and irrationality (*alogon*) are to be found in everyone. However, as Psellos argues, this general statement does not prevent his own intellectual abilities from being peculiar and superior. Since Psellos shifts here from general psychology to relative properties of people, I have chosen to represent this dichotomy as 'spiritual' and 'material' in the translation below (435.20-29):

Τὸ μὲν λογικόν, ἴσον παρ' ἀμφοτέροις καὶ ὅμοιον, τὸ δέ γε λόγιον παρ' ἑκατέρῳ μὲν, ἀλλ' οὐ κατ' ἴσην μοῖραν, ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἐν ζυγοῖς τρυτάνης ἡ ἐμὴ πλάστιγξ βαρυτέρα τῆς σῆς, ἐπειδὴ καὶ αὐτὸς ἀνθεσι λόγου σεμνύνῃ καὶ ζηλοῖς τὴν ὥραν τῶν λέξεων, ἦν μὴ ἀποτίκτης οὕτως, ἀλλὰ τοὺς ἀλλοτρίους μὲν, γενναίους δὲ τόκους ὡς οἰκείους ἀσπάζῃ· οὔτε οὖν αὐτὸς ἄλογόν τι χρῆμα διδοὺς καὶ λογικὰς λαμβάνων χάριτας, ἐκτὸς τῆς ἀλογίας καθίστασαι, καὶ μόνον τὸν λόγον ἐνδέδουσαι, οὔτε δὲ ἐγὼ, οὔτω διδοὺς καὶ λαμβάνων ἀλογώτατος μόνον γίνομαι· ἀλλ' ἔστιν αὔθις παρ' ἀμφοτέροις ἀμφοτέρα.

The faculty of reasoning (*logikon*) is the same and equally present in both of us. The learned (*logios*) part may also be present in both of us, but not in equal amounts: just as in the beams of a balance, my scale is heavier than yours, since you too take pride in the flowerings of language and strive after beauty of style, although you do not yourself give birth to these but rather embrace the noble offspring of others as if they were your own. So, if you give some material (*alogon*) thing and receive intellectual (*logikas*) charms in return, that does not mean that you escape from materiality (*alogia*) and are dressed only in spirituality (*logos*), nor do I become, by giving and receiving, merely material (*alogotatos*): both properties remain present in both of us.

Psellos here makes a distinction between two manifestations of *logos* in people. One of these, *logikos*, the propriety of having reason and language, is present in everyone, but the other, *logios*, being learned, is reserved for only a few people, a distinction that is bound to remain so. While Iasites may possess *logos*, he does not have the ability to create things that possess the charms of powerful discourse; he can only appropriate them, and this is exactly what Psellos proposes he do in this letter. The specifically literary properties of the *logos* that Psellos bestows on it are expressed clearly by the specifications 'flowerings of language' and 'beauty of style'.

The philosophically styled representation of the soul as a mixture of rational and irrational parts continues. It is stressed that every soul partakes of both and that 'reason (*logos*), just as a ruler or emperor, needs the service of the lesser upon which to mount and ride' (436.6-7: δεῖ γὰρ τῷ λόγῳ ὡσπερ δεσπότη καὶ βασιλεῖ ὑπερησίας τῆς χείρονος, ἐφ' ἧς ὀχίσεται καὶ ἱππάσεται). The imagery here used represents the irrational part of our soul as a horse, an image on which the following sentences elaborate. The notion that

¹² This expression goes back to Plato, *Timaeus* (see 41c and 69c), and is elaborated on in the psychological theories of Neoplatonic philosophers when addressing the relation of mind to body; it is also dear to Psellos, see: Michael Psellos, *Oratoria Minora*, ed. A. Littlewood (Leipzig 1985) 11, line 9 (or.4), referring to 'body', and *Philosophica minora*, II, 23, l. 10-11 (op. 11) in a more 'Proclean', spiritual sense. The idea of λόγος as a 'carriage for the soul' is, however, unique, as far as I can see.

the irrational part should serve reason is in line with earlier influential philosophical and theological treatises about the soul and was also familiar to Psellos¹³. Thereafter, the different elements within the *alogon* are listed (senses, desire, etc.) in terms somewhat similar to those from Aristotle's *De anima*¹⁴. Psellos stresses once again, however, that this communication between the two parts does not entail that they become mixed (436.13-18):

ἀλλ' ὡσπερ ἵππος τιθασσεύμενος καὶ χρυσοῖς φαλάροις καλλωπιζόμενος, οὐκ εἰς κρείττω ὑπαρξιν μετατίθεται, οὔτε μὴν εἰς τὴν χεῖρω ὁ ἐποχούμενος τούτῳ ὀλισθαίνων τῆς ἔδρας καὶ συμπατούμενος, οὕτως οὔτε τὸ ἐν ἡμῖν ἄλογον, λόγος ἀκριβῆς γένοιτ' ἂν ποτε, οὔθ' ὁ λόγος τῆς πρώτης ἐκσταίῃ ὑπάρξεως καὶ τοῦ φυσικοῦ ἀξιώματος.

But just as a horse that is tamed and is adorned with golden bosses does not change into a higher form of existence, nor, indeed, the rider into a lesser when he slips from the saddle and is trampled upon, so could the *alogon* in us never fully become *logos*, nor could *logos* ever step aside from its first form of existence and its natural rank.

Notwithstanding the philosophical discourse that is maintained here, the comparison with a 'real' horse and the use of verbs from the sphere of horse-riding to denote the servitude of the irrational part of our soul ensure that the underlying connotation of 'horse' for *alogon* is not forgotten. In the comparison, even the unequivocal word ἵππος is used, for the first time in this letter.

The image of the horse has a firm tradition in philosophical theories about the human soul. Every Byzantine reader familiar with Platonic philosophy would inevitably call to mind Plato's allegory of the soul in the *Phaedrus*, where reason as a charioteer tames the irrational parts of our soul, represented as a pair of horses¹⁵. As a result, the Platonic horse develops into the cornerstone of Psellos' equivocation centred around *alogon*. Ironically, Psellos' use of the metaphor elucidates, through the aid of philosophy, the properties of a tangible horse, instead of the other way round.

Psellos then returns to the assertion that neither *logos* nor *alogon* can change into its opposite, but this time he links the philosophical relation between the two to the exchange that he and Iasites are performing (436.22-25):

Δεῖ δὲ ἀμφοτέροις θατέρου μέρους· ἐμοὶ μὲν, τῷ λογίῳ εἴποι τις ἂν ἴσως καὶ φιλοσόφῳ, τῆς ὑπερειδούσης ἀλόγου δυνάμεως, καὶ σοὶ τῷ ἥττονα τὴν λογιότητα ἔχοντι, τῆς λογικωτέρας ὑπάρξεως.

Both parts need each other: I, who some may perhaps call learned and a philosopher, need material power to support me; and you, having less learnedness, need a more intellectual (*logikos*) faculty.

I translate here the adjective λογικός with 'intellectual', because at this point the opposition *logos* - *alogon* is reduced to a distinction between the intellectual (again, the connection with *logios*, learned is made), and the 'normal' person, whose task it is to materially support the intellectual. They can give δύναμις, the

¹³ Michael Psellos, *De Omnifaria Doctrina*, ed. L. Westerink (Nijmegen 1948), 49, §81, and Psellos' encomium for his mother in Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, V, 34.

¹⁴ See e.g. *De Anima* 413b-414b, where Aristotle makes the connection between sensible things, sensory impressions, opinions, and desires.

¹⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus* 246a-254e. Psellos was very familiar with this image; he even devoted an exegetical work to it, entitled Ἐξήγησις τῆς Πλατωνικῆς ἐν τῷ Φαίδρῳ διφρεῖας τῶν ψυχῶν καὶ στρατείας τῶν θεῶν, ed. *Philosophica Minora*, II, 12-14 (op. 7).

effect of an action, while the intellectual can give (or rather: can allow someone to take part in) his ὑπαρξις, his innate faculty.

Pursuing the horse metaphor, Psellos states that Iasites, as a noble soul, needs the reins of reason (436.31: τοῦ λογικοῦ χαλινουῦ). Then the distinction between a general and a specific intellectual faculty is made again: while Iasites has *logos* by nature, Psellos possesses another kind of *logos*, one that is able to glide into the soul and lead it towards the understanding of the ‘better things’. This latter kind is more helpful than the natural *logos* (437.6-13):

Ὁ μὲν γὰρ βλοσυρός τις δοκεῖ εἶναι, καὶ οὐκ ἀφήσει κάλλη, οὐδὲ ἀκτινοβολεῖ χάριτας, ἀλλ’ ἔστι δυσπαράδεκτός τε καὶ δυσσιώνιστος· ὁ δὲ, ὡς περ ἄνθος ἐστὶν ὥρας ἔαρινῆς, καὶ ὑπάγεται τὸν ἀκροατὴν, εἰκότως ἐλκόμενον τῷ θελκτηρίῳ τῆς χάριτος. Εἰ δὲ πολλοὶ πρὸς τὴν ἠχῶ τοῦ λόγου κωφεύουσιν, ἀλλὰ σοὶ γε πρὸς ταύτην τὰ ὦτα ἀνεώγασι καὶ ἐστήκασι, καὶ οὐδὲν σε τῶν πάντων οὕτως ἠδύνει ὡς λέξις χαρίεσσα καὶ συνθήκη λόγου ἐμμελεστάτην ἀρμονίαν κληρωσαμένη.

The first kind [of *logos*] seems somehow coarse, and does not impart any beauty, nor does it shine forth with grace: it is hard to accept and hard to interpret¹⁶. The other kind, however, is like a flower in spring: it brings the listener, who is rightly attracted by the charms of grace, under its power. Most people, however, remain deaf to the sound of literature (*logos*); but your ears are open to it and remain still for it, and there is nothing that delights you so much as graceful style and a literary composition that has inherited a most melodious harmony.

Psellos makes here a distinction between *logos* as natural, plain discourse, and a special kind of discourse that is more attractive¹⁷. The distinction makes clear that the *logos* that Psellos claims to be giving comes closer to what we would call ‘literature’: it is a graceful and rhetorically effective kind of discourse.

The predilection of Iasites for this more sophisticated side of *logos* is for Psellos the occasion to offer him an erudite digression. This is an etymological explanation of why, of all animals, only the horse is called *alogon*, even though every animal is *alogon* in the sense that it has no language (438.7: λόγος φυσικός). The reason that Psellos gives is that the horse corresponds to the irrational part of our soul that needs to be tamed. A horse is a kind of second *alogon*, because, just as the passions and emotions in our soul have to be tamed by our rational part, so the horse was the first animal to be tamed by the only rational animal, and for that reason it came to be named after irrationality. Psellos’ explanation, which is idiosyncratic as far as I can see, is in fact a backward etymology: whereas the metaphor of the horse in Plato clarifies the way we have to understand the irrationality in our soul, the causal relation works for Psellos in the opposite direction.

After this digression, Psellos proceeds to the conclusion of his letter (438.17-21):

Ἄρ’ οὐχὶ μυρίων ἀλόγων ἀντάξιος ἡ ἐπιστολή, ἀδελφὲ φίλτατε; ἀλλ’ ἡμεῖς ἐνὸς ταύτην ἀνταλλαττόμεθα, ἔστω δὲ τοῦτο μῆτ’ ὄνος, μῆθ’ ἵππος ἄρρην, ἀλλ’ ὡς περ ὁ παρὰ τοῖς ἰατροῖς ἡμιτριταῖος σύνθετός ἐστιν ἐξ ἀφημερινοῦ συνεχοῦς τριταίου διαλείποντος, οὕτω δὴ καὶ τοῦτο ἡμίονος εἶη.

Is my letter not worth a thousand horses, my dearest friend? I have, however, exchanged it for only one¹⁸! And it shall not be an ass, nor a male horse, but just as in the domain of physicians a

¹⁶ *LSJ*, s.v. *δυσσιώνιστος* give the translation ‘ill-omened’, but I think Psellos takes it to mean ‘hard to take an omen from’.

¹⁷ He makes a similar distinction in another letter; see Sathas, *Μεσαιωνική Βιβλιοθήκη*, 242-3, letter 11.

¹⁸ The text is problematic here: normally, as elsewhere in the letter, the verb ἀνταλλάττομαι is followed by an accusative denoting the object that one receives in exchange and a genitive for the object that is given in exchange. Here the opposite is the case.

‘semi-tertian’ fever is compounded of an intermittent tertian and a continual quotidian fever, so shall this thing be a mule, a ‘semi-ass’.

Psellos does not miss the opportunity to drop in some technical medical terminology here, clearly taken from Galen (or one of his compilers)¹⁹. It is striking that once again he advances a backward etymological explanation: Galen explains the term ‘semi-tertian’ by using the example of the mule, whereas Psellos does the opposite.

Here, Psellos finally reveals what his missive boils down to: Iasites should give him a mule. The imperative and optative mood and future tenses used in connection with the mule imply that the mule is not yet given. Requests for donations specifically of horses or mules are frequent in Byzantine letter-writing²⁰. The most probable scenario is that Psellos describes here the animal he wants in response to an earlier proposal from Iasites that he give him a mule.

Psellos further specifies that the colour is not important but that the mule should be of a quiet nature, not too wild, since our armchair scholar has often been thrown out of the saddle. The letter closes with a pun that for a last time exploits the polysemy of *alogon*: it should in fact not be too *alogon* (here carrying the meaning of ‘unreasonable’).

Κἂν εἰ μετρίων ἐτῶν εἴη, μὴ μέντοι πολλῶν, οὐδὲ τοῦτό μοι ἀλυσιτελές, ἦττον γὰρ οὕτως ἔξει τὸ ἄλογον. Ἐγὼ γὰρ μετρίως ἄλογον ὑποτάξαι δύναμαι ταῖς χερσίν, ἀλογώτατον δὲ καὶ θρασύτατον οὗ μοι δύναμις τῷ χαλινῷ ἀντισπᾶν.

And if it would be of middle age—but not too old!—that would be of convenience to me, because that way it is less unreasonable (*alogon*). For I can subdue an averagely unreasonable *alogon*, but I have not the strength to hold in check with the reins one that is all too rash and *alogon*.

Exchange in letter-writing

This letter is permeated by the terminology of exchange. The transaction between Iasites and Psellos to which the letter pertains is referred to with the terms ἀνταλλάττεσθαι (434.27, 435.2 and *passim*), ἀντιλαμβάνω (435.6, 436.21), ἄμειψις (435.10), ἀντάμειψις (435.3), and the pair δίδωμι – λαμβάνω (435.25-28). The main argument of the letter focuses on the question of whether the two gifts are of equal value (438.17: ἀντάξιος) and whether exchanging them is legitimate.

It is perhaps indicative of the conscious elaboration of this theme that this letter has a particular place in the letter collection: it forms part of a small series of letters which concentrate on exchange and reward²¹. The weighing of the mutual gifts is an element of a playfully conducted competition that recurs in

¹⁹ See the striking resemblance of expression in Galen’s *De differentiis februm*, edited in Galen, *Opera omnia*, ed. C. G. Kühn, VII (Leipzig 1821-1833) 358.

²⁰ Karpozelos, ‘Realia’, 27-28.

²¹ This is only a hypothesis, based on the fact that both the preceding and the following letter in the edition of Sathas explore these themes. These letters follow upon each other in their original sequence in the manuscript Paris. Gr. 1182. Letter 168, also positioned nearby in the manuscript, is the more famous letter to a schoolteacher not satisfied with the gift of money Psellos had given to him. See P. Gautier, ‘Deux manuscrits pselliens: le Parisinus Graecus 1182 et le Laurentianus Graecus 57-40’, *REB* 44 (1986) 45-110, here 78. There is not much known about the principles of collections of Psellos’ letters, see E. Papaioannou, ‘Das Briefcorpus des Michael Psellos: Vorarbeiten zu eine kritischen Neuedition’, *JÖB* 48 (1998) 67-116. On the difficulty of discerning principles of Byzantine collections of letters in general, see M. Mullett, *Theophylact of Ochrid. Reading the Letters of a Byzantine Archbishop* (Aldershot 1997), 19-20. Letter 168, also positioned nearby in the manuscript, is the more famous letter to a schoolteacher not satisfied with the gift of money Psellos had given to

other Byzantine letters which reflect on the question of communication and letter exchange²². It was a *topos* in epistolography that gifts were accepted with some reluctance, since it was the letter itself that was supposed to be the eagerly awaited precious object²³.

It should be mentioned that this *topos*, with the same pun on *aloga* versus *logoi*, appears in a letter by Ioannes Mauropous (letter 37): Mauropous accepts with some protestation a materially valuable gift, remarking that it means nothing to him compared with *logoi* (l. 10-11: τί γὰρ τὰ ἄλογα πρὸς τοὺς λόγους;). Karpozelos infers from this sentence that in this case too the gift in question is a horse²⁴. I would add that the subsequent phrase in Mauropous' letter, ὡς τὰ ἄχυρα πρὸς τὸν σίτον, a biblical allusion (Jer. 23.28), also echoes the beginning of Psellos' letter. A form of imitation between these two intellectuals, linked by the bonds of a teacher-student relationship and a lifelong (but sometimes troubled) friendship, is indeed likely.

As letters themselves form *a priori* part of an exchange system, it should not surprise us that Psellos often uses the image of exchange or commercial transaction when he speaks about himself and his addressee exchanging letters²⁵. But on some occasions, letters are exchanged for more mundane objects. In a letter to the patriarch of Antioch²⁶, Psellos gently rebukes his addressee for thinking his debt has been paid off by just one letter. He takes on the role of tax collector, asking for more friendly words. He then switches to more practical matters. He has interceded with some monks on the patriarch's behalf. Rightly so, Psellos argues: just as the patriarch owes him his fatherly love and attachment, so does Psellos requite him (p. 165, l. 27: ἀντιδίδωμι) with spiritual debts, such as respect and help by means of his eloquence. At the end of the letter, he sums up the balance of exchange: the patriarch has paid off two debts of the three he owes to Psellos: the 'golden' and the 'black', gold referring to money and black to ink, *i.e.* to letters. The third kind is only hinted at obliquely, but I suspect he asks for a garment, a speciality of Antioch. By bringing together these kinds of assets—cultural, social and material—Psellos confirms that they work as kinds of capital that are interchangeable.

In other letters, Psellos presents his eloquence more explicitly as a commodity that can be exchanged for other kinds of commodities. A common way to exploit this theme is to juxtapose words (*logoi*) with deeds (*erga*, or *pragmata*). One letter to an unknown addressee is perfectly clear in this regard, and also implies that Psellos' *logoi* may enhance the latter's social renown:

So, let us in a certain way requite each other, and be reciprocally affected, me by giving words, you by giving me back deeds. (...) I have opened up with my mouth the sources of words in your favour, and you gush over me with your benevolence in a still greater stream, and by both, the bowl of friendship will become filled²⁷.

him.

²² M. Mullett, 'The Classical Tradition in the Byzantine Letter', in M. Mullett and R. Scott (eds.), *Byzantium and the Classical Tradition, Papers of the Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies* (Oxford 1981) 75-93, here 81.

²³ Karpozelos, 'Realia', 20-21.

²⁴ A. Karpozelos, *The Letters of Ioannes Mauropous, Metropolitan of Euchaita* (Thessalonike 1990), 128 (translation) and 230 (commentary).

²⁵ See for instance a letter to Aristenos, edited in Gautier, *Lettres inédites*, 173-175 (letter 24), where Psellos avers that letters can be exchanged for letters, just like clothes for clothes (l. 14-15: λόγος γὰρ λόγου ἀντιλαμβάνεται ὡσπερ ὑφάσματος ὑφάσμα).

²⁶ Kurtz-Drexler, II, 164-6 (letter 138).

²⁷ Gautier, *Lettres inédites*, 184-5 (letter 31), l. 8-10: Τρόπον οὖν τινα ἀντιδρῶμεν ἀλλήλοις καὶ ἀντιπάσχομεν, ἐγὼ μὲν λόγους διδούς, σὺ δὲ ἔργα ἀντιδιδούς, and l. 15-17: Ἐγὼ μὲν πρὸς τὰς ὑπὲρ σοῦ τῶν λόγων πηγὰς ἀνεστόμωμαι, σὺ δὲ

In another letter, to the bishop of Parnassos,²⁸ he uses almost exactly the same phrasings. The bishop has given Psellos cheese, pickled meat and butter in abundance. The thing that Psellos proposes as exchange are *encomia*, because ‘I am rich in words, you are rich in things, so we will exchange our own things liberally between each other’²⁹.

Logos: both inalienable and exchangeable

The letter to Iasites surely forms part of this rhetoric of ‘words for things’ so common in Psellos’ letters. However, the argument as developed generally in this particular letter is more far-reaching: it paves the way for a particular conception of *logos*, something that deserves a place in an exchange of different kinds of assets.

A first step in this direction is the representation of the notion *logos* as something that stands above mundane, material things. The most important strategy to create this impression is the deliberate blurring of the semantic fields of this word, so that it is able to impart all its (positive) philosophical connotations (reason, rationality, spirituality, immateriality, etc.).

The inexhaustibility of this gift is another element that underpins the immateriality of *logos*. It is depicted as an eternally renewable source (435.10-12), and a *hexis* (435.4-5: τῆς λογικῆς ... ἔξεως), an innate talent that cannot be taken away, because it came with nature (435: οὕτω γὰρ καὶ ἡ φύσις ἡμῶν συμπέπλασται). Psellos repeats this points several times: he can never be deprived of this ability (436.21-22: οὐτ’ ἐγώ ... κενός ποτε γενοίμην τῆς ἔξεως). As a result, *logos* is not only an immaterial thing but also inalienable.

Having evidenced this elevated nature of *logos*, Psellos narrows down its definition to make clear that the *logos* he proposes for exchange is not only the technical philosophical notion but also an intellectual faculty, of which his letter is a token. He achieves this by connecting *logos* with the far more specific cognate *λογιότης*, ‘learnedness’ (435.8, 436.24). He also presents himself obliquely, but unmistakably, as a learned person, and deduces from this that he possesses more *logos* than others (436.22-24). In this way, he proceeds almost seamlessly from a general philosophical statement to a differentiation of people along intellectual criteria.

A further step towards the understanding of *logos* as an intellectual, and indeed literary, faculty is made by the distinction between two kinds of discourse (436.31-437.13). Opposed to a natural kind of discourse, Psellos presents ‘his’ *logos* as a sophisticated, refined discourse. This *logos* possesses *charis*, a key notion mentioned thrice (437.7, 9 and 12). These charms are further specified as beautiful style and composition (437.12-13), and ‘flowerings’ (435.23, 437.8).

Moreover, it is implied that this kind of discourse is creative. When Psellos depicts the faculty of being *logios*, this is taken to be a creative version of possessing *logos*: Psellos partakes of more *logos* than Iasites

ἀνθυπερβλύζεις τὸ εὐγνωμονεῖν πλείονι ρεύματι, καὶ γίνεται παρ’ ἀλλήλοις πλήρης ὁ τῆς φιλίας κρατήρ.

²⁸ Kurtz-Drexler, II, 107 (letter 75).

²⁹ I. 17-19: ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ πλουτῶ λόγοις, σὺ δὲ πλουτεῖς πράγμασιν· ἀντιδώσομεν οὖν ἀλλήλοις δαψιλῶς τὰ οἰκεῖα.

because he can create literature (435.25: τόκους). The specifically literary qualities of Psellos' *logos* are again unequivocally made clear: Iasites admires the flowers of the *logos* (435.23: ἄνθεσι λόγου), and the 'beauty of wordings' (435.23: τὴν ὄραν τῶν λέξεων). Again, *charis* is mentioned (435.26: λογιᾶς χάριτας). This stress on the creative aspect of Psellos' *logos*, in conjunction with my comments on the translation above, convinces me that the *logos* that Psellos presents here is a creative authorial practice, endowed with the techniques and the effects of rhetoric. Therefore, seen from the perspective of the sociology of literature, this letter may be seen as an attempt to provide grounds for a material remuneration for literature (in the sense of 'rhetorically shaped texts with aesthetic effect on its public'), while at the same time retaining its overtones of spirituality and inalienability.

However, this kind of exchange entails a particular difficulty. From the beginning, Psellos states that it is in fact an impossible exchange because spiritual goods are superior to material things and, in fact, inalienable. We touch here on a fundamental issue of how to understand the exchange of cultural for material goods³⁰: it is a prevailing ethical prescription that intellectual pursuits such as learning and literature should stand above commercial transactions and the baneful influence of money. On other occasions, Psellos asserts that he has never sold his lessons for money³¹ and scoffs at people who study letters with the intention of making money out of it, instead of studying it for its own sake³².

This paradox forms part of a universal set of conceptions by which people conduct and perceive transactions involving cultural goods. Both parties (the 'artist' and the cultural consumer) agree upon a kind of tacit misrecognition of how the exchange of cultural goods works. It is not seen as an exchange at all, but rather as a spontaneous act inspired by feelings of friendship and aesthetic admiration. So, the task that Psellos set himself is to unite this discourse of the inalienability of *logos* with the practical need for literary services to be recompensed in some way.

Here again, the philosophical discourse of *alogon* and *logos* comes to his aid. The Platonic image of the horse, and, inspired by that, the etymological digression, remind the reader of the irrefutable philosophical idea that corporeal things should put themselves at the service of spiritual things. But Psellos cleverly makes the shift from philosophical ideas towards an idea of cultural exchange. This is achieved through Psellos' self-representation as an intellectual who needs the support of material powers, while Iasites, as a normal person, needs help in intellectual matters (436.22-25).

The same shift is also performed in the section where Psellos describes the forces that the irrational part of our soul can deploy for the benefit of *logos* (436.6-11). These forces are described as senses, opinions, and desires. These imply, I would contend, the specific elements that appreciative people like Iasites can contribute to do honour to the literary work addressed to them. What Psellos expects from the admiring public is that they submit their senses, opinions and desires to the power of his discourse.

³⁰ In this and the following paragraphs, I make use of some concepts and ideas of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, see especially his *Le sens pratique* (Paris 1980) and *Les règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris 1992).

³¹ Michael Psellos, *Chronographia*, ed. S. Impellizzeri, I (Milano 2005³) 290 (book VI, §43). As E. Pietsch, *Die Chronographia des Michael Psellos: Kaisergeschichte, Autobiographie und Apologie* (Wiesbaden 2005) 73 remarks, this is nothing more than mimicking the Socrates of Plato's *Apology*.

³² Psellos, *Chronographia* I, 40-42 (book I, §29).

However, there is also another dimension to this exchange, one that emerges when Psellos describes the effects that his discourse can have on its public. Through the ears, it glides unnoticed into the soul (see 437.2-3, an image not rare in letters concerning mediation³³) and thereby ‘subdues’ the listener with its charms (437.9). This suggests that Psellos’ rhetorically competent *logos* is a tool for effective social engineering: mediation through effective eloquence can enhance someone’s network resources, an important asset in a social world dominated by nepotism and favours for friends³⁴.

We can see, then, that the rhetorical and properly literary qualities of the *logos* that Psellos proposes for exchange are elements that can generate social capital. The exchange is therefore also an exchange of social capital in return for material capital; but this social capital is dependent on a specific form of cultural capital, that is, rhetorical know-how and literary techniques.

This letter even allots a place to every participant in this kind of exchange. Most people just remain deaf to the literary charms of rhetoric. For them, Psellos reserves the term that is paramount in Greek culture to denote the ignorant masses: οἱ πολλοί (437.10). Iasites is set apart from these masses: he has the right predisposition to appreciate literature. The language that Psellos uses—the ears that stand open for literature (437.11), the sweetening enchantment (437.12: ἡδύνει) that polished discourse exerts—appeals first and foremost to the taste he projects in Iasites. But this group of people is still not able to produce literature; they can only embrace and love the works of others (435.22-25). Their place in the exchange is therefore to support (436.23: ὑπεριδούσης) literature. The true superior elite are the *logioi* like Psellos, those able to produce literature and to give it to others.

These allocations create bonds as well as exclusions: men who have the ‘legitimate’ tastes and competences to engage in such a literary exchange, partake of its grace and profit from its charming power. They can claim to belong to a distinctive elite. Others are excluded from the start, as they lack the taste necessary to participate in such refined exchanges.

Even more: the argument works toward the conception that these categories of people are fixed for once and all. Repeatedly, Psellos insists that Iasites will remain in his state of *alogia*, while he himself possesses the *logikè hexis*³⁵. No matter how frequently they engage in exchange, this exchange cannot in any way taint Psellos’ superior status. *Hexis* is more than just a taste or an action: it is a property that cannot be taken away, nor can it be acquired easily by just anyone. We can see here that the cultural capital, consisting of the various rhetorical and intellectual competences so valuable for generating social influence, is safeguarded from gratuitous intruders by the claim that it is innate and inalienable.

³³ See for example Kurtz-Drexl, II, 80-81 (letter 48), in which Psellos confirms to his friend Kalokyros that he has engaged all his eloquence to move the emperor to show mercy: ‘If there was any charming ode, or a melody gently gliding into the ears, chasing the soul unnoticed, I did not neglect it.’ (r. 13-15).

³⁴ See H. Ahrweiler, ‘Recherches sur la société byzantine au XIe siècle: nouvelles hiérarchies et nouvelles solidarités’, *TM* 6 (1976) 99-124.

³⁵ This ‘capacity for learning’ (ἔξιν λογιότητος) re-occurs in Psellos, *Chronographia*, I, 282 (book VI, §35), to describe Monomachos’ lack of intellectual abilities.

Two horses are not the same

In order to understand fully the particularity of the exchange that Psellos proposes to Iasites, I would like to contrast this letter with another letter of Psellos. Letter 232 in the edition of Kurtz-Drexel³⁶ is directed to Psellos' influential friend Ioannes Doukas, brother of emperor Konstantinos X Doukas (1059-1067), holding the title of *kaisar*, and an influential figure during his brother's reign and that of his cousin Michael VII Doukas (1071-1078). The letter begins thus:

In response to cheese and truffles³⁷, maybe also to oils, sweetmeats and perfumes, my most wondrous *kaisar*, I am able to write letters back and give things in exchange. But in response to a horse, so beautiful, great, and docile, so swift and agile, I am at a loss to write a letter of equal measure and equal value³⁸.

In both letters, Psellos discusses with a friend the exchange of a horse for a letter, but the difference in argument is striking: while Psellos assures Iasites that his letter is worth so much more than the horse, here he declares that no letter will ever be of equal value. Surely this remarkable difference is not due to the fact that Iasites' horse was in fact a mule, and Ioannes Doukas' horse a real horse. Psellos explains the difference unmistakably:

Even though it [the horse] may not be as wonderful or adorned with so many beauties as the famous horse of Alexander, (...) but as it is sent me as a gift from a man so formidable that no human of old would want to contend with him, how could I by means of words compete with the excellence of such a man?³⁹

The value of the gift does not reside exclusively in the gift, but first and foremost in the status of the person who gives it. Evidently, a *kaisar* stands on a higher social rank than a *kouropalates*, and Doukas, whom Psellos regarded as a patron, outranked Iasites, who stood at an equal or even inferior rank. This hierarchical difference determines the value of the gift, more than philosophical assumptions or the intrinsic value of the gift itself. Psellos himself acknowledges this fact, not only here but also in other letters: in the letter to the patriarch of Antioch discussed above, he says about the patriarch's expected share in (letter) exchange that he will 'measure it from our shared friendship and determine it from our mutually agreed obligations'⁴⁰.

Therefore, while in both the letters to Iasites and to Ioannes Doukas the discourse of exchange and playful competition is maintained, in the letter to the *kaisar* Psellos opts to follow a rhetoric of deference instead of a rhetoric of arrogant overbidding. Social hierarchy remains the ultimate force behind the way an exchange works.

³⁶ Kurtz-Drexel, II, 278-281.

³⁷ These gifts are mentioned in other letters directed to *caesar* Ioannes Doukas, e.g. letters 206 and 233 in the edition of Kurtz-Drexel.

³⁸ Kurtz-Drexel, II, 278, l. 19-24: Πρὸς μὲν τυροῦς καὶ ὕδνα, ἴσως δὲ καὶ μύρα καὶ πέμματα καὶ ἀρώματα, ὑπερθαύμαστέ μοι καῖσαρ, ἐπιστέλλειν καὶ ἀνταμείβεσθαι δύναμαι· πρὸς δὲ ἵππον οὕτω μὲν καλόν, οὕτω δὲ μέγαν, οὕτω δὲ τρυφερόν, οὕτω δὲ ταχὺν καὶ εὐκίνητον ἐπιστολὴν ἰσόμετρόν τε καὶ ἰσοδύναμον ποιῆσαι ἀμηχανῶ.

³⁹ Kurtz-Drexel, II, 278.24-279.3: Εἰ γὰρ καὶ μὴ τοιοῦτος ἦν μηδὲ τοσοῦτοις ἐκεκόσμητο κάλλεσιν, ὁπόσοις οὐδ' ὁ τοῦ Ἀλεξάνδρου παράσημος ἵππος (...) ἀλλ' ἐπειδὴ παρὰ τοιοῦτου ἀνδρὸς δῶρόν μοι ἀπέσταλται, ὁποῖω ἂν οὐδεὶς τῶν ἀπ' αἰῶνος γηγενῶν ἀντερῖσειεν, πῶς ἂν διαμιλλησαίμην λόγῳ πρὸς τὴν τοῦ πέμψαντος ἀρετὴν;

⁴⁰ Kurtz-Drexel, II, 164 (letter 138), l. 17-19: ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ τοῦτον τῇ κοινῇ φιλίᾳ παραμετρῶν καὶ τὰς πρὸς ἀλλήλους συνθήκας συλλογιζόμενος μυρίον εἰσπράττομαι χρέος ἐπιστολῶν.

As a final remark, we should not lose from sight the fact that the primary function of the letter to Iasites at the time of sending was to thank a friend for a mule he was about to receive. The historical person Iasites may have expected in return not only this letter, but also more tangible help from Psellos, such as effective intercession. The philosophically styled argument is at one level just part of a playful competition to decide whose gift is the more valuable. Nevertheless, a discourse is created that allows people to accept that literature (in its quality of 'crafted discourse') can be exchanged for real things, without losing its superior qualities. In this respect, the letter to Iasites can be read as the script for the role that rhetorical competences should play in society, a script written by one of the most ardent and influential defenders of intellectualism in Byzantium.