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Angles of Refraction: The Letters of Mary Delany

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Abstract

Mary Delany (1700-1788) is particularly famous for her paper-cuttings or 'mosaicks' based on botanical subjects. A very lively woman of fashion, she was close to Queen Charlotte and one of the Bluestocking Ladies. She left a vivid portrait of life and society in eighteenth century England and Ireland in the six volumes of her *Autobiography and Letters*, edited in 1861 by her descendant Lady Llanover. Her autobiography is made up of 18 letters sent to her most intimate friend, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Portland. The first letter is dated 1740, but in this, as in the following ones, Mrs. Delany narrates her past life to her friend, starting from the early years of her life, describing her unhappy marriage, financial difficulties as a widow, and family relationships. Along with these 'autobiographical' letters, other letters written by her to her sister Ann are introduced, which date to the periods of life Mrs. Delany is dealing with. The aim of this paper is to focus on the textual, linguistic and content differences between the two letter types, and analyse how the identity of Mary Delany is differently constructed and perceived in the explicit autobiographical letters addressed to the Duchess of Portland, and the ones written to her sister.

Keywords: Autobiographical Letters, Familiar Letters, Identity Construction, Mary Delany

1. *Introductory Notes*

In her study on the familiar letter in early modern English, Susan F. Fitzmaurice states that this letter type 'participates in the social, historical and rhetorical plasticity of the letter as a textual form', and that 'its many guises and functions... serve to capture (as well as manage) the multiplicity of relationships among correspondents' (2002, 233). Brant, on the other hand, focusing on eighteenth-century letters, observes that 'the history of letters links up with other genres' and that 'boundaries are not always clear' (2006, 25). Starting from these assumptions, this article aims at analysing what happens when the genre of letter writing, in itself a form of self-presentation, is shaped by the writer to become the means of voluntary self-(re)presentation, resulting in an autobiography proper.

The analysis will be carried out on the correspondence of Mary Delany, *née* Granville (1700-1788), who was famous during her lifetime for her exquisite paper mosaics of flowers, a collection of which is in the British

Museum. A very lively woman of fashion, at different periods of her long life, Mary started writing her recollections of which two unfinished manuscripts still exist. The first one is an autobiographical fragment 'written in the latter years of her life' and 'dictated to a confidential amanuensis' (Llanover 1861, vii); the second consists of 18 letters in her handwriting addressed to her intimate friend Margaret Cavendish Harley, the Duchess of Portland. Both manuscripts were edited by her descendant, Lady Llanover, daughter of Ann Granville, Mrs. Delany's sister, and published in six volumes in 1861-1862, together with the correspondence of her aunt, as *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany: With Interesting Reminiscences of King George The Third and Queen Charlotte*.¹ To render 'the chain of events more complete' (Llanover 1861, viii), Lady Llanover decided to enrich Delany's biographical narrative with original letters written by relatives to Mrs. Delany and by her to her mother and sister Ann, in the same years dealt with in the autobiographical letters.

The purpose of this article is to analyse the 18 autobiographical letters addressed to the Duchess of Portland, and examine them side by side with a small corpus of 30 letters written by Mary to her sister, Ann Granville. These letters were published in the first of the six volumes edited by Lady Llanover, in 1861. The aims of the analysis are:

- to compare these two letter types – the autobiographical letter and the familiar letter – in order to check if and how the different addressees, functions, and topics, affect the textual, linguistic, rhetorical and metadiscursive features of the genre;
- to highlight how the identity of Mary Delany is constructed and conveyed in the two letter types;
- to highlight how the social background is portrayed and conveyed.

The Critical Discourse Analysis approach developed by Norman Fairclough (1992, 2001, 2003) will be applied, since the analysis of Mrs. Delany's letters will take into consideration textual, social and discursive practices.

In terms of discursive practice, all the letters belong to the category of private and personal writing and offer a good example of the ways epistolary discourse can help reconstruct a profile both of the encoder of the letters and of his/her social network. They are an interesting example of what, looking at changes in the nature of letters over the late medieval and early modern periods, Daybell considers 'the emergence of more personal epistolary forms, and the increasing range of private, introspective and flexible uses for which letters were employed' (2001, 2). As regards the editing of the letters, Lady Llanover affirms in her introduction that she has preserved the spelling and phraseology of the texts as she found them, since she wants to show the superiority of the style of Mrs. Delany 'measured by comparison with the greater part of her contemporaries in her own class', especially considering how she was separated by her noble relationships at an age 'when even in these days

the epistolary style of young ladies is generally very faulty and unformed' (Llanover 1861, viii-ix).

Before focusing on the texts, a few data about the encoder of the letters and her recipients will be provided, as they can be useful to locate them within their social context.

Mary Delany was the daughter of Bernard Granville, from a West Country Tory family. Her father's brother, George, became Lord Lansdowne, a Tory politician. The Granville fortunes fell with the Tories at Queen Anne's death in 1714. Mary lived for a while at Lord Lansdowne's house where, at the age of 17, she met his friend, Alexander Pendarves, over forty years her senior. She was forced into marriage by her family and the marriage was rather unhappy. When her husband died, she was left free but without an income. She spent some time in Ireland where she met Swift and a friend of the writer, the Irish churchman Patrick Delany. In 1741 Delany proposed marriage and Mary accepted, despite her family's opposition.

Mrs. Delany knew most of the important scientific, literary and artistic people of her time: she was acquainted with Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, who appreciated and encouraged her botanically accurate and extraordinarily beautiful representations of plants; she was a friend of Elizabeth Montagu and other members of the Bluestocking circle, of Jonathan Swift and Fanny Burney. She was also a friend of the Duchess of Portland (1715-1785), the wealthiest woman in England in her time.

One of the greatest eighteenth-century collectors, and a patron of the arts, the Duchess of Portland devoted much of her adult life to the study of natural history, and supported, and was supported by, a team of botanists, entomologists, and ornithologists. She also corresponded for ten years with Jean-Jacques Rousseau on botanical subjects (Cook 2007). It was through her friendship with the Duchess that Mary was introduced to members of the royal family who generously granted her a house in Windsor as well as an annuity of £300.

As regards Ann Granville, she was younger than her sister, but when she grew up, Mary 'had a perfect confidence in her, told her some of [her] distresses, and found great consolation and relief to [her] mind by this opening of [her] heart, and from her great tenderness and friendship for [her]' (Llanover 1861, 85). Ann married a certain Mr. Dewes, and died in 1760.

2. The Autobiographical Letters to Mary Cavendish Duchess of Portland

This group of 18 letters shows how letter writing can be used as a form of 'public' exposure of the private self, and as an instrument to produce an explicitly autobiographical narrative. In an autobiography the author selects what to include and what to omit in order to create an orderly and developmental narration whose aim is to shape a 'true' image of him/herself.² Since

the objective of these letters is to outline a retrospective sketch of Delany's life, as well as of the people and events connected with the author/character, the main functions of the autobiographical letters of Delany are: narrating past events, describing people, expressing her opinion on people and facts, and explaining causes and (desired or undesired) effects of the events. All these functions are mostly enunciated through the past tense of verbs.

As was fashionable at the time (Brant 2006, 24), Mary uses fictitious names for her addressee, who is called Maria, for herself (she signs the letters as Aspasia), and for all the other people mentioned. Thus, her husband is called Gromio, Alcander is the name she gives to Lord Lansdowne, her aunt is called Valeria, and her friend Sarah Chapone is called Sappho. However, to help her friend's understanding, Mrs. Delany provided a key to the names on a separate sheet of paper. Sometimes little notes were added to provide details about people or places not known to the Duchess. Elliptical language is not possible in these letters, since the encoder and the receiver often do not share the same information.

The first autobiographical letter is dated 1740, that is the year after Mary's first encounter with the Duchess of Portland. In 1740, Mary was 40 years old, but the story she was going to narrate dated back to more than twenty years before, since her life story starts when she was 15. Letters I to IV focus on the years 1715-1717, letters V to XIV on the years 1717-1724-1725, letters XV-XVI on the years 1726-1730, and finally letters XVII-XVIII on the years 1730-1733.

Mrs. Delany is writing her letters, then, on the basis of her memory, recollecting her past life looking at it from a distant point of view, from a perspective that already knows how things developed and what consequences they produced. She also writes out of a grown-up awareness of herself, and with an experience of the world that has equipped her to give opinions and comments on people and facts. Although there are no references to the present state of the author nor to the moment of enunciation, apart from the references to the addressee (who lives in the present time), sometimes during the narration, the author comments on how she feels today in remembering her past life, as in the following passage: 'I passed two months with dreadful apprehensions, apprehensions too well grounded. I assure you the recollection of this part of my life *makes me tremble at this day*' (Llanover 1861, 24; emphasis mine). Only in these rare cases, is the past 'relative to the discursive present of epistolary communication' (Dossena and Del Lungo Camiciotti 2012, 5).

Although written in a formal style, the letters allow Mrs. Delany to express an emotive content. She gives, thus, a detailed account of her own feelings and discloses her intimate thoughts and attitudes to her friend, as can be seen in the following description of her reaction to Mr. Pendarves' proposal of marriage:

How can I describe to you, my dear friend, the cruel agitation of my mind! Whilst my uncle talked to me, I did not once interrupt him, surprise, tender concern for my father, a consciousness of my own little merit, and the great abhorrence I had to Gromio, raised such a confusion of thoughts in my mind, that it deprived me of the power of utterance, and after some moments' silence I burst into tears. (Llanover 1861, 27)

She narrates how her unhappy marriage with Mr. Pendarves was arranged by her uncle for political reasons; she also narrates about her uneasy and retired life as the wife of an elderly husband; about the death of her husband, as well as her financial difficulties as a young widow, and her sentimental life during the first years of her widowhood.

The opening paragraph of the first letter states that it was her friend who convinced her to begin the autobiographical narration which is presented as a task to perform: 'The task you have set me, my dearest Maria, is a very hard one, and nothing but the complying with the earnest request from so tender a friend, could prevail with me to undertake it' (Llanover 1861, 7).

The important role played by Margaret as stimulus of the autobiography will be recalled now and then in the opening lines of the letters, where Mary humorously portrays an interchangeable relationship of victim and tormentor, as indicated by recurring keywords such as 'punishment', 'sufferer', 'obstinacy', 'obedience', as in 'I am very sorry I can't prevail with you to let me be silent; *you* will be the sufferer, but since you are obstinate, you deserve the punishment' (Llanover 1861, 12; her emphasis); or in 'Let your own obstinacy, my dear friend, be your punishment, and since you insist on my finishing this little history I will not spare your patience but put it to the utmost trial, by recollecting as many particulars as my memory will permit' (Llanover 1861, 50); and also in 'Why should you, my dear Maria, insist on my going on with my narrative; it will hardly afford you entertainment enough to compensate for the loss of time in reading it, I will convince you of it by my obedience' (Llanover 1861, 296).

Although there is no explicit mention of replies from the Duchess, she is presented in the narrative as an active participant who elicits extra information. This would imply an (epistolary? vis-à-vis?) exchange between the writer and her reader. 'You say I have omitted giving you his character, 'tis true I have not been very particular in it', Mary writes in Letter VI, filling then many pages with the description of her husband's aspect and character (Llanover 1861, 34-35).

The I/You relationship which is a basic trait of epistolary discourse, and is 'both a form of self-(re)presentation and of dialogic interaction' (Dossena and Del LungoCamiciotti 2012, 4), and is present in Mary's direct address to the Duchess, underlines how, although Mary is reconstructing her life and an image of herself, these letters cannot be considered a diary (Bland and Cross 2004, 7).

Mary often anticipates her recipient's likely thoughts and reactions, as in the following passages, where she accentuates both her sincere mind in retelling her own story and her deep friendship with Margaret:

I am sure my dear generous Maria must condemn me, and have a very bad opinion of my nature, that could so obstinate repel all sense of affection for one [her husband] so fond of me, but I flatter myself it was not in my power to make a suitable return, or if it had, I promise not to disguise any part of my conduct or even my sentiments from you; and I will rather run the hazard of losing some part of your good opinion, than hide myself from you, under the veil of any kind of deceit. (Llanover 1861, 56)

And this I think is a very proper period to my little history, which I fear has not given you the entertainment and satisfaction you expected from it. If it has failed in those particulars, I hope it will at least convince you of the great confidence I have in your friendship... (Llanover 1861, 242)

Thus, these letters are connoted as a space where the writer can express her opinions directly and sincerely, even risking a negative judgment on the part of the recipient. At the same time, the author is also constructing an image of the receiver, who is valued as a person worthy of nothing but the truth. The letters therefore present the relationship of the two friends as one built on more valuable features than the eighteenth-century ideals of politeness and agreeability. In other cases, the writer tries to win her friend's sympathy, appealing to her good nature, as in: 'I shall not disguise my thoughts, or soften any part of my behaviour, which I fear was not altogether justifiable, and which, though your judgment may condemn, your indulgence and partiality I hope will find some excuse for' (Llanover 1861, 28).

As concerns the structure, the autobiographical letters do not start with opening formulae. They usually resume the thread of the narrative where it has been interrupted and the salutation is often inside the first paragraph. The closing lines underline the need to interrupt the narration because of the excessive length of the letter as in: 'These were the scenes I had at home: it is now time to tell you what I met with abroad, which I must make the subject of another letter, this being already of unreasonable length' (Llanover 1861, 63); or for lack of energy on the part of the writer as in 'I was then to enter a new scene of life, and must (before I lay it open to your view) beg leave to take breath' (Llanover 1861, 57); or for supposed physical or emotional tiredness on the part of the reader as in 'I ought to relieve you after telling you so melancholy a story' (Llanover 1861, 54). The subscription, when present, follows the norms of etiquette (Bannet 2005, 66), showing that Mary felt on equal terms with the Duchess, as in '... my friend, adieu' (Llanover 1861, 16), 'Adieu, my dear Maria' (Llanover 1861, 54).

The metadiscursive features refer to the letter Mrs. Delany is writing and to previous ones as in 'I told you in one of my first letters that she was very

handsome and gay, she loved admiration...’ (Llanover 1861, 81). In this way, the letters are connected to one other, thus reinforcing the cohesiveness of the narration. Other people’s epistles, usually sent to her by unwanted suitors, are also reported. These references allow us to observe the discursive practices of the eighteenth-century world of letter writing:

... my servant brought me a letter: I opened it; guess at my vexation when I found it came from Clario! It was written in French with the true spirit of a libertine Frenchman. In it he deplored my unhappy situation in being nurse to an old man... To this effect was his elaborate billet composed, and stuffed with high-flown compliments to me, all which I despised as much as I detested the author... I bid them tell the servant ‘the letter required no answer’. (Llanover 1861, 94)

As is expected in an autobiography, the letters follow a narrative in chronological order which has a main plot – Mary’s own life story – and digressions on minor characters. Because of the events narrated and the ‘characters’ described, these letters cannot but remind us of eighteenth-century epistolary sentimental novels. It is an interesting coincidence that *Pamela* (1740) was published the same year Mrs. Delany started her autobiography in letters. It is difficult to say what influence epistolary novels might have had on Mary’s autobiographical letter writing, and also difficult to ascertain whether there is a connection. Mary’s letters have indeed the plot of a novel, where Mary herself can be read as a character, with the full array of the forced marriage with the elderly husband, of the wife who has to face the world unprotected, guarded only by her own moral code, devoid of friends she can disclose her soul to. In the plot there is also space for a few dissolute rakes, such as the above mentioned Clario, and Germanico whose ambush in Windsor Park has the flavour of a literary device:

I soon apprehended this was the plot of the audacious wretch’s contrivance, and a thousand fears crowded my mind... He came up to me and threw himself upon his knees, holding my petticoat, and begged I would forgive the stratagem he had made use of, for an opportunity of declaring how miserable he was on my account. I grew so frightened and so angry, that I hardly heard what he said, nor can I exactly recollect what I said to him, in the vast confusion I was in... (Llanover 1861, 90)

We cannot, however, question the authenticity of her letters as documents and vehicles of the sincere expression of her heart, because of the presence of the Duchess of Portland as real recipient of Mary’s confidential writing, and because Mary is well aware of the goals of her letters. Epistolary fiction, on the contrary, ‘depends on the pretence that the reader is the unintended audience, that there has been some mistakes in the communication process, that the writer is doing something he doesn’t know he is doing’ (Gillis 1984, 85).

As concerns the image Mary builds of herself in her epistolary autobiography, it can be noticed that her identity is characterized by demure behaviour

as well as obedience to her relatives, especially in accepting an arranged marriage, while being in love with somebody else. Such a constructed image of female submission respected the conventions of the time, and would likely win her friend's approval.

The following extract expresses her real feelings at the time, along with her expected behaviour; it also shows her irony in the emphasis given to the contrast between appearance and inner truth, and her mature analysis of what a forced marriage implied. It is a forceful illustration of the value given to marriage seen as a worldly settlement in life:

I had now nothing to do but submit to my unhappy fortune, and to endeavour to reconcile myself to it... I was married with *great pomp*. Never was woe drest out in gayer colours, and when I was led to the altar, I wished from my soul I had been led, as Iphigenia was, to be sacrificed. I was sacrificed. I lost, not life indeed, but I lost all that makes life desirable – joy and peace of mind. (Llanover 1861, 29-30; her emphasis)

The use of figurative language, with the comparison between Iphigenia and herself, together with the high presence of verbs in the passive voice, highlights the position of Mary as an innocent victim of external events, and, while increasing the dramatic quality of the narration, elicits the empathy of the reader.

Figurative language will be further exploited, for example to underline her unhappiness as the wife of a much older, sick and often drunk, husband ('a man I looked upon as my tyrant – my jailor; one that I was determined to obey and oblige, but found it impossible to love'; Llanover 1861, 31). She also highlights her loneliness, often pointing out she had no one to ask for help and advice, or simply to open her heart to. By insisting on her young age and *naïveté*, she portrays herself as ignorant of the ways of the world and an innocent prey of men's unwanted attention. She also emphasises the seriousness of her character in her will to maintain her virtue intact.

In the social framework she is describing, there are, in fact, two types of women - the virtuous and the 'vain', 'extravagant' ones. She obviously belongs to the first group, and insists on underlining the fact that she did not perceive the evil nature of people (mostly men) around her, underestimating the risk her position as a faithful wife was running, of being corrupted by bad company. However, she describes herself as a determined person able to overcome her inexperience when her honour is at stake. Here is, for example, the narrative of the unexpected courtship of Germanico, where once again she shows the rhetorical quality of a fictional writer:

His age placed him amongst those that I could not imagine had any gallantry in their head – but was mistaken... as I did not observe anything in his behavior to me that could give me offence, I behaved towards him with the same indifference I did to my general acquaintance... Germanico sat next to me, but I soon wished for another neighbour. He stared at me the whole night, and put me so much out of countenance,

that I was ready to cry: he soon checked all my pleasure at the entertainment, the music sounded harsh, and everything appeared disagreeable... I abhorred the wretch and could not forgive his presumption, but how was my detestation of him increased a day or two after this odious supper, when, sorting some papers I had in my pocket, I found a letter from Germanico, with a passionate declaration of love! I threw it into the fire with the utmost indignation. (Llanover 1861, 83-84)

While the use of negative forms (i.e. 'I could not imagine', 'I did not observe') marks her ingenuity, the active voice of verbs highlights her agency in the events narrated. These linguistic devices, as well her lexical choice of strongly connoted words such 'harsh', 'disagreeable', 'detestation' and 'indignation', make the letter a means to reinforce a positive image of herself, at the same time building a portrait of eighteenth-century society with its intrigues and deceitfully polite conventions. She portrays a society ruled by norms of sociability, which should be followed scrupulously but are often violated. In other letters, she describes a world of alliances among young and less young women to avoid mistakes and pitfalls.

Her vivacious character is mentioned too, as well as her intellectual pursuits. She portrays herself as a girl brought up to love reading and learning (aspects that the Duchess would certainly approve of), an attitude which, once again, would put her among the virtuous ladies, as the following comment shows: '... though I did not pretend to much penetration or any judgment, I soon found their [her aunts'] conversation much less instructive, as well as less entertaining than his [her uncle's]. I had been brought up to love reading; they never read at all, or, if they did, idle books that I was not allowed to read' (Llanover 1861, 22). Her sense of humour and perceptive skill in observing and describing her contemporaries, is another aspect of her letters, as, for example, in the description of her first encounter with her future husband:

I expected to have seen somebody with the appearance of a gentleman, when the poor, old, dripping almost drowned Gromio was brought into the room, like Hob out of the well, his wig, his coat, his dirty boots, his large unwieldy person, and his crimson countenance were all subjects of great mirth and observation to me. (Llanover 1861, 23)

3. *The Letters to Ann Granville*

The thirty letters taken into consideration for the present analysis were written by Mary in the same years dealt with in the autobiographical letters, and therefore cover the same timeline of Mary's recollections. From a structural point of view, the letters to Ann differ from the autobiographical ones because they are properly dated and indicate the location from which they are sent, thus respecting the codes of etiquette of the time (Bannet 2005, 67). Salutation is

always present ('my dearest sister' being the most frequent one) and usually opens the letter, and closing formulas are also respected. The signature has a variety of forms derived from Mary's surname and referring to her role of wife: 'Mrs. Penderves', 'Penny Penny', 'Penelope' (which adds a metaphorical nuance of faithfulness to her signature); sometimes, the fictitious name 'Aspasia' is also used.

The letters to Ann offer a wider range of functions when compared with the letters to the Duchess. The narrative function which was predominant in the autobiographical letters is here only sporadically present, while describing people and places becomes more central, with detailed descriptions of the dresses and jewels worn by high society ladies. Giving information, reporting news and expressing opinions on people and events are also frequent, but mostly inscribed within the expected code of polite sociability. Mary's opinions and attitudes appear more straightforward and free-speaking, in the numerous cases when she gives her sister information about cultural events such as concerts, theatrical performances, or publications. The functions of giving advice and suggestions, totally absent in the autobiography, are frequently introduced, and are probably linked to the age of the recipient, as Mary plays the role of the 'experienced' woman instructing a younger sister.

From a stylistic point of view, the autobiographical letters have a smooth narrative flow which does not characterise the letters to her sister, which shift from one topic to the next quickly, as the main objective is to convey a variety of messages connected with the various functions already analysed. These letters are, after all, a way to converse with Ann and thus follow a conversational pattern. They reinforce, then, the eighteenth-century commonplace which compared familiar letter writing to conversation (Brant 2006, 21).

A striking difference between the two types of letters is the high presence of metadiscursive features. There are many references to the discursive practices, role and value, of letter writing. The main features concern:

- Acknowledgment of a letter received from Ann and her happiness about it. This is usually found after the salutation, as in: 'Your cheerful letter and good account of my dear papa has given me a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction' (Llanover 1861, 70).
- Acknowledgment of letters from other members of the family as in 'I have received my dear mama's obliging letter... and will pay my duty and thanks next post in a more particular manner' (Llanover 1861, 150).
- Lack of letters from her family as in 'Three posts have passed and no letter except that – which was without a date. My dearest sister must excuse my troublesome fears, but where two such friends as my mother and yourself are the constant object of my tenderest thoughts, I cannot help yielding to my apprehensions when I miss hearing from you...' (Llanover 1861, 147).
- Letters to be written to a third party but deferred, as in 'Pray assure my brother and Mrs. Carter of my humble service; I acknowledge myself their

debtor, but will pay them in a very little time' (Llanover 1861, 70), where letter writing is metaphorically introduced as a business exchange.

- Delays in writing letters to her sister or other members of the family, and consequent apologies as in 'I have been very rude in not sooner returning my thanks for your obliging letter, but I really have so little time myself, that I cannot do as I would or as I ought. Pray present my humble duty to my mama. I designed to write to her last post, but I was engaged...'

(Llanover 1861, 57).
- Counting how many letters she is in debt/credit of as in 'I believe this is the fourth letter you have to answer' (Llanover 1861, 149).

- Letters written by her sister to a third party whose content is made known to her, as in 'I am rejoiced to hear by your letter to her [Mrs. Carter] that my mama is pretty well' (Llanover 1861, 79).

- Letters written to her sister by a third party as in 'You will have a letter from him [brother Bevill] this post' (Llanover 1861, 71).

- Letters received from a third party, asking questions about her sister as in 'Yesterday I had a letter from Miss Leigh, who asks me many questions about you: as, if you are in town? If you mind your musick? and *to crown all* if you are to be married soon?' (Llanover 1861, 80; her emphasis).

- Letters written by a third party, enclosed by Mary within her own letter as in 'Enclosed I have sent you Sally's letter; pray take care of it, and send it me by the first opportunity, but I desire you will read this first...'

(Llanover 1861, 167). These features are often combined as in the following passage in which the pleasure of receiving and writing letters is emphasized, as well as the importance of letter writing as a familial link whose function is to substitute, albeit imperfectly, the face to face conversation denied by distance (Fitzmaurice 2002, 35):

You are very unjust to yourself, my dearest sister, in saying you have it not in your power to make your letters agreeable: they are so to me more than I can express, and I shall always think my time well employed in writing to you, when in return I have so much pleasure as the favour of your last letter gave me. When I am writing to you I am so intent on the subject, that I forget all things but yourself, and by that means you can never fail of a long letter from me, for I never grow weary; and when I have finished my letter, I am sorry to think the conversation is broke off, for imperfect as it is, it gives me more satisfaction than any personal one that I meet with here. Though so many hills and vales separate our bodies, thought (that is free and unlimited) makes up in some measure that misfortune, and though my eyes are shut, I see my dearest sister in my dreams. I talked with you all last night and was mortified when the vision fled. (Llanover 1861, 98)

These letters construct a different image of the author, who considers writing to Ann an appropriate site to express her feelings about her family, and show the central role family plays in her life. She is affectionate and fond of her family relationships, an attitude that is confirmed by her respectful and caring words about all the family members. In this sense, these letters respect the conventions of familial letters, as there are repeated expressions of appreciation

towards her sister, of love towards other members of the family (mother, brother, uncles, aunts); there are inquiries about the health of family members, and news about the health, or other matters, of common acquaintance and relatives are given. People are mentioned in an elliptical way since the sender and the recipient share the necessary background information, and nicknames are often used. These data, which are clarified by extra information provided by the editor of the letters, emphasise the bond between the sisters. At the same time, Mary is superior to her recipient, both in age and status, and the age difference between the sisters sometimes causes a slightly patronizing tone in Mary, when she gives her sister advice, even if she generally resorts to a teasing tone.

Since Mary also received requests for goods to be bought in town for her family, the topic of money which is never mentioned in the autobiographical letters, is present in the familiar letters, where the price of things is often given:

... has bought two pounds of Bohea [tea], at thirteen shilling a pound, which the man say is extraordinary good; but everything of that kind grows very dear, chocolate especially. I have sent you a pound at three and sixpence, the best in town at that price... (Llanover 1861, 134-135)

References to money are also found when Mary describes the dresses and jewels worn by the royal family and the aristocrats, as in 'The Queen has upon her petticoat for the coronation, twenty-four hundred thousand pounds worth of jewels' (Llanover 1861, 136).

As the addressee was living a restricted social life in the country, Mary was ready to involve her sister in her own social life in 'town', that is London, or in the other cities she was living in. Therefore, news about her entertainments are shared, regarding dinners she has been invited to, masquerades she has taken part in, visits she has, or has been, paid. Special events such as the celebrations for the Queen's birthday or the coronation of George III and Queen Caroline in 1727, are obviously given great attention, and described with richness of details. She describes a world of intense social life (which she was able to enjoy most, after her husband's death), and news about gentlewomen and gentlemen unknown to Ann is given, often becoming real gossip as in the following passage:

Great news stirring: Lady Betty Berkeley, daughter to the earl of that name, being almost fifteen, has thought it time to be married, and ran away last week with Mr. Henley a man noted for his imprudence and immorality, but a *good estate* and a *beau* – irresistible charms in these days. (Llanover 1861, 156-157; her emphasis)

Through these descriptions she builds the image of a lively witty woman, who enjoys entertainment, and is an active member of the buzzing social life of the upper classes. This image appears only sporadically in the autobiography, where she also mentions her social life, but foregrounding the doubts more than the joys this life caused her.

Most interesting is, however, the way Mary shared her cultural life with her sister. Every letter devotes sample space to detailed information and comments about books she has read, from Voltaire to Pope, as well as theatrical and musical performances she has attended. In this way, she leads her younger sister along the path of polite education, but at the same time she presents herself as a lady of sense and virtues, able to appreciate the importance of cultural values.³ Here are a few comments about Händel, and Gay's *Beggars' Opera*:

Yesterday I was at the rehearsal of the new opera composed by Handel: I like it extremely, but the taste of the town is so depraved, that nothing will be approved of but the burlesque. The Beggars' Opera entirely triumphs over the Italian one; I have not seen it, but everybody that has seen it, says it is very comical and full of humour; the songs will soon be published, and I will send them to you. (Llanover 1861, 158)

I desire you will introduce the Beggars' Opera at Gloucester; you must sing it everywhere *but at church*, if you have a mind to be *like the polite world*. (Llanover 1861, 163; her emphasis)

The abundance of comments on cultural life confirms an aspect of her personality which appears in the autobiography when she mentions her love for reading and theatrical entertainment.

Despite the obvious importance of writing letters to her sister and the repeated assurances of her joy in 'conversing' with her, Mary's letters to her sister are not confidential, since she does not convey her feelings about more private matters such as her unhappy married life, or the various intrigues which threatened her peace of mind. There are, in fact, no references to the situations and feelings of loneliness and despair she would afterwards narrate at length in the autobiographical letters. Whereas the autobiography focuses on her inner feelings and real reactions, and her social life is a background to her states of mind, the letters to her sister foreground her social life, leaving space to her feelings only in sketchy comments which do not reveal any of the worries and sad thoughts which occupied her mind. The letters to Ann are not considered a suitable site for the expression of feelings other than satisfaction, pleasure of, and curiosity towards, life. This silence about inner emotions, may be due to the fact that letters would have been read by other people beside her sister, and therefore to the certainty that the necessary privacy would be violated. 'I won't trust the post', she affirms in one of the letters to Ann, adding that 'circumstances and several particulars must be told, which cannot be so well expressed in writing', and that her hope is to meet her sister 'before the year is expired and tell old stories' (Llanover 1861, 80). Another possible explanation for her silence, is that she did not intend to convey to her family the sad condition her very family had put her in. Thus, the politeness of manners makes her familiar letters a vehicle for news, but not for real intimacy.

Mary's silence might also depend on her decision not to overload the young age of her sister with her sorrows and regrets. As a matter of fact, as her sister became older, Mary confided more in her, although to a limited extent. An interesting example of this is offered by a letter Mary wrote to her sister during a moment of crisis in her life. After the death of her husband, Mary was courted by Lord Baltimore, and nourished an attachment for him, which would be disappointed by his later behaviour and marriage with somebody else. In a letter written on Christmas Day to Ann in 1729, Mary describes a meeting she had at the opera with Baltimore, introduced with the fictitious names 'Bas' and 'Guyamore', and a subsequent visit paid by him. These two episodes, which really destroyed Mary's hopes in a stable love relationship with the gentleman and caused her great suffering, are described, even reporting the gentleman's words, but without really expressing the depth of her attachment and disillusion. Were it not for the autobiographical letter, where she narrates the same episodes to the Duchess, we would not understand how critical this moment was in her life. Here is, for example, how Mary outlines the episode to Ann:

Guyamore was there [at the opera], and sat behind me the first act, came again as soon as the opera was done and led me to my chair; talked in the old strain, of being unhappy, and that I was to answer for all his flights and extravagance. I told him that was so large a charge, that I should be sorry to have it placed to my account. However, on Monday he came... (Llanover 1861, 232-233)

and here is how the same episode is narrated in the XVI autobiographical letter:

Herminius [Lord Baltimore] was there, and placed himself just behind me; he told me he wondered where I had buried myself; he could neither see me at home nor abroad, and that he had been miserable to see me; that since his opportunities were so few he could no longer help declaring that he '*had been in love with me for five years*', during which time I had kept him in such awe that he had not had courage to make a declaration of his love to me. I was in such confusion I knew not what I saw or heard for some time, but finding he was going on with the same subject, I softly begged he would not interrupt my attention to the opera, and if he had anything to say to me, that was *not* the proper place. He then asked 'if I should be at home the next day?', I said 'I should'. I cannot say I listened much to the music, and I had a secret satisfaction in thinking this affair would be explained some way or other, and free me from the anxiety of uncertainty. (Llanover 1861, 240; her emphasis)

A comparison between the two narratives shows how differently Mary narrates the story. Apart from the different names used for Baltimore in the two letters, the second extract tells with abundance of details what is briefly mentioned in the first extract. The precision of the details is particularly surprising if we remember that the letter to the Duchess was written eleven years after the event, while the letter to Ann was written soon after it. Herminius' expressions of distress and love are reduced to a simple 'talked in the old strain, of

being unhappy', while the autobiographical letter reports his remarks in indirect speech. In the letter to Ann, there is no mention of Baltimore's love declaration. Consequently, the letter gives no hint of Mary's reactions of confusion while and after Baltimore made his declaration, nor to her hopes of solving the 'anxiety' caused by Baltimore's undecided behaviour. Mary's implied suggestion of continuing the conversation in a more suitable place is not mentioned at all, and in the first extract it seems that Baltimore's visit the following Monday is spontaneous, and not depending on what had happened at the opera. Direct speech is used in the autobiographical letter, which makes the narration more lively.

The Monday visit, which put an end to the relationship between Mary and Baltimore is also narrated differently in the two letters. Although Mary tries to report the conversation she had with Baltimore in an objective and detached way, this time quoting his sentences and her replies, the comments which follow the exchange of cues, reveal her real state of mind:

He sat down and immediately asked me 'if I did not think they were miserable people that were strangers to love, but added he, you are so great a philosopher that I dread your answer'. I told him, as for 'philosophy, I did not pretend to it;' but 'I endeavoured to make my life easy by living according to reason, and that my opinion of love was that it either made people very miserable or very happy,' he said it '*made him miserable*.' 'That, I suppose, my Lord,' said I, '*proceeds from yourself: perhaps you place it upon a wrong foundation*.' He looked confounded, turned the discourse, and went away immediately after. I must confess I could not behave myself with indifference, and I have been in no public place since. (Llanover 1861, 233; her emphasis)

Moreover, so as not to mark the importance of the episode in her life, Mary soon changes subject and turns her sister's attention to other topics, as if what she has just written about was not that important in her life, but only one example of the oddities of the people she met.

The conversation between the two is narrated differently in the letter to the Duchess:

It began with common talk of news. Some marriage was named, and we both observed how little probability of happiness there was in most of the fashionable matches where interest and not inclination was consulted. At last he said he was determined never to marry, unless he was well assured of the affection of the person he married. My reply was, can you have a stronger proof (if the person is at her own disposal) than her consenting to marry you? He replied that was not sufficient. I said he was *unreasonable*, upon which he started up and said, 'I find, madam, this is a point in which we shall never agree'. He looked piqued and angry, made a low bow and went away immediately, and left me in such confusion that I could hardly recollect what had past, nor can I to this hour – but from that time till he was married *we never met*. The vexation of mind... affected me to so great a degree that I fell ill of a fever the very day that Herminius made me that last extraordinary visit. As it fell on my spirits, I was for some days in a great deal of danger. (Llanover 1861, 240-241; her emphasis)

'I cannot recollect minutely our conversation', explains Mary to the Duchess in her XVI letter. Thus, there are no direct quotations this time, apart from the last sentence pronounced by Baltimore, which was obviously inscribed in Mary's memory. The exchange of cues quoted in the letter to Ann is not repeated in the autobiographical letters, where it looks as if she were reporting a polite conversation on the topic of marriage and love between two members of an enlightened society. However, Mary's reply ('... proceeds from yourself ...') reveals the implicit unsaid discourse which is taking place between the two participants (about a possible marriage between them), and causes the sharp reaction of Baltimore. The modifier 'confounded' used in the first extract, is given stronger connotations ('piqued and angry') in the autobiographical letters. The aside ('nor can I to this hour') reveals how much the episode still holds in her mind a decade later, while the negative load of the lexical choices in her final narrative lines ('vexation', 'affected', 'ill', 'fever', 'danger') rhetorically underline her distress.

Once again, then, it is in the autobiographical letter written many years later, that Mary really opens her heart, even if the letter to Ann hints at some features of intimacy.

4. *Concluding Remarks*

As James Daybell points out, 'as social documents' women's letters 'are useful indicators of female literacy, the quality of familial and other relationships, and of women's social interaction in general' (2001, 3). The letters of Mary Delany provide a further example of the way epistolary writing can fulfill a variety of goals and help reconstruct not only the writer's identity but also the profile of the social context in which the letters were written.

What both types of letters have in common is the importance of certain aspects of women's life, such as the major role played by family and relationships. However, the analysis of the autobiographical letters written by Mary Delany to the Duchess of Portland and the familiar letters written to her sister Ann Granville highlights differences in terms of content and goals as well as textual, stylistic, and metadiscursive differences.

The letters to the Duchess contain Mary's recollections of a great part of her life and are meant to create an autobiographical narrative of her life, whereas the letters to Ann were meant as a vehicle of family communication, and a way to maintain family bonds. As a consequence of the different goals of the two letter types, language functions inside the letters are also different. The function of narrating past events is fundamental in the autobiography, whereas a greater variety of functions can be found in the familiar letters.

Time also plays a major role in differentiating the two letter types. The letters to Ann are the result of immediate reaction to contemporary events, whereas the autobiographical letters are written a few decades after the events,

when these (and the people involved in them) are sifted by memory. Moreover, as she is writing an autobiography, Mrs. Delany has to concentrate on her feelings and reactions, in order to recreate and convey her state of mind at the time of the events. The letters to Ann focus on many topics, which partly depend on the nature of familiar letters (such as the health of relatives, information about matters concerning common friends), but also depend on the writer's personality and interests. For example, many of the letters to Ann are devoted to cultural events, such as performances and social highlights. The major role of her social background portrays Mary as a lady of fashion and a happy member of 'town' society. In the autobiographical letters, on the other hand, the social background is not seen as important as in the letters to Ann, and is often narrated as dangerous and confusing. Therefore, the letters to her sister are richer in details which are unnecessary in the autobiographical letters where 'truth' is seen as fundamental, albeit subjective truth.

Metadiscursive features play a vital role in the familiar letter, while the autobiography in letters introduces references only to the writer's previous or future letters, only as a means of giving cohesion and cohesiveness to the narration.

Finally, the analysis shows that Mrs. Delany, although fond of her sister, did not consider the letters to Ann an appropriate site for intimacy – at least not in the years whose events she would later narrate in the autobiographical letters to the Duchess of Portland. This is probably due, above all, to the fact that family letters were very likely read to, or by, other members of the family, while the letters to the Duchess were for her eyes only. Maybe as a consequence of this, in terms of self-(re)presentation, Mrs. Delany mainly portrays herself as a naïf, lonely, and suffering young woman, as an innocent victim of external events, and unwanted male attention, in the letters to the Duchess. At the same time, she positions herself among the virtuous ladies, who defend their honour in a dangerous society. In the letters to her sister, Mary mainly portrays herself as a woman of sense and virtue, and a lively member of polite society.

¹ In 1900 George Paston published an abridged and popular version of Lady Llanover's six-volume work (1861-1862), entitled *Mrs Delany (Mary Granville): A Memoir*. In his introduction, Paston stated that he had decided to publish the memoir because the size and cost of the volumes edited by Lady Llanover were 'beyond the reach of general public'; besides, they had long been out of print. However, in his work, Paston simply quotes extracts from the autobiographical letters and the letters by, or to, Mrs. Delany; he also inserts his own comments to connect the extracts, thus reconstructing Mary's life story.

² On the slipperiness of the features of autobiography, see Anderson 2001, 1-17.

³ Mary's later relationship with the Bluestocking group, a circle of learned gentlewomen and gentlemen, is worth recalling. For a portrait of Mary as a Bluestocking member, see Scott 1947. On the letters of the Bluestocking ladies, see Sairio 2008.

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