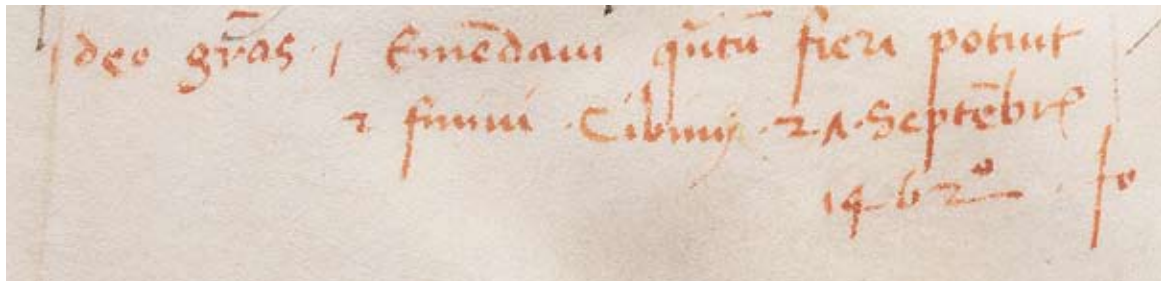


A Star in the Raven's Shadow

János Vitéz and the Beginnings of Humanism in Hungary



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Vitéz's coat of arms (Cat. No. 24)

A Star in the Raven's Shadow

JÁNOS VITÉZ
AND THE BEGINNINGS OF HUMANISM
IN HUNGARY

Exhibition organised by the National Széchényi Library
14th March – 15th June 2008

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János Vitéz' Book of Letters
Prologue

One of the most suitable – and definitely most popular – written genres of humanist intellectual expression was the letter.¹ When in the tract *De ratione conscribendi epistolas* Erasmus attempts to make a theoretical approach to the letter, critically detaching himself from former definitions and attempts at typifying², he clearly turns against any form of narrowing down according to themes or length, and emphasises the many-faceted character of the letter both in the topics it may cover and the possible linguistic means of expression.³ In the case of the latter, he regards the *apte dicere* principle as the most important one, suggesting that it is vital that the right mode of expression should be selected according to the addressee's character and the writer's intentions.

Although it maintains a certain degree of continuity with the conventions of the medieval art of letter writing, the *ars dictaminis*⁴, the humanist letter bears features fundamentally different from the medieval genre. The genuine model for epistle-writing humanists, however, was not the medieval tradition, but Cicero's and Livius's art of letter writing.

When Petrarch discovered some of the Cicero letters in Verona in 1345, and this led him to publish the collection of his own letters (*Familiarum rerum libri*), the humanist cult of the

¹ Of the literature dealing with medieval and humanist letters, an excellent summary is given by PAJORIN Klára: La cultura di János Vitéz. *Camoenae Hungaricae* 2005. 13, 3. About the characteristics of the humanist letter, its contemporary theoretical approach and the earlier literature, an excellent review is given by H. HART: Poggio Bracciolini und die Brieftheorie des 15. Jahrhunderts. Zur Gattungsform des humanistischen Briefs. In: *Der Brief im Zeitalter der Renaissance*. Mitteilung IX der Kommission für Humanismusforschung. Hrsg. F. J. WORSTBROCK. Weinheim 1983, 81–99.

² For the theoretical approach to the genre of the letter in the Renaissance, see FRANCISCUS NIGER: *De modo epistolandi*. Venetiis 1490; NICOLAUS PEROTTUS: *Rudimenta Grammatices*. Venetiis 1486; ANGELO POLIZIANO: *Commento inedito alle Selve di Stazio*, a cura di L. CESARINI MARTINELLI. Firenze 1978 (Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento. Studi e Testi V); LORENZO VALLA: *De conficiendis epistolis libellus*. In: *Opera omnia*. Con una premessa di E. GARIN. Torino, 1962, vol. II, 97–115 (a reprint of the 1486 Florence edition). The views of the mentioned authors on the theory of the letter and attempts at categorisation are summarised by HART 1983, 89–90.

³ Seech. 1, *De ratione conscribendi epistolas*, entitled *Qui epistolae character*. Ibid.: ... cum argumentorum species non minus sint innumerabiles, quam mundi illi Democritici *De conscribendis epistolis opus Des. Eras. Rot.* Lugduni, apud Theobaldum Paganum, 1557. Budapest, OSZK, Ant. 13 404.

⁴ The continuity between the medieval and humanist letter can be observed primarily in structure and function. In the Middle Ages too, the parts of the letter were standardised according to classical rhetoric. A twelfth-century school manual from Bologna, the *Rationes dictandi* lists the parts of the letter as follows: *Salutatio, Captatio benevolentiae, Narratio, Petitio, Conclusio*. HART 1983. 84–85.

letter was launched. Thus letter writing developed into a veritable art. The authors tried to prove that they were well-prepared scholars and outstanding stylists by applying rhetorical and linguistic means of expression and classical quotes.⁵

At the same time, humanist letters take a large step towards becoming personal, as unlike the medieval letter where the writer aimed only at expressing his own thoughts, they convey a dialogue⁶ between the writer and the recipient.⁷ Thus the letter ceases to be merely a tool for passing on information, and leaves room for a more personal exchange of ideas between people far apart.⁸ In the European network of humanists, or the *res publica litteraria*, the letter was a means of establishing and maintaining friendships. In the Renaissance, the notion of ‘friendship’ was extended beyond its traditional meaning: it referred to the relationship between humanists living in different locations, who sometimes never met in person. This ‘friendship’, in fact, expressed that they all belonged to the same European community of the *res publica litteraria*. Letters and correspondence made possible the manifestation of this friendship.

This special relationship, which could be called ‘professional’, is well reflected in the themes, style and tone of the letters. As the humanists primarily discuss scholarly, philosophical and philological issues, give accounts of current political events or conduct scholarly debates, the letters may represent almost all the prose genres of the age, including tracts, literary conversations, travel stories, invectives, etc.⁹

Besides and through their addressees, humanists intended their letters to be read by a wide public. When composing them, they had their eyes on a larger literary audience, carefully structuring their work, ordering their argument and using appropriate language.¹⁰ The ideal letter would be a reflection of knowledge as well as of the eloquence.¹¹ Organising letters into a volume and publishing them was one form of attaining the public. Following classical models of letter collections, the Renaissance also yielded a number of such collections. They were copied, they served as independent readings or were occasionally used as samples.¹²

⁵ V. KOVÁCS Sándor: Humanista levelek, levélíró humanisták (Vitéz Jánostól az erasmistákig kb. 1440–kb. 1540). [Humanist letters. Letter-writing humanists. From János Vitéz to the Erasmists ca 1440 – ca 1540] In: V. KOVÁCS 1987. 259–313, 260.

⁶ Batkin considers dialogue as a basic cognitive structure in the Renaissance. See BATKIN, Leonyid: *Az itáliai reneszánsz*. [Italian Renaissance.] Budapest 1986. 262–325.

⁷ In the first piece of Petrarch’s own letter collection that he addressed to Socrates, he closes down the “dialogue” with him as follows: *Dulci mihi colloquium tecum fuit* F. Petrarca: *Le familiari*, I. I. 334–337. (Vol. I. 14.) Quoted by BATKIN *ibid.* 248.

⁸ Batkin considers “... these letters ... were vital tools of communication between people who, by the standards of the time, were far apart, but for whom it was vital need to have their peers’ support and the maintenance of the group.” (p. 219). About the humanist letter in detail, BATKIN *ibid.* 215–223.

⁹ HART 1983. 91–92.

¹⁰ HART 1983. 82.

¹¹ HART 1983. 92.

¹² See, for example, Ficino’s collected letters in the Corvinian Library. The three volumes are today in the Wolfenbüttel Herzog August Bibliothek, marked: Cod. Guelf. 73. Aug. 2°; Cod. Guelf. 2. Aug. 4°; Cod. Guelf. 12. Aug. 4°. Poggio Bracciolini’s letter collection was especially liked because of his enjoyable novel-like style.

János Vitéz

The figure of János Vitéz emerges in Hungarian cultural history in a strangely unexpected manner. In the literature, József Huszti's claim is almost a cliché that "whoever is able to explain the development of János Vitéz's humanist personality has found the key to the secret of the Hungarian Quattrocento".¹³ The phenomenon is also remarkable because Vitéz's education was rooted in medieval tradition.¹⁴ In all probability, this was a fortunate coincidence of many different influences, of which Pier Paolo Vergerio's role is of the utmost significance.

Vergerio (1370–1444), whom Coluccio Salutati called "the phoenix of all classical virtues"¹⁵, had already had a long humanist career behind him when at the Council of Constance he entered the service of King Sigismundus (1414–1418). Huszti argued that his most fundamental feature was his universalism.¹⁶ Under the Carraras rule, he acted as chancellor of Padua, was the apostolic secretary to Pope Innocent VII, and at the Council mentioned above represented Ravenna. He taught humanities at the universities of Florence, Bologna, Padua and Rome and later became an honorary lecturer. He studied Greek with Manuel Chrysoloras in Florence, and when not so young any more, back on Hungarian soil, he did translations. In addition, he is also a historiographer, a philosopher, writer and poet, writing verse in Latin and Italian and a comedy in Terentius's style. His surviving letters and pedagogical tract on *Noble Morality (De ingenuis moribus)*¹⁷ prove that he was not merely a "practising" humanist, but also seriously and frequently dealt with theoretical issues of the Renaissance.

Invited by Sigismundus, he came to Buda in 1418 and held the office of *referendarius*, working as advisor and diplomat outside (and beyond) the hierarchy in the monarch's environment, almost as if acting as Sigismundus's court humanist. Apart from his missions, he did not leave Hungary again. For reasons unknown, he also reduced his contacts with Italy. He died in Buda in 1444.¹⁸

13 HUSZTI 1955. The quotation is on p. 521.

14 Klára Pajorin has vividly demonstrated that several elements of Vitéz's education, including some that had earlier been considered humanist traits, in fact originated from medieval education. PAJORIN 2005.

15 BATKIN, op.cit. 217.

16 HUSZTI 1955. 523. About Vergerio most recently in Hungarian: KISÉRY Zsuzsanna: Vergerio és Luxemburgi Zsigmond. [Vergerio and Sigismundus of Luxembourg.] In: *Sigismundus* 2006. 292–294.

17 A manuscript version is available at the National Széchényi Library. Mark: Cod. Lat. 314. (Cat. No. 19)

18 HUSZTI 1955. 523–526.

The career of János Vitéz of Zredna (1408–1472) started in the early or mid-1430s when he worked for Sigismundus’s secret chancellery.¹⁹ Thus the possibility of contact between Vergerio and Vitéz was given for long years to come; the encounter between the influential Italian humanist and the sensitive and talented young man proved to be especially fortunate. Vergerio’s activity and personality must have served as a model for Vitéz in a large number of areas. Nevertheless, it is important to underline the consciousness that Vergerio manifested in approaching the humanist way of life on a theoretical level as well. In the course of their conversations, the educator and “theoretical expert”, Vergerio must have drawn the figure of the ideal humanist to Vitéz and must have instructed him in how to attain the model. From the point of the present paper it has special significance that Vergerio is regarded as one of the great humanist letter writers.²⁰ He started seriously cultivating this genre under the influence of Petrarch and Giovanni Conversino da Ravenna, while his classical prototypes were also Cicero and Seneca. Vergerio published, among others, Petrarch’s collection, the *Epistolae familiares*. His library, a part of which some²¹ believe to have been inherited by Vitéz, probably included all these works.²²

The great historian of Hungarian literature, János Horváth, who says about Vergerio that “János Vitéz became the true founder of humanism in Hungary mainly through his mediation, following his example and under his influence”, also attributes great significance to contemporary Italian–Hungarian diplomatic relations in trying to identify antecedents.²³ Naturally, Vergerio himself must have attracted his own friends to Buda, but a large number of other highly distinguished humanists also visited Sigismundus’s court, among them Ambrogio Traversari, Antonio Loschi, the Venetian Francesco Barbaro, the scholar of Greek, Francesco Filelfo, Poggio Bracciolini, Jacopo Angelo and the traveler of antiquarian interest, Ciriaco d’ Ancona.²⁴ Meeting them, conducting official negotiations with them, where wonderful humanist speeches must have been made, as well as their letters that had to be answered preferably at the same level of sophistication, certainly made a huge impact. Of the humanists listed, Poggio Bracciolini’s example appears to have been especially important for Vitéz. Poggio was known as a celebrated epistle-writer, who compiled volumes of his let-

¹⁹ For János Vitéz’s official and political career, see FRANKÓI 1879; SZAKÁLY 1990, with a detailed review of earlier literature; KUBINYI 1999; KUBINYI András: Vitéz János és Janus Pannonius politikája Mátyás uralkodása idején. In: *Humanista műveltség Pannóniában*. [The politics of János Vitéz and Janus Pannonius during the reign of king Matthias. Humanist education in Pannonia.] Ed. BARTÓK István, JANKOVITS László, KECSKEMÉTI Gábor, Pécs, 2000. From the summer of 1439 he is a prothonotary, and from November his rank is that of a deputy chancellor. In the spring of 1440, representing the chancery he accompanies to Krakow the Hungarian delegation to elect Vladislav I to be Hungarian king, and he formulates Vladislav’s letter of faith too. SZAKÁLY 1990. 12; KUBINYI 1999. 45.

²⁰ The basic edition of his letters: SMITH, Leonardo: *Epistolario di Pier Paolo Vergerio*. Roma, 1934.

²¹ HUSZTI 1955. 532; KARDOS Tibor: *A magyarországi humanizmus kora*. [The age of Hungarian humanism.] Budapest 1955. 118–119; CSAPODI-GÁRDONYI 1984. No. 23. Klára Pajorin brings forth convincing arguments for her doubts: PAJORIN 2005. 19., also PAJORIN Klára: *A magyar humanizmus Zsigmond-kori alapjai*. [Bases of Hungarian humanism in the age of Sigismundus.] In: *Zsigmond* 1987. 193–211.

²² V. KOVÁCS 1987. 263.

²³ HORVÁTH János 1935. 40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

ters²⁵; he was also the teacher of one of the most significant humanist letter writers, namely Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, the later Pope Innocent II. Poggio maintained regular correspondence both with Sigismundus's and Albert's courts, offered his services as a historiographer even to János Hunyadi, and sent him the Latin translation of Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*.²⁶ Thus Vitéz had ample opportunity to study humanist letters.²⁷ Vitéz's predecessor in office, the Várad bishop, Ioannes de Dominis (†10. Nov, 1444) should not be left without mention, either. He possessed a remarkable humanist education and had direct contact with Vergerio, as well as with the most distinguished Italian humanists.²⁸ When Vitéz assumed his office, he followed in his footsteps also by serving a new tradition and a new culture.

The question of Vitéz's foreign travels and studies is rather problematic. There is hardly any concrete information about these issues. Nevertheless, most researchers regard it impossible that Vitéz's comprehensive humanist education could have been obtained without studies abroad, especially in Italy, or at least without travelling abroad. Fraknói asserts that Vitéz must have studied at Padua, as among the youths of the Zagreb diocese, where Vitéz himself belonged, this was rather frequent.²⁹ Fraknói tentatively suggests, while Ferenc Szakály already proves that János Vitéz was among those who accompanied Sigismundus on his foreign trips.³⁰ Several scholars toy with the idea that Vitéz may have been present in Rome in 1433 when Sigismundus was crowned emperor by Eugene IV, although there is no direct evidence to prove the assumption.³¹

There is one single piece of evidence regarding Vitéz's studies, namely that in 1434 he entered the faculty of art of Vienna University, but never completed his studies.³² His later contacts – Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, Georg Peuerbach, Miklós Lasocki Krakow dean, Grzegorz z Sanoka – as well as his diplomatic missions also seem to suggest a Viennese, Czech and Polish orientation. He gives an account of his planned study trip to Italy, which, how-

²⁵ Edition of Poggio's letters: *Epistolae I–III*. A cura di T. TONELLI, Florentinae 1832–1861.

²⁶ ÁBEL 1880. 158–159. See also CSAPODI Csaba: Hunyadi János és Poggio Bracciolini. [János Hunyadi and Poggio Bracciolini.] *Filológiai Közlemény*, 1965. 155–158.

²⁷ V. KOVÁCS 1987. 263–64.

²⁸ IÁJORIN 2005. 20–21.; see also: KUBINYI András: Vitéz János a jó humanista és a rossz politikus [János Vitéz the good humanist and poor politician]. In: *A magyar történelem vitatott személyiségei*. [Questionable personalities in Hungarian history.] Budapest, 2002.

²⁹ FRAKNÓI 1879. 10–11. Fraknói anyhow notes (note 1) that the list of Padua students does not survive from the 15th century.

³⁰ FRAKNÓI 1879. 12; SZAKÁLY 1990. 11. Based on the justification for a 1437 donation letter addressed to Vitéz, Ferenc Szakály proves Fraknói's tenet that from it it transpires that Vitéz was indeed one of the monarch's escorts on his foreign trips. No concrete data, however, about the times and dates of these trips are available.

³¹ SZAKÁLY 1990. 11.

³² Op.cit.; KUBINYI 1999. 45.

ever, fell through, in a piece in the *Book of Letters*.³³ Tibor Klaniczay finds evidence in a phrase by the primate himself that not only in 1444 but never did he do any studies in Italy, saying: “As I also think of myself as a son of the uncultivated land whose fruit I miss more than its busy hands...”³⁴. By “uncultivated land” he is presumed to mean Hungary, while the “busy hands” would be the humanist masters, primarily Vergerio.³⁵ In this context, mention should be made of the domestic forum where these “busy hands” were able to exert their most direct influence, namely the Vitéz’s *contubernium* in Buda and Várad (Oradea, Romania). Already during the Buda years, a scholarly society was formed around Vitéz, whose members would often be engaged in witty conversation, literary exercises and contests. Members of the first *contubernium* included Grzegorz z Sanoka, the humanist vicar of Wielicka, educator of Vladislav I and László Hunyadi and a friend of Vitéz’s; the dean of Krakow Miklós Lasocki, Hungary’s delegate at the Holy See; Filippo Podocataro, the poet and diplomat from Cyprus; based on his classical education Archdeacon Pál, Vitéz’s colleague, who later encouraged him to compile the *Book of Letters*; probably Pál Ivanich, canon of Zagreb as well, who was later to be the editor of the *Book of Letters* and the highly educated Papal delegate Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini, Vergerio’s close friend. Although the society was organised around Vitéz, its *spiritus rector* appears to have been still the elderly Vergerio.³⁶

This was the spiritual environment that formed the author of the *Book of Letters* in the period preceding the writing of the letters.

The Book of Letters

There is no data about János Vitéz’s work for the chancellery after 1441. Following Vladislav I’s accession to the throne, although he helped the king, for reasons unknown Vitéz

³³ Dated as the turn of 1444, addressed to the Krakow dean Nicholas: *Infelici occupatus tempore via, quam optabat animus, incedere minime potui, verum revector in meam infinite temptationis domum, ipsemet – ut vera loquar – ignoro, quo iam consistam gradu.* [Bogged down because of unfortunate times, I was unable to set out on the road where my spirit craved to go, but returning to this house of endless trials, honestly, even I myself don’t know what my rank is.] Ivanich adds in a note: *Via: susceperat enim viam ad Italianam pro studio, sed propter insidias latronum, et etiam quia inhibitus fuit ab isto transitu per condam Mathkonem banum, a Zagrabia retrocessit, et propterea dicit infra: ‘revector’ etc.* [On the road because he set out to go and study in Italy, but because of the danger of highwaymen and because a certain Count Mathko returned from Zagreb, therefor he says ‘removed’ etc.] BORONKAI 1980. 60–61. Epistolarium 20. The reliable edition of the Book of Letters in the Vienna manuscript (ÖNB, Cod. 431) up to Boronkai’s edition see: J. G. SCHWANDTNER: *Scriptores rerum Hungaricarum veteres ac genuini. II. Vindobonae 1746*, with a preface by Mátyás Bél. This edition, however, only includes a part of Ivanich’s notes. Excerpts from Vitéz’s letters are from now on included exclusively in the translator’s rendering into English from Iván Boronkai’s Hungarian translation in the following volume: BORONKAI 1987. Vitéz planned to do studies in Italy once more in 1451, for which he received Pope Nicholas V’s permission, but his plan repeatedly fell through. PAJORIN 2005. 21.

³⁴ *Cum autem ego quoque noverim me pariter eo rure alitum, cui huius culture frugem magis quam operam abesse queror ...* Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 39.

³⁵ KLANICZAY Tibor: Vitéz János contuberniuma. [János Vitéz’s contubernium.] In: KLANICZAY 1993. 37–38.

³⁶ KLANICZAY 1993. 27–38.

lost some of his power, and appears again as prothonotary and canon of Zagreb and was not donated an estate by the young monarch. It needs to be added that in 1441 he was appointed to be provost of the Várad chapter, which he presumably did not see as sufficient compensation, though. It is possible that this treatment hurt his self-esteem, and that is why he relinquished his service for the chancellery, leaving Buda and withdrawing to Várad.³⁷ Presumably, this is also the time he entered into János Hunyadi's service. Vitéz's non-transparent professional and political career, full of strange twists and turns, raises a number of questions. It is hard to explain why he was repeatedly pushed aside and rejected. Between 1441 and 1452 he was in Hunyadi's exclusive unofficial service, acting as his personal secretary and writing his diplomatic letters. Sometimes he is even referred to as 'Hunyadi's pen'. The charge has been brought against Hunyadi that he expropriated Vitéz. Around 1445 there are some slight hints again that he may have received a temporary government post worthy of his abilities, but this is completely unverified. Anyhow, in 1445 he was consecrated bishop of Várad.³⁸

János Vitéz's *Book of letters* (Cat. No. 34) is "a consciously edited humanist collection, the first literary product of Hungarian humanism related to the chancery, which also proves Vitéz's great authority."³⁹ According to the scenario that transpires, it was János Vitéz's former colleague at the chancery, Archdeacon Pál, who asked the primate as early as 1445 to gather and publish his letters, because he had already gained a reputation as a highly respected scholar. According to Sándor V. Kovács, however, the actual initiator was Vitéz himself, hiding behind Pál as a requirement of the genre and for reasons of obligatory modesty.⁴⁰ In 1451 the letters were collected and arranged into a volume by Pál Ivanich, the scholarly canon of Várad and member of Vitéz's Várad *contubernium*.⁴¹ At the head of the collection and at its end, constituting a preface and an epilogue, there are Pál Ivanich's letters giving a report about the work done to Archdeacon Pál, dated as of 12 January and 15 December 1451, respectively. Ivanich's introductory letter is followed by two of János Vitéz's as the first and second prologues, both addressed to Archdeacon Pál. The first is dated 24th April 1445, while the second 18th March 1448, both responding to Pál's request. The volume contains 78 letters primarily of diplomatic content from the period between 1445 and 1451. Its special feature is that Pál Ivanich supplied the text with abundant notes on the

³⁷ SZAKÁLY 1990. 13. Ferenc Szakály's opinion is supported by the following spot in the Book of Letters where Vitéz writes about the art of writing as of something he gave up a long time before: ... *abiectionem iam pridem usum moremque scribendi* ... Epistolarium 1, 31.

³⁸ SZAKÁLY 1990. 14–22. Later, between 1453 and '56 he returns to official politics, and becomes Ladislaus V's secret chancellor. Later Matthias is, to a certain extent, to rehabilitate him.

³⁹ HORVÁTH János 1935. 69.

⁴⁰ V. KOVÁCS 1987. 264.

⁴¹ Based on a 15th century Vergerio biography, Florio Banfi supposes that Ivanich was in touch with Vergerio. KLANICZAY 1993. 36. Pál Ivanich's figure is made special in the eyes of posterity by the fact that he spoke Turkish, as a result of which his service was required in the court of Pope Nicholas V. HUSZTI József: Magyar humanista mint török tudós V. Miklós udvarában [A Hungarian humanist as a 'turcologist' in the court of Pope Nicholas V]. *Századok* 1927. 334–350.

margins. This is why János Horváth says „this is a veritable scholarly publication of the master’s letters, serving as a model and edification, in the form of two followers’ keen enterprise.”⁴²

The framework of the Book of Letters: preface and epilogue
Two letters by Pál Ivanich to Archdeacon Pál dated 12th January and
16th December 1451

Pál Ivanich’s *praefatio* or his first letter written to Archdeacon Pál is, in fact, an editorial preface in which he informs Pál and, through him, the future reader of the circumstances of the book’s creation. Nevertheless, in the preface, reality is mixed with certain fictional circumstances, which as typical features of the genre, cannot be absent from the introduction to the letter corpus of a Humanist educated on Cicero, Plinius and Seneca. This is how Ivanich starts at the very beginning:

With many others, I regarded it my pleasant duty to have the letters long required by our common father sent to you. Not only readily but also with great enthusiasm and with his consent have I gathered into one volume the letters scattered all over, sometimes left on sheets or thrown into the corner, occasionally even carelessly trampled on, so that you should know: both of us have competed to possess them with a strong desire – I have been silent and you voicing your wish.⁴³

Later, discussing the structure of the volume, he proposes similar ideas:

You should also know that in arranging these letters, I was unable to consider the chronological order of their birth and dispatch. I have presented them as the copies cropped up and as I found the material.⁴⁴

Then in his first letter, Vitéz himself also returns to the same motif:

⁴² HORVÁTH János 1935. 69.

⁴³ *Dudum expetite a communi patre nostro epistole et tibi mitterentur, ego inter alios operam iussus dedi. Ego, inquam, eas hinc-inde disiectas, in scediis suis atque angulis mandatas, nonnullas etiam ex incuria proculcatas in hoc volumen ipso annuente recolligere ne solum pronus, sed etiam sollicitus fui, ut cognosceres et me tacentem et te loquentem eque cupido animo ad eas habendas cucurrisses.* Epistolarium, Praefatio, BORONKAI 1980. 27. Klaniczay draws attention to the fact that the word *pater* for Vitéz might be important also because the leaders of academies, or scholarly groups, in the 15th century were given the titles *princeps* and *pater*. KLANICZAY 1993. 42.

⁴⁴ *Noveris preterea, quod in collocandis hiis epistolis ego ordinem illum servare non potui, quo eodem facte editeque fuere, sed ut occorrebat copia ac materia inventa.* Epistolarium, Praefatio, BORONKAI 1980. 27.

Well, let us see what you wish. You want me, don't you, to search every nook and cranny of my house for pages of my old letters and to hand them over to you for reading, arranged in a volume?⁴⁵

Thus the situation described at the launch of the letter corpus suggests a careless attitude in a positive sense, as well as a degree of unaffectedness. It was an almost obligatory convention that the humanist letter collection was supposed to stress at its start this kind of ad-lib and perfunctory character.⁴⁶ Naturally, classical epistle-writers provided the source. For example, Plinius the Younger begins the first book of his letters as follows:

My dear Septicius, You have often prodded me that I collect and publish the letters I have written with more care. Well, I have gathered them but with no regard for their chronology, just as I chanced upon them, as after all, this is not a historical work. I hope you won't regret your advice, neither will I regret taking it. In that case, it is possible that I will find the others too that are still lying about, and when I write new ones, I won't hide them. I wish you well.⁴⁷

It should be noted, however, that both Plinius the Younger and Renaissance humanists selected, revised and improved with utmost care their letters intended for publication, and parallel to them, their speeches which are inseparable from the letters. What is more, it is obvious that in most cases, already at the moment of writing, they had the future public in mind. It is a question if this is also true for János Vitéz.⁴⁸ Care, conscientiousness and the intention of observing the rules and elements of classical rhetoric are undeniable in his work too. It is not easy to decide, however, if he is "reluctant" to make his letters public due to the obligatory modesty and warns us through Ivanich that the letters should edify rather than present an artistic form (*prae-fatio*). The two letters following the preface are so imbued with some kind of reticence and reserve concerning a forthright opening up to the public that perhaps we have to agree with those who consider his attitude genuine modesty which they originate from Vitéz's personality rather than an obligatory pose. He must have seen it himself that his diplomatic letters gathered into the volume were considerably different from

⁴⁵ *Age nunc videamus, quid expostules; et quidem ut edium angulis, carthophylactis quoque conlustratis, scedas tibi epistolarum quondam mearum perquirerem, easque in volumen redactas tibi tuisque legendas exhiberem.* Epistolarium, BORONKAI 1980. 30–31.

⁴⁶ V. KOVÁCS 1987. 265–266.

⁴⁷ *C. Plinius Septicio Suo S. Frequenter hortatus es, ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. Collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus venerat. Superest, ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii. Ita enim fiet, ut eas quae adhuc neglectae iacent requiram et, si quas addidero, non supprimam. Vale.* C. Plini Caecili Secundi Epistolarum libri novem, Epistolarum ad Traianum liber, Panegyricus. Ed. Mauritius SCHUSTER, Lipsiae MCMLVIII. 1. 1.

⁴⁸ Vitéz also had his Plinius, probably in multiple copies. One has survived and is today kept in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 141 (Cat. No. 24). Vitéz's emendations of the codex reflect very thorough study.

those of the classical forefathers or from the witty and brilliant epistles of such contemporary humanists as Poggio:

Since according to our great orator, it is good if the person who aspires for great and desirable things tries everything, as you have requested, I am sending you my rather weak writings in the hope that you as reader will appreciate them more – if you should have become tired of walking the majestic scenes of the old masters' letters, your intellect might have a pleasant rest on these and if you have already admired the high peaks, you can now treasure the lowlands.⁴⁹

János Vitéz is sometimes called a practical humanist, who is not limited to complacency and exhibitionism, but finds his humanist self in his work and service.⁵⁰ In the closing letter of the volume, Ivanich discloses that Vitéz would often repeat that “It is volatile and mercurial honour to search for fame through the mere splendour of words.”⁵¹ This claim seems to be confirmed by the fact that János Vitéz did not compile any further books of letters. Although the material in the *Book of Letters* is up to 1451, Vitéz's professional and diplomatic career is far from being over. There were many more epistles, famous speeches and private letters as well, but he did not find it important to save them. It is conceivable that in bringing about the *Book of Letters* Pál Ivanich's ambition played a bigger role than Vitéz's individual intentions.

Ivanich's aim to emphasize his own contribution is tangible already in the preface. Primarily his showing off is reflected in the fact that he does not include Archdeacon Pál's letter or letters, who was in fact the 'mastermind' or the driving force behind the project, thus stressing his own role⁵² of being the “executor”.⁵³ At the end of the preface, he talks at length about his own contribution to the volume: he supplied the letters with scholarly explanations so that they are easier to understand, in case of quotations from classical authors, he named the source, and also gave linguistic clarifications, “partly inquiring from our common father and partly checking things in books”.⁵⁴ The epilogue, namely Ivanich's letter at the end of the volume, which he also wrote to Archdeacon Pál on 16th December 1451 in Váradi, is exclusively about him and his share of the undertaking. In the first lines, he ex-

⁴⁹ *At quoniam iuxta magni oratoris nostri sententiam par est omnes omnia experiri, qui res magnas et magnopere expetendas concupiverunt, cedo instancie tue, atque ut petisti, statui mittere tibi infirma mea, legenti pociora, ut cum inter excellentes illas litterarum veterum regiones lassus forte versaberis, ad hec remittens animum iocabundus conquiescas, utque tandem si summa miraberis, inferiora quoque probes.* Epistolarium 1., BORONKAI 1980. 31–32.

⁵⁰ HÉRVÁTH János 1935. 71.

⁵¹ ... *fluxa – iniquens – et ventosa gloria est de solo verborum splendore famam querere* ... Epistolarium, Epilogus, BORONKAI 1980. 166.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ ... *te quidem motore, me vero executore libellus ipse dedicabitur* ... [this booklet we are going to recommend as initiators and executors] Epistolarium, Praefatio, BORONKAI 1980. 27.

⁵⁴ ... *et ab ipso patre nostro interrogans, et in libris per me requirens informari potui.* Epistolarium, Praefatio, BORONKAI 1980. 28.

presses his sadness that the joyful activity has come to an end, and then rather unfortunately, he refers back to the starting image according to which there are no usable letters in any nooks and crannies. He encourages Pál that he should also do further search for possible Vitéz letters, and if he is successful, he should send copies to Ivanich. After this, he discusses at length his notes to the letters, apologising for his mistakes and says to Pál that if he finds some, he should be contented that he (i.e. Pál) knows better. He is apologetic also about the style of the notes and refers to Vitéz, who also concentrated on facts rather than on artistic form.⁵⁵ Subsequently, he uses warm words to recommend Vitéz's letters to Pál and asks him not to make rushed judgments about them, but to let them make an impact on him. This is how he addresses Pál:

Because, as you know, they were written by a pen that duly (and not badly!) became a master 'in his twilight years', and which serving matters through them, apparently did not completely disregard art either.⁵⁶

It is remarkable, however, that in the closing lines of the letter, he refers to the work as his own:

Love this work of mine, the creation of the same editor and author, which I offer as a token of love that should yield richer harvests soon.⁵⁷

The two Vitéz letters
On 24th April 1445 and 18th March 1448

Regarding the structure of the volume, this is what Ivanich writes about the two letters in the preface:

⁵⁵ Pál Ivanich's notes are mainly explanations of words and are partly related to style and rhetoric. Iván Boronkai has pointed out that the rhetorical glosses are primarily about the structure of the letters, and one of their sources is the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. They also evidence that in the first half of the 15th century, in Hungary there was an interest in the theory of rhetoric. See BORONKAI Iván: Vitéz János retorikai iskolázottsága. [János Vitéz's rhetorical education]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 1975. 129–143. Klára Pajorin stresses that the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* was known and used in the Middle Ages, according to which the knowledge of this piece is not necessarily a humanist specificity. PAJORIN 2005. 15.

⁵⁶ *Nam eo calamo — ut nosti — facte sunt, cui merito haud perperam 'seris venit usus ab annis', et qui in eis usui rerum subserviens, nec artem omnino extrusisse conspicitur.* Epistolarium, Epilogus, BORONKAI 1980. 166.

⁵⁷ *... atque hanc meam operam ama, quam eodem direttore pariter et autore confectam amoris arrabonem offero, in maiorem effectum propediem evasuram.* Epistolarium, Epilogus, BORONKAI 1980. 166.

... the two letters that with no small time gap he addressed to you [i.e. to Pál], in answer to questions about the volume, I have placed before the others, because in my judgment they are most worthy of introducing the others and of having their memory survive. I dare say that once you understand the two, it will be easier to relish the taste and meaning of subsequent ones.⁵⁸

The two Vitéz letters concerned are indeed special in the corpus, as with a few exceptions, the 78-item collection is made up of letters that he wrote on other people's behalf, mainly about state affairs in the name of János Hunyadi. At best, Vitéz is present only on the level of linguistic and rhetorical formulation, while his ideas and personality stay in the background. The two introductory letters, however, are genuinely his own, expounding his views on significant questions of literature. In this sense, they may be regarded as humanist mission statements. About their style, Ivanich makes the following remarks in his second note:

... in this letter and the next, he applies a style that he would use in addressing a partner or a friend. He uses in them words and phrases fit for a comedy, which – as you know – he tends to avoid in his serious letters. The major parts of the two letters are mainly woven from the words and sentences of classical orators, writers and poets.⁵⁹

This reflects that Ivanich, who was familiar with Vitéz's style, sensed the differences between these two letters and the rest of the volume and was also able to classify them as Vitéz's individual letter types. Accordingly, Vitéz would write to the "partner" (*ad socium*) and the "friend" (*ad amicum*) in words "fit for a comedy" and including less serious phrases. It is possible that this inproportionately frequent use of classical quotations is also partly a game, which in Vitéz's style is a feature of his lighter tone. In spite of all this, the two letters cannot be classified as belonging to the genre of the *epistolae familiares*, because their ease and informality are not at the level of the true humanist letter.

In content, tone, emotions and ideas, the first letter is a highly complex piece with a master structure. In April 1445, Vitéz answers in response to Pál's earlier urging. The letter can be divided into two main parts. Firstly, in the warm greetings and the few warmth-filled lines addressed to Pál, in which he accepts Pál's request in an ostensible reproach, he sum-

⁵⁸ ... illas duas epistolas, quas ad te pro responsione huius voluminis post sese haut parvo intervallo rescripserat, ceteris anteposui, utpote quas in primis et prologo aliarum et memoria dignas existimavi. Epistolarium, Praefatio, BORONKAI 1980. 27–28.

⁵⁹ In primis nota, quod hanc epistolam et sequentem scribens utitur sermone, quo videlicet ad socium vel amicum scribere solitus erat, ponuntur enim in eis verba comica et termini, quos in gravibus epistolis idem ipse – ut tu nosti – refutare solebat. Que quidem due epistole in magna parte contexte sunt ex verbis et clausulis veterum oratorum, scriptorum et poetarum. Paulus. Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 33.

huius voluminis post sese hauri paruo intervallo resciperat. ceteris anteposui utpote quas in primis et prologo aliarum et memoria dignas existamaui. Vere etenim dico quod quodammodo easdem duas mente comprehendere mox ad aliarum sequentium lectionem et sapor et intellectus facilius aderit. Ut autem ab earum lectione te forte aliqua difficultas vel error non abstrahat. volui pro mea exercitatione adhuc unum laborem adhibere. feci namque in spacio circumiacenti annotari tibi veterum autorum nomina quorum dicta verbaque in ipsius epistolis inducuntur nonnullorum etiam vocabulorum et etiam sententiarum aliquarum expositiones ac notas adieci. inquitum et ab ipso patre nostro interrogans et in libris pro me requirens informari potui. Que quidem si tu sanius acutusque intellexeris libenter fauebo rationi doctiorumque consenciam. et nec me pigebit erroris emendati. Postremo ausatus esto quod cum in fronte huius voluminis titulum auctoris solitum formare volueram. pertinens contradictum fuit. ne ad hoc curam exponerem. sed ut iuxta beati Severi doctrinam sufficiat quod libellus iste loquatur materiam et non loquatur auctorem. Vale. Ex Waradino duodecima Januarii. Anno domini Millesimo Quadringentesimo Quinquagesimo primo.

et hinc in prologo sup. vna
si autem. pau.

In primis nota. quod ista epistola
et supra libellus vna sunt.
f. vna. ad hanc partem. sicut
solent esse. quoniam si in uno
libro sententia et ratio. et in gra
tulis epistolis. Insuper ut in notis
referuntur. Quod si duo
epistolae in maiori parte referuntur
ex istis et clausula veterum
oratorum referuntur et poe'ty.

Accipit huiusmodi p. obdure.
Epistolae voluntatem.

o. patre nro.

ponit ad siluam illam. dicit
quod p. refugio. sicut dicitur. et
si dicitur. et arguitur ad
me refugio.

**EPISTOLA PRIMA. IPSE DOMINI. IO. QUE ALIARUM SEQUEN
TIUM PROLOGVS DICI POTEST. IN QVA QVIVEM EPI
STOLAE DISTVRBII DATA. EIVSDEM DISTVRBII MALA ET
FACIEM DENOTAT. ET PLVRA ALIA VTILIA EXPRESSIT.**
Dilecto filio. P. Notario Cancellarie regie. S.
Morem gerere solitus fili votis tuis cumulatam instan
tia. preceps ago. ut petitioni tue (uel impetitioni apaus dixerit)
cedam magis quam concedam. eo pacto. ut palam noueris huic
importunitati tue impetrarum non. iudicio delatum rei sed tedio
Virgentes quippe addis stimulos affectui. ne quo languore
moreris. occupatam solito exigendi vicem. neue refugio pa

maries the reasons for his reluctance in a long paragraph. The date, 24 April 1445, is to be noted: the composition is written shortly after the Varna defeat on 10th November 1444. Hunyadi had just returned to the country, the state of which is described by Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini in these terms: “the Hungarian state has been shattered and toppled... divided into parts, and there is hardly any contact between the parts.”⁶⁰ In the first part of his letter, Vitéz stresses the unpredictability and uncertainty of this spring, describing in especially expressive language the chaos ruling the country. He lets us know that in this unpredictable situation, he would not like to make his writings public. He is anxious and cautious. At this point in the letter, as well as elsewhere, there is a reference to Vitéz’s own position and role in public affairs. Personal aspects are integrated into the texture of the letter in a masterly manner: they appear as reflections that flash up all the time without any concrete details. As has been discussed earlier, the 1441 to 1445 period is the least known part of Vitéz’s life. It is exactly on the basis of certain vague hints in the *Book of Letters* that we may gather some ideas about it.⁶¹

For example:

Your better judgment will rather be manifested if you urge me to make my speech more reserved and to make it stay within its borders – especially in this storm, in which as you will know, our cause and reputation are in a worrying and doubtful situation.

And later:

It was my own intention and ambition to take a rest and to start an intellectual activity, reassuring for both of us, in which the protective guard of silence (and benefits of the whole undertaking!) is required. I never ceased to worry that from the place where I was facing the public so unprotected, in this turmoil of judgments and changes in fates, morality-nourishing modesty might be swept off. Thus as war imposed silence on morality and laws, we suffer idleness voluntarily.⁶²

⁶⁰ SZAKÁLY Ferenc: *Virágkor és hanyatlás 1440–1711*. (Magyarok Európában II.) [Heyday and decline 1440–1711. (Hungarians in Europe II.)] Budapest 1990. 42. Piccolomini is also quoted by Szakály F. here.

⁶¹ SZAKÁLY 1990. 13–22.

⁶² *Quin ymmo rectius cognoscere videberis, si persuadere mihi properes, ut sermo sit restrictior et suis ripis coherceatur, hac presertim tempestate, in qua et causam nostram et famam pariter in arto stare et ancipiti non ignoras. Sic fuit mihi quoque studium ac intentio requiescendi atque animum ad utriusque nostrum tuta quedam negocia referendi, in quibus – totius operis primipilare commercium – opus esset silentii fido custode tueri. Quandoquidem ex eo loco, quo palam apertusque steti, nunquam pavere destiti, ne forte inter has turgidas iudiciorum fortunarumque conflages morum alitrix modestia elaberetur. Igitur postquam mores ac leges bello siluere coacte, patimur volentes ocium..* Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 30.

Ferenc Szakály comes to the conclusion that Vitéz, about whose official work for the chancery there is absolutely no data after 1441, perhaps withdrawing at this point already to Váradi and entering Hunyadi's service, at the turn of 1444 and 1445 again received a short-term official appointment matching his abilities, conceivably working as a chancellor.⁶³ From his own perspective, he considers *otium* to be the most appropriate form of behaviour, in the silence of which he was able to pursue his intellectual activity:

And in this immeasurable turmoil and loss of peace (...), I thought it especially more useful to find refuge for my pen and concern from the winds howling outside, lest a censor's voice should go out to the public, through which a compromise out of harmony with my intentions would threaten my wielding of the pen, although I always wanted to serve my country with it rather than my personal ambitions...⁶⁴

Around the middle of the letter, Vitéz uses a clever transition in which he says that, in fact, Pál's request very much matches his own desired pastime and therefore he turns to his actual topic, namely the style of his own letters. It is possible that Pál too justified his request by his wish to study the master's style, but presumably Vitéz was also aware that the novelty of his letters was primarily in their new style, a basic feature of which was the extensive citing of classical authors. He warns Pál that his style is not his own, that he borrows a lot and encourages him to study the original authors rather, as "in my work you will find few phrases that have not been said before", and "your expectation (...) will not be met if leaving the source behind, you try and get a corrupted flavour in the stream".⁶⁵ He feels that he has to apologise because of plagiarising. He then gives examples of how the great predecessors had done the same: He refers to Vergilius Maro, who „drank up the wonderful sweetness of his song from the honey of Homer's source”⁶⁶ and Saint Jerome, who although he was Christian, filled his letters with quotes from Vergilius, Horatius and Terentius, “because this man filled with God and virgin-like science, did not find it degrading to borrow tools for sacred purposes from pagan authors”.⁶⁷ The future primate may have felt the need to justify his special attachment to pagan authors, and the most appropriate way to do so was by making a reference to a Christian authority.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, the apologies for his style are not totally unfounded. Although his letters do demonstrate traits of the new style, we should

⁶³ SZAKÁLY 1990. 19–20.

⁶⁴ *Et in primis quidem ego in hac tanta occupatione rerum pacisque exilio (...) parumper calamum curamque subducere ab hiis, que foris perstrepunt, sacius duxeram, ne quicquam sermonis censorii prodiret, per quem ipsi calamo active indigna proposito meo aucuparetur licitatio. Quem quidem sane patrie nostre usui esse semper malui quam ostentui ...* Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 30.

⁶⁵ ... *opinio tua fallitur, si dimisso fonte preposterum saporem in rivo querendum ducis..* Epistolarium, 1, BORONKAI 1980. 31.

⁶⁶ ... *carminis sui eruditum dulcorem ex melle Homericum fluminis epotasse astruitur.* Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 31.

⁶⁷ *Non enim indignum ratus est vir ille Deo et celibe studio plenus a prophanis inventoribus equa sacro usui instrumenta contrahere.* Epistolarium, 1, BORONKAI 1980. 31.

⁶⁸ V. KOVÁCS 1987. 266.

not forget that it originates primarily from the several hundred years of chancery tradition. This is suggested by the long, complicated and often convoluted sentences in his letters. The rhyming sentence closures that Vitéz applied are not identical with the clauses of classical rhetoric that are based on syllable length. They are more characteristics of the medieval style of charters. Thus there are several medieval features in Vitéz's texts. Adding to them his highly idiosyncratic usage and word order, the end result is a unique style bordering on the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.⁶⁹

It is after this that he defines the program of the right humanist (self)-development:

If you also intend to cultivate yourself in the right manner, from now on follow their example; I suggest that you study them, and finally take frequent exercise, because practice is worth more than any master's instruction, and stop trying to pursue this silly discipline, because it will soon give away that you are making every effort at breaking the force of oratory.⁷⁰

This is the main message of the letter. Here Vitéz probably goes beyond describing a general humanist principle of learning and probably talks about his own method. This is confirmed by the marginal notes in his extant books. So the secret of the "self-taught humanist", admired by all of the period's educated Europe, was as simple as this.

⁶⁹ Several people have dealt with Vitéz's style. First, Mátyás Bél in the preface to the Schwandtner edition. Bél's opinion is summarized by János Horváth as follows: "Accordingly, Vitéz wrote in a fine and varied style in the name of those whose rank and the occasion required him to do so. But in his mixed style he blended words already outdated by the learned people of the age with brand new ones; he filled his diction with clichés, thus becoming pompous; he was sometimes too low-brow and sometimes aiming at high-brow style, but not always able to reach it, was wavering between the two. He was not so much the follower of Cicero or Plinius the Younger, but rather of the fourth- and fifth-century writers, Symmachus and Apollinaris Sidonius; going beyond the former and not reaching the latter." Then Horváth goes on to give his own opinion: "Mátyás Bél's remarks are exclusively about style. We may be more positive about Vitéz's art of structure. Only in friendly and jovial letters (...) do we find the humanist affectedness whereby even the tiniest steps of the argumentation are detailed in eloquent periodic style, and which forces you to read several pages for the sake of negligible details. Rarely does he wrap the simplest message in the attire of stylistic elements. On the other hand, *ratio cinatio*, the step by step rational, polite and respectful train of thought, worthy of the addressee's rank, is indeed characteristic of him." HORVÁTH János 1935. 73. Vitéz's style is analysed in depth by Iván BORONKAI's papers; see e.g.: Vitéz János és az ókori klasszikusok [János Vitéz and the classics]. In: *Janus Pannonius. Tanulmányok* [Janus Pannonius. Studies]. Budapest 1975. 219–232; *Vitéz János, a "magyar humanizmus atyja"* [János Vitéz, "the father of Hungarian humanism".] In: BORONKAI 1987. 5–30.; A ritmikus próza Vitéz János leveleiben. [Rhythmical prose in János Vitéz's letters.] *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények*, 1969. 693–696.

⁷⁰ *Igitur si tu quoque recte erudiri volueris, perge ut hos deinceps imitabundus emuleris, ex hiis velim edas paresque studia ac demum adiungas frequentem usum, qui omnium magistrorum precepta superabit, nec amplius properes indoctam hanc scienciam consecrari, qua te ipsum facile prodes ad labefactandas eloquii vires procaciter obeuntem.* Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 31.

Vitéz's light playfulness when reflecting on himself and his style in the second letter should not be passed unnoticed either: the light sense of humour that he treats this serious subject with. Naturally, this is more than what can be acquired through long practice. Primarily in this and in his tight logical argumentation, as well as in the masterful structure is the literary value of this letter.

In some sense, the virtuosity that Vitéz demonstrates in applying classical authors and integrating them into a homogenous text is also to be seen as an aspect of his playfulness. This letter is almost exclusively constituted of “borrowed” patches, which might be sentences, half sentences, or simply turns of phrase or words. In the first part of the letter, the chaotic and uncertain state of affairs are introduced primarily by Lucanus, but some of Valerius Maximus, Seneca, Cicero, Livius, Vergilius and Terentius as well as the Christian authors Hieronymus and Ambrosius are also used. If any contemporary fellow scholar was familiar with at least some of the quotations, he certainly had great pleasure in following their exquisite blend. Undoubtedly, this exercise served practical purposes too: as the contemporary educated public knew classical quotations very well, their use and associations facilitated the accurate formulation of demands and requests in diplomatic letters, and at the same time, legalised the fact of the request.⁷¹ The repertoire of authors reflects Vitéz's readings at the time. This letter, for example, shows that after the Battle of Varna he would often read Lucanus.⁷² In the last lines, when Vitéz is going to reprimand Pál for forcing him to write in such mournful times, he makes a comment that reveals his consciousness as a literary figure and writer: „I would do it if a longer detour was compatible with the genre of the letter.”⁷³ This remark further confirms the obvious fact that Vitéz carefully studied the contemporary theory of letter writing. In the sentence cited, he refers to *brevitas*, the virtue of brevity that Plinius the Younger already identified as one of the criteria for good letters. He informs Pál that he has been invited to the upcoming parliamentary session, therefore only later will he fulfill his promise. This parliament in May 1445 decided to acknowledge Ladislaus V as king, and this is when seven chief captains, with Hunyadi among them, were selected for maintaining the internal order.⁷⁴

János Vitéz's second letter dates back to three years later than the first, more precisely to 18th March 1448. The country had become more peaceful by then. At the Rákosmező Parliament, János Hunyadi had been elected governor while Ladislaus was still under age, and he was to hold this office until 1453. János Vitéz became the bishop of Várad in 1445.

⁷¹ Boronkai uses the notion of “agitative rhetoric” to describe this phenomenon, according to which associations with classical quotations may have induced the audience's compassion and action. See BORONKAI Iván: Vitéz János és az ókori klasszikusok [János Vitéz and the classics]. In: *Janus Pannonius. Tanulmányok* [Janus Pannonius. Studies]. Budapest 1975. 228.

⁷² A Lucanus has also survived, today it is kept in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Cod. 100. The numerous Vitéz notes in it witness careful reading and processing. (Cat. No. 20)

⁷³ *Et facerem sane, si epistolaris condicio evagari longius pateretur.* Epistolarium 1, BORONKAI 1980. 32.

⁷⁴ SZAKÁLY Ferenc: *Virágkor és hanyatlás 1440–1711.* (Magyarok Európában II.) [Heyday and decline 1440–1711. (Hungarians in Europe II.)] Budapest 1990. 42.

Arhdeacon Pál asks Vitéz to meet the promise he made three years earlier. After a few lines in which he plays with the image of the debtor, the impatient creditor and usury, he turns to his actual subject. Now that the situation is less emotion-charged, in the resulting relative law and order, he has to put his own life in order:

As a result, now I also have to put my own life in order, regarding whose measure and my age the best thing is to genuinely wish to be my own master not just to say so – my own master to the extent that I should regard it immodest to enhance my reputation or find others' favour through such activity.⁷⁵

By “such activity”, he meant the compilation of the letter collection. Already in the previous letter, he was continuously wondering whether in the given chaotic political situation it was wise to appear before the public, or perhaps it was more advisable not to expose himself to possible negative criticism. The same reluctance can be read out of the second letter as well. In the first place he mentions jealousy as a constraining factor. Those envious of him would only say bad things about the collection to be published:

Because Hungary's terrible malaise, greedy jealousy is still very much present, and this – it seems I am making judgments – stings so viciously from all directions that the light of the intellect and the spirit fade, and as a consequence the only thing that is to the benefit of the modest is if in their hiding they give no cause for praise.⁷⁶

In addition, he is concerned that he would have no comprehending audience. In the famous lines below, it is the first time on Hungarian soil that medieval Latin-based education is criticized:⁷⁷

And then in our country, which was born on the uncultivated edge of Latin culture, if I am not mistaken, they make little difference between the best and the worst of literature, or (...) in it Davus counts as wise, or perhaps even wiser than Oedipus.

It has become an old habit to be happy with petty-minded speech and to accept the complete rooting out of the artistic voice rather than writing it. I wished to

⁷⁵ *Quo beneficio vicem quoque meam par est hoc tempore refici, cuius canonici etatiq[ue] precipue expedit, ut esse quam dici mei proprius malim; et ita proprius, ut nec famam producere, nec favores consecrari hoc genere studii modestum putem.* Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 37.

⁷⁶ *Durat quippe primogenita tabes luesque Hungarie: livor edax, quo varios ex more iudicii aculeos concrispante recte quidem ingenii animique splendor emarcuit, ut hoc solum nunc modestis laudi sit, si laudis casibus faciem abstraxerint.* Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 37–38.

⁷⁷ HÉRVÁTH János 1935. 72.

bus tuis. repulse minaces scopulos incureres. Quodquidem sane. et si rapide instance tue ratio exposculet. tam id scias decernere placuit. Saliocet. ne ob pces indignas. dignu petito rem exassem. **M**ulta u mibi aduozsum obeunt et mita pariter dehortant. ne sermone (si quis in me est) hoc tempore futilem effiaam. vt iuxta pmi sancti doctous nri sententia pus me vox condempnet mea qm absoluat aliena. habeat enim suos q; timinos verecundia necesse est. non quos ipa stiat. si in quibus circumferat. qtns res gerendas moribz temporibusq; agruas exhibeat. ne que gradus vsusq; laborz erigat. aut impaciens loci fortuna secundi. **C**eterz si tu q ante octoz faciemq; statuere volueris. pnciu condicoe epam facile psuade defines. vt nuc pmi. micaari tibi ppem. indiscussam hacten pudoris mei cesariem. quam vt solum vt maxime. coipo tuta putauerim. si domesticas penetralibus delitescens. foris varia fori ventilabra euitabit. Dic sodes. Nonne palam stueri potes nuc tpa illa. que ob olim fatali quodam crimine. no despta mibi. si magis depicta videntur. in quibz vig in p mis. ferale p Regnu iusticium latuit. cunctasq; pudoris rum punt fca moras. Ac deinde resoluta legu fienis. tra ruit. Dors incerta vagatur. fertq; refertq; vices. Jam sane ferri ptas. cofudit omē ius manu. Legesq; et sedera rez. pestifero vertit natura tumultu. Tum libertas data odys. pdaq; et hostiles luxum suasere rapine. Sed prohnephas. rectius affines. qm hostiles rapinas dixerim. nempe in quibz amica manus. in sua ferrox viscera gutit. cognateq; decertat aces. Quid pluris. Nemo fauoris compos. nemo expers pauoris. Equata passim vlnera membris vidim. Mensura q; iuris. vis erat. letalis deniq; ambit. incanduit. In comune exicium. oculo cecultante ruit. pauca vltiores scelez. autores plurimi affluunt. Quassa est fides. quies egra. dubius sanguis. atq; ut veteri puerbio aiunt. certi nihil. nisi fi hostis. Restat vt confusis hys rebz. ipaq; rez vocabula ofundant.

1. h. ut inuicem supula respicit. 27.

2. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

3. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

4. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

5. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

6. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

7. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

8. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

9. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

10. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

11. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

12. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

13. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

14. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

15. h. ut inuicem respicit. 27.

talk about this in more gentle tones, although I spoke gentler than this idle passivity would justify, into which our compatriots have sunk, not even savvying Latin-based education – perhaps in the conviction that they are following in the traces of the ancient culture (if at all you can call ignorance of the literary language and not teaching it culture).

Pál Ivanich gives the following explanation of Davus:

Davus: These words are found in Terentius's *Andria*, where he says: "I am Davus, not Oedipus", thus Davus in this context means a simpleton, while Oedipus stands for the philosopher or another scholar. Pál.⁷⁸

He immediately apologises to Pál for his strong critical remarks and shows the other side of the coin too: he talks appreciatively of the men who are keen on seeking education. Here again though, the covert critique of the "uncultivated domestic land" crops up:

Today, more or less in our age, they take a path indeed worth following in accumulating the treasures of knowledge, as you as well as I have known many men of outstanding abilities and sophisticated intellect who would prove my woeful judgment right not only in their words but also through their continuous activity. Once they enthusiastically pounce on seeking education, in their studies they do not go after the domestic shade but chase the disciplines that have fled, or been forced to flee, abroad. Because the noble spirit that is proud of its own light finds it unfair to be bogged down by our uncultivated state...⁷⁹

⁷⁸ *Ceterum in hac patria nostra, Latine rusticitatis vernacula, parum (ni fallor) differentie statuitur inter farrem litterarum et furfurem, ymmo (ut vulgari more tecum pedem conferam) plerumque in ea eque vel paulo largius Davus sapit quam Edippus. Ita enim veteri usu morem instituit, ut pedestri sermone contenta sit, proscribique sacius artem dicendi, quam scribi noverit. Vellem micus hoc posse dici, at parum certe dixi pro merito tante socordie, qua profecto nostri contribules obvoluti Latine sciencie vix peripsima complectuntur, rati forsitan discipline veteris se formam assectari -, ac si hec vere disciplina dici possit, in qua litterati sermonis ignoracio et discitur et docetur. Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 38. Explanation by Pál Ivanich: Davus: habentur hec verba in Terencio in Andria, ubi dicitur: "Davus sum non Edippus", ita ut Davus hic ponitur pro simplici, Edippus pro philosopho vel alio docto. Paulus. Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 40.*

⁷⁹ *Iam sane alius mos, et certe recta emulatione dignus, hac ferme nostra etate in conlucanda sciencia queritur. Multos etenim ipse nosti, ego vero complurimos, et nunc quoque haut paucos conspecto egregia ratione ac liberali ingenio viros, qui huic mee querule sentencie ne dicam verbis, sed assiduis prope factis astipulantur. Nam ut primum animum querende eruditionis zelo applicant, non umbram domesticam in studio, sed rem petunt, et quasi fugientes foras – vel fugatas potius e patria – litteras avidi persequuntur. Nobilis quippe ille animus, peculiaris sui luminis bene memor, indignum ducit hac nostra rudi erudicione ligari ... Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 38.*

The content of the letter's closing section may be related to Pál Ivanich's preface, in a way complementing it. Vitéz starts discussing the practicalities and the ways of compiling the collection. Accordingly, there is a shift in its style too. The artificially composed sentences are replaced by a pleasantly flowing, simple and natural text without any superfluous decoration. He is aware of this himself, and even makes a note of it. The special significance of the excerpt is that Vitéz's decisive role in the compilation of the *Book of Letters* clearly transpires from it. He details the criteria for selection and his decisions in the first person singular. Using the words of Plinius the Younger he halts this pragmatic section, not intending to go beyond the limits of the letter. He repeatedly evokes his earlier delineated doubts about the publishability of the letters, adding the request that Pál should treat the volume as his private reading. To justify his point, he repeatedly clarifies his view about style, or in other words, about form and content:

But this should suffice as I believe it is unnecessary to make predictions about the traps of other people's judgments.

You will get the requested and promised letters soon, as we have managed to gather them from scribes in various places, but only the ones that we found in whole. You have to know that we have been unable to recover copies of those that I had composed before the time that our country in that first disastrous battle by the sea⁸⁰ was lost, together with our good fortune. They may have provided very instructive lessons, even if not for your studies, but for recording events and for getting to know the ups and downs of fortune. And although some of the letters emerged out there, as they were so badly damaged, I judge it better not to claim their authorship. Therefore, I have decided that we should leave them out of the body of this volume altogether, despite the fact that I have no doubts that if they had been recovered in good condition, a reliable picture could have been drawn of the numerous successful events that we fought with the Turks⁸¹ under a fortunate star, as well as of our country's later chaos and confusion.

But it seems perhaps that I am already going beyond the scope of the letter, while my pen that you urged me to wield is already teeming with ideas. Finally, please accept one condition that I am posing to you: keep this volume in strong and loyal guard, strictly as your private reading, lest through your carelessness it could slip out an open door and should have the scrutiny of those that I would like to learn from rather than demonstrate my own knowledge to. Our aim was not to find an eloquent style in these letters or to enter the ranks of those who conduct superfluous debates according to academic rules, more concerned about form than about benefit. The only rule we observed in our work was that noth-

⁸⁰ This wofeul battle was the Battle of Varna on 10th November 1444.

⁸¹ In a long note Pál Ivanich takes stock of these fights. See BORONKAI 1980. 42.

ing important should be missing from our product, nothing should be subordinated to mere art and no compromise should be made in favour of the desire for empty glamour. I wish you good health!⁸²

★★★

The actual *Book of Letters*, the 78 letters following that of Pál Ivanich and János Vitéz's two introductory ones, have a strange relationship to what has been said about classical and humanist letter corpuses.

Since Vitéz writes them to the Pope and to other church and world dignitaries primarily on Hunyadi's behalf and mostly on issues connected to the Turks, he appears „merely” with his style. Together with the two letters introduced, he wrote only seven pieces in his own name. They are the ones that are the closest to the category of humanist epistles.⁸³ In the final one of them (No. 76) on 17th March 1451 Vitéz puts a few lines on paper for Guarino Veronese, the renowned Ferrara humanist teacher on the occasion that he is sending back again to Italy the visiting Janus Pannonius, a student at Guarino's Ferrara school.

The *Book of Letters* is a special collection born at the juncture of two eras. In a sense, it is a uniform whole, some of the letters providing relevant information about our first Hungarian humanist's personal convictions, rhetorical consciousness, while its proportions give a vivid picture of the selfsame humanist's apparently honest commitment that his writing and knowledge were intended primarily to serve his country rather than his own seeking of glamour and fame. Never did he or anyone else compile a letter collection for him, although a number of his epistles and speeches later became models to follow in school curricula.

⁸² *Sed de hoc sat habeas, quandoquidem alieni iudicii latebras presagire supervacaneum putem. Habitus es propediem petitas et promissas epistolas, quas apud scedarios undique requisitas habere potuimus, et eas dumtaxat, que integre reperte sunt. Nam earum, que ante id tempus, quo maritimum illud primum funebre regni nostri bellum simul cum fortuna obtritum est, dictate fuerant, copiam habere nequivimus. Que quidem, etsi studio tuo parum, sed certe pro gestarum rerum memoria et illorum temporum fortunarumque orbe noscendo non mediocriter conducere potuissent. Ex quibus tamen licet aliquae nobis aforis occurrerint, ita tamen violatae erant, ut eas non meas profiteri sacius duxerim. Quas etiam ab huius voluminis corpore prorsus vetandas decrevi, quamquam ex eis, si in manus cum integritate venissent, superiorum bellorum, que cum Teucris stante fortuna acta sunt, felices plurimos eventus, preterea varie rotatum deinceps statum regni recte potuisse concipi non dubito. Sed forte iam modum epistole transgredi videor, dum in calamum tuo stimulo concitatum plurima occurrentia irruunt impinguntque. In eius tamen calce hanc unam tibi condicionem edici perferas, ut volumen hoc intra private leccionis terminos fido custode communias, ne per te foras migrandi fores facile inveniat, neve eorum prostituatur examini, apud quos studia nostra optaremus conferre libencius quam preferre. Parum enim nostra interfuit, ut in hiis epistolis decori studeremus, seu in eorum numerum ambiremus conscendere, qui pro more institutionis scolasticae verbis labrisque inter se velitantes, arti magis, quam opportunitati operam dedunt. A nobis vero in hoc ordine agendi ita institutum fuit, ut in opera nostra necessitati nihil desit, nihil arrogetur arti, nihil denique nitori conferatur. Vale.* Epistolarium 2, BORONKAI 1980. 39–40.

⁸³ Their numbers in the textual edition are (BORONKAI 1980): No. 20, 72, 74, 75, 76; all are available in Hungarian in Iván Boronkai's translation (BORONKAI 1987), where they have the following numbers: (20=) 11, (72=) 43, (74=) 44, (75=) 45, (76=) 46.



48. János Vitéz's tomb stone destroyed in the 16th century
 Nineteenth-century etching reflecting the state before restoration
 Mathes, Johannes: *Veteris arcis Strigoniensis ... descriptio*. Strigonii, 1827.