

## Epistolary Writing: From Divine Gift to Literary Creation

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### Abstract

*In the movement of human thought, there are two dimensions that affect and influence each other: one reflects the features of mental function, which deals with material reality in analysis, conclusions, and impact. The second function is symbolic, by which a person reaches his imagination, goes beyond his senses, and opens up to everything that is amazing and extraordinary. No matter how much we achieve in scientific progress, a symbolic horizon is still necessary in order to overcome the conditions of doubt, suspicion, and boredom, and achieve a balance between scientific knowledge and imagination, restriction and absolute, and mundane and sacred. Within a host argument, the symbol is renewed and imagination is enriched. There are many manifestations of this meeting between the mundane and the religious in Arabic literature, and this is the relationship between literature and the sacred that stands out to us. It is therefore evident that epistolary literature, being an ancient literary genre, is similar to the sacred in that it quotes the sacred as the formative conditions of its sender and message. The research used the comparative approach and the descriptive analytical approach to reveal the manifestations of this similarity, its limitations, and the extent of its ability to enrich the literature of epistolary. It has been concluded from all this that when the epistolary was opened to the sacred world, it recalled most of its religious loads and gave it the literary message until it was raised, among the ancient epistolaries, to the rank of the sacred message in form and content.*

**Keywords:** Sacred, Earthly, Epistolary, Literature.

### Introduction

«يَرْجِعُونَ مَادًّا فَائْتَرُ عَنْهُمْ تَوَلَّى تُمَّ إِلَيْهِمْ فَآلَقَهُ هَذَا بِكِتَابِي أَذْهَبُ»

{*Sūrat un-Naml* (25): 28}

Ancient peoples knew epistolary writing and used it to manage their affairs. Inscriptions, historical manuscripts, and the notes of travellers and historians all indicate the interest of ancient peoples in epistolary writing and their keenness to develop it. The Chinese Empire in the Middle Ages for instance relied on epistolary writing to disseminate Confucian ideas and affirm the rituals of preserving social hierarchy. Such writings appeared in booklet form that defined relationships and etiquette among members of society and reinforced the concept of ‘the imperial citizen’. Epistolary novels, along with memoirs, were the prevailing narrative structure in eighteenth-century Europe. However, curiously, there is a scarcity of studies focused on its artistic features and semiotic performance.

Arabic prose also contains epistolary texts that fulfilled its tendency toward literary formation. Undoubtedly, when Islam began, its need for communication with distant tribes and peoples compelled Muslims at that time to pay attention to epistolary writing by establishing the *Dīwān al-Rasā’il* [the Bureau of Letters], which was the first bureau instituted in Islam. This transformed epistolary writing into a craft with two dimensions: a literary dimension and also a sacred, faith-based dimension. This study focuses on examining how the sacred influenced the form and content of epistolary literature. Methodologically, it draws on a comparative approach to identify the boundaries of sacred influence and a descriptive analytical approach to uncover the manifestations of that influence and its artistic and semantic functions.

The research is divided into three chapters:

The first discusses the art of epistolary writing

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The second deals with the conditions of epistolary writing

While the third explores the manifestations of its sanctity.

This study has drawn upon research related to this subject, such as the work *as-Rasā'il al-Adabiyyah min al-Qarn al-Thālith ilā'l-Qarn al-Khāmis li'l-Hijrah* [Literary Letters from the Third to the Fifth Hijri Centuries] by researcher Ṣāliḥ ibn Ramaḍān. That study aims to trace the artistic features of literary letters, uncover the civilizational and cultural factors that gave them their high poetic quality, and highlight the sources that paved the way for the emergence of epistolary writing and enriched the form and content of letters. Despite the significance of that historical and artistic research on epistolary writing, it confines its inquiry to affirming the creative, aesthetic dimension of letters without examining the connection between epistolary writing and the new religion or the influence of its sacred energies that distinguished Arabic epistolary writing from its Western counterpart, which preceded it historically.

### *Literary Epistolary Writing*

Epistolary writing (*tarassul*) has settled into the Arabic prose canon with two definitions: linguistic and terminological. Linguistically, the root (ر،س،ل) indicates 'slowness', 'gentleness', and 'understanding' on one hand and 'verification' and 'certainty' on the other, as cited by Ibn Janbah and quoted by Ibn Manẓūr in *Lisān al-'Arab*:

At-Tarassul in speech means 'dignity', 'understanding', and 'gentleness' without raising one's voice too loudly... 'at-tarassul' is like 'ar-risl', and 'tarassul' in reading and 'tarsil' is one and the same; it is verification without haste.

As for its terminological definition, 'tarassul' refers to the repeated composition of letters. Some believe that Ibn Wahb al-Kātib (d. 335 AH) was the first to establish the term 'tarassul' as a literary concept in his work *al-Burhān fī Wujūh il-Bayān* [The Proof, on the Aspects of Elocution]. There he mentions the verb "tarassala" and its derivations, saying:

I tarassaltu, I yutarassalu, tarassulan (I wrote letters repeatedly—I am an epistolary writer—and the noun is tarassul)

Adding:

and the original derivation is that it is speech sent to someone who is far away, so a name for it was derived from that: 'tarassul' and 'risālah'.

Then he explains the difference between 'tarassul' and 'irsāl' [sending a single letter], clarifying that tarassul, is only said of someone who repeats his activity in composing letters, whereas one who does it only once is said to have sent (*arsala*) a letter—he is a *mursal*.

What Ibn Manẓūr stated about the meanings of the root (ر،س،ل) includes references to the repetitive quality that Ibn Wahb mentions in the act of tarassul. The first appears in the phrase: "and it is some of it following upon some," and the second in the example he gives: "they sent their camels to the water in groups," meaning the repeated act of sending in successive waves. Ṣāliḥ ibn Ramaḍān in his research clarifies Ibn Wahb's statement on repetition, saying the word 'repetition' implies:

The epistolary writer's acquisition of writing conventions, along with his production of multiple literary works that together constitute the epistolary genre (*Le Genre Epistolaire*). Thus, tarassul and mutarassil represent a level beyond *irsāl* and *mursal*, or an expansion and intensification of the original act derived from the root (ر،س،ل). Also, tarassul combines the idea of repeatedly writing letters with exchanging them.

*The History of Epistolary Art*

Epistolary writing, in its communicative function, was present in ancient cultures. We find inscriptions, historical manuscripts, and the notes of travellers and historians that point to the concept of letters and epistolary writing among these peoples.

Its forms and styles continued to develop with the development of written communication and the arts of prose letters.

This was until it became a recognized literary craft in those cultures, particularly within the sphere of composition—

which stands at the pinnacle of these arts [i.e., literary arts], for it is their authority and the very ‘apple of their eye.’ Kings turn only to it and rely on it in significant matters, and they hold in high esteem its practitioners and draw them close. Thus, its ally is ever worthy of precedence, reverence and honour.

Aware of epistolary writing’s importance, ancient peoples chose promising children from among their offspring and tasked an accomplished master of epistolary writing to train them in the art of composing letters, so that they would later be ready to fulfil its responsibilities when needed. For example,

the Persian kings, due to the lofty rank of [epistolary] writing in their eyes, gathered the young aspirants to government service and ordered the heads of the scribes to test them. Whomever was approved would be retained at the court and enlisted.

Indeed, the corpus of Arabic prose—both literary and historical—confirms the existence of epistolary writing since the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him). The *Dīwān al-Rasā’il* was established first in Islam, where the Prophet (peace be upon him)—as is related—sent letters to the kings and rulers of the earth inviting them to Islam. He was assisted by Abū Bakr as-Ṣiddīq, ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and others, numbering more than thirty scribes.

Parallel to the Prophet’s letters, other forms of correspondence existed, such as poetic and literary letters written for particular socio-cultural occasions. Most scholars of this literary art maintain that Mu‘āwiyah ibn Abī Sufyān (d. 60 AH), at a time when the affairs of the Islamic state had greatly expanded and its needs had diversified and its territories widened, founded the *Dīwān al-Rasā’il* and entrusted it with composing letters to his governors and army commanders. During the Umayyad era, many skilled writers excelled in epistolary prose, mastering its forms and contents to the point of artistic creativity, such as ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132 AH), who supervised the correspondence bureau of Marwān ibn Muḥammad, the last Umayyad caliph.

With the advent of the Abbasid period, interest in epistolary writing increased due to the civilizational development that the Abbasid state witnessed, especially in the third and fourth hijri centuries. Rules were established to govern its formal, artistic, and communicative features, and it proliferated,

within government bureaus to serve caliphs, ministers, governors, and administrators in various high positions of the caliphate and society.

As a result, epistolary writing acquired a lofty status in cultural and political life that endured until the end of Islamic rule, thereby establishing artistic and thematic requirements—some concerning the epistolary writer, others the letter itself—all of which were connected to the religious sphere, imitating and drawing from it.

## Conditions of the Epistolary Writer

The growing role of epistolary writers in the political and cultural life of the Arab-Islamic civilization, their elevated status in the bureaus of caliphs, ministers, and emirs, their frequent practice of this literary art, and their transformation of it into an occupation that managed all affairs of state—were all which factors collectively led to the crystallization of general conditions that became the hallmark of a skilled epistolary writer and a means to attaining a prestigious position in his social milieu. This is why some described the epistolary writer, or the writer of *inshā'*, as the “guiding spirit” governing all human faculties.

In defining these qualities that an epistolary writer must possess and the conditions that must guide him in his work, we relied on the opinions of the masters and critics of this art, such as 'Abd al-Ḥamīd al-Kātib (d. 132 AH) in his message to the scribes; Ibn Wahb in *Al-Burhān fī Wujūh al-Bayān*; al-Kalā'ī (d. 545 AH) in *Iḥkām Ṣan'at al-Kalām fī Funūn al-Nathr wa Madhāhibihi fī'l-Mashriq wa'l-Andalus*; Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī in *Ḥusn at-Tawassul ilā Ṣan'at at-Tarassul*; al-Qalqashandī in *Ṣubḥ al-A'shā fī's-Ṣinā'at al-Inshā'*, and many others.

We find that al-Qalqashandī, in enumerating the attributes required of an epistolary writer, drew from what previous authorities on the craft had written, and perhaps he added some of his own observations. He finally concluded with ten attributes that he deemed necessary for anyone entrusted with this profession. They are detailed as follows:

**Islam:** This attribute must be present in every epistolary writer “so that trust will be placed in everything he writes or dictates and so that he is relied upon in everything he omits or does, for he is the kingdom’s tongue.” Being male: Al-Qalqashandī is unique in mentioning this, basing it on the requirement that the clerk (*kātib*) of a judge be male, according to the Shāfi'ī school of law. He says, “Our Shāfi'ī scholars have stated clearly that a judge’s clerk must be a man. If that is required of a judge’s clerk, then it is even more appropriate for the sultan’s clerk, given the wider scope of benefit.”

**Freedom:** The epistolary writer must not be owned as a slave. Al-Qalqashandī bases this on again applying the same conditions that apply to a judge’s clerk: “They stipulated that a judge’s clerk be free, because a slave is deficient and thus cannot be relied upon in all matters nor fully trusted at all times. The same applies to the sultan’s clerk, indeed more so, as already mentioned.”

**Legal Capacity (Taklīf):** Al-Qalqashandī states, “As with a judge’s clerk, a minor cannot be relied upon in writing, as he is neither trustworthy nor dependable.”

**Credibility ('Adālah):** This is a fifth condition upon which al-Qalqashandī insists. “A transgressor cannot serve as a writer, for it is a lofty position of tremendous importance that decides people’s lives and wealth. If he were to add even a single word, omit a trivial letter, conceal something he knew, interpret a word contrary to its meaning, or twist it from its intended purpose, it could lead to harming someone undeserving of harm or benefiting one who should be harmed.”

**Eloquence:** This quality ensures that “he [the writer] stands at the highest rank and loftiest station, for he is the sultan’s tongue and his hand that writes on his behalf. Many a skilful writer has achieved his goal with his pen alone, dispensing with armies, for he wielded the pen and so did not need to employ swords.”

**Sound intellect and firm judgment:** This is the seventh attribute, for “intellect is the foundation of virtues and the source of all merits; a person who lacks intellect cannot be of benefit.”

**Knowledge of religious rulings and literary arts:** “An ignorant person cannot distinguish truth from falsehood nor possess the learning that would guide him to the appropriate methods in writing.”

Resoluteness, ambition, and honour: These are qualities that the epistolary writer must appreciate because “every writer is naturally drawn in his writing toward what appeals to his own temperament, inherent disposition, and moral character.”

Competence in his assigned tasks: Al-Qalqashandī explains, “An incapable individual brings harm to the realm and weakens the affairs of the Muslims.”

What clearly emerges from these qualities and conditions is that they all rest on Islamic values such as faith, sincerity, truthfulness, trustworthiness, freedom, and mastery of Arabic. As we shall see below, these values elevate epistolary writing to a domain of the forbidden (*muḥarram*) and inviolable (*majāl al-mamnūʿ*) and the revered, collectively establishing its sanctity. These attributes fall under the category of “non-physical” aspects of the epistolary writer’s person; they do not concern his physical appearance or outward form. The recipient of the letter is interested only in its content as it relates to the psychological, social, or political state of its writer at the moment of composition, since the latter remains unseen.

### *Descriptions of the Letter and Its Pillars*

The results of our research into the literary letters that compose the epistolary corpus in Arabic prose confirm that those letters drew their semantic and formal content from the various literary arts of their time—narration, exemplification, oration, and others—so much so that letters,

were among the most flourishing Arabic prose literary forms in ancient eras, receiving special artistic attention from the Arabs. They were like mirrors, truly faithful in reflecting lively images of those eras and accurately imprinting upon themselves its diverse artistic currents.

Perhaps this is why the letter took on a narrative dimension in that it is grounded in reporting (*ikhbār*), the desire to describe, and the mention of settings and the individuals involved therein. For each letter:

There are certain matters the writer organizes: narrating some situation of an enemy or hunting scene, or praise and commendation, or a comparison between two things, or any other topic of a similar nature. They are called letters because a literarily skilled composer might send them to someone else, informing him of the reality of the situation, beginning in the style of epistolary greetings and then expanding with preambles and more.

Through this narrative shape, the letter acquired its stylistic features, which gave it a distinctive literary form that set the criteria for both the writer and the text. Ibn Wahb notes some of these conditions in his aforementioned book, including:

That the orator or epistolary writer knows when and how to deliver his speech and whether his audience can handle it—never employing brevity where length is called for, lest he fail to achieve his purpose, nor employing length where brevity is needed, lest he bore and exhaust his readers; never using the language of the elite to address the general public nor the language of kings to address commoners, but rather giving each group speech suited to their station and measured by their worth.

Meanwhile, the requirements for composing a letter vary from author to author. Yet from what has come down to us regarding its descriptions—and what we have discerned of its structural elements—one can conclude that letters include a set of commonly shared pillars. Some concern the narrative content (the “adventure”), while others concern the style in which that content is presented (the “discourse”), all following a known order that contributed to the development of epistolary writing and preserved its artistic unity. Scholars of epistolary writing have classified literary letters by their communicative function into three categories, yet they differ in defining the nature of each category. These categories are as follows:

The first category includes letters for purely creative (*inshāʿī*) purposes, which are the fruit of the epistolary craft and were seen by earlier scholars as one of the major types of prose writing. The second category consists of letters with educational, cultural, or critical purposes, classified by literary historians as part of

authored prose. The third category involves letters set within narrative contexts, which critics have completely overlooked. This category includes letters with a narrative function, forming part of the narrative genre as a particular style of dialogue among the story's characters.

Some researchers see correspondence (*mukātabah*) or epistolary writing as an art of composition (*inshā'*), on the grounds that it is a craft based on addressing the absent with the pen's voice, as stated by Aḥmad al-Hāshimī:

Its benefits are too numerous to list since it is the interpreter of the mind, the deputy of the absent person in attaining his aims and the bond of fellowship even across great distances. The approach to correspondence is that of eloquent discourse, taking into account the situations of both the writer and the recipient, and the relationship between them.

Al-Hāshimī divides letters, based on their subject matter, into three categories: domestic (*ahliyyah*), circulated (*mutadāwalah*), and scholarly (*'ilmiyyah*) letters. What is most pertinent to our research is his definition of 'domestic letters', also called "letters of longing," which include:

Letters exchanged among relatives and friends, revealing hidden affection and the heart's secrets. There is no constraint on the writer's freedom in discussing his personal affairs, nor is there any objection to inquiring discreetly about the circumstances of his friends. These letters are characterized by allowing the writer free rein, avoiding excessive formality, and refraining from restraint.

From al-Hāshimī's observations on letters, we gather that each letter has two structures: a narrative structure and a discursive (*khitābī*) one, which we shall return to in the next two sections of this chapter. Al-Hāshimī further subdivides domestic letters into fifteen topics: letters of longing; letters of acquaintance before meeting; letters of gifts; letters of appeal and apology; letters of polite repayment and requests; letters of gratitude; letters of advice and consultation; letters of blame and reproach; letters of complaint; letters of visitation (*'iyādah*); letters of congratulations; letters of condolence and eulogy; response letters; letters of wills and intercessions; and finally letters of denial and repudiation.

Despite the differences in letter types, in *Iḥkām Ṣan'at al-Kalām* we find al-Kalā'ī (one of the most famous epistolary writers) emphasising a set of formal elements that helped build the letter, forming its established pillars. These elements give the letter the attribute of belonging to the genre of "fine speech," paralleling poetry in its beauty and eloquence. They are stable structural components that, during al-Kalā'ī's era, no commendable letter was without, namely:

The Basmalah: Opening in the Name of God, followed by praising Him and invoking blessings upon His Messenger. This is the religious element in the letter.

The Opening (*Istiftāḥ*): Its phrasing is chosen according to the recipient's status, and it is composed in a manner that invites goodwill. Then the writer mentions the recipient's name, epithet, or title. Al-Kalā'ī notes that writers differ in how they phrase this opening: "I examined the forms of letters and their openings, and I found that they vary."

The Body of the Letter (Subject): Introduced by the phrase "*ammā ba'd*" ["to proceed"], which directs the recipient's attention to the main content. There the sender presents and details the letter's topic or purpose.

The Supplication (*Du'ā'*): This transitions the letter from its central aim to its conclusion. It is required that the sender's supplication be devoted to the recipient. "He should aim for pleasing phrases and appropriate meanings, choosing what fits the situation, matches the content, and suits the addressee."

The Conclusion: The letter ends with a benevolent invocation that comforts the addressee, followed by the formal greeting (*taslīm*), which al-Kalā'ī deems a recommended constant. Then, the date of writing is recorded by month, indicating the letter's completion.

Because epistolary writing is a literary genre that falls under “fine speech,” following Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī’s (d. 395 AH) classification of eloquent discourse—which includes letters, poetry, and oration—it occupies a noteworthy position in Arabic prose, prompting authors and critics to focus on its craft. Over time, most came to view it as a narrative genre with a transcendental character surpassing ordinary spoken language in both style and function, and it came into contact with religious texts, as the next section will demonstrate.

### *The Sanctity of Epistolary Writing*

Our discussions in the first three sections of this study have led us to define the concept of the sacred, in which various manifestations of sanctity converge for objects and beings. All point to it as a notion humans assign to particular socio-political-cultural elements connected with religion, thereby placing them within a sphere of prohibition, taboo, and inviolability. Undoubtedly, the structuring of epistolary writing through the establishment of its functions and the specification of its writers’ qualities—and their correlation with the Qur’ān and the Prophetic ḥadīth in terms of imitation and appropriation—has endowed this art with sanctity. We find abundant evidence for this sanctity in literary and religious references, as well as in the writings of epistolary writers themselves.

One example is how some of the sources we have consulted compare the literary letter to the divine message. Both, they note, merited recording in written form, unlike other forms of speech at the dawn of Islam. At that time, the literary letter was vested with a transcendent aura that prevented it from being violated. For instance, it is reported from Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68 AH), and mentioned by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 392 AH) in *Taqyīd al-‘Ilm*, that if a man came to him carrying a question on behalf of another person about a legal matter and asked him to write the answer down, Ibn ‘Abbās would reply: “Tell your companion that the ruling is such and such, for we do not write anything on paper except letters and the Qur’ān.”

For some scholars, epistolary writing is a divine gift from God, selecting whomever He wills of His servants to practice it, resembling the revelation (waḥy) that God entrusts to His prophets alone. Al-Qalqashandī states in *Ṣubḥ al-A‘shā*, in praise of epistolary writing above other literary arts:

Yet it has come in the place of inspiration and sign, tending toward conciseness, contenting itself with hints rather than elaborate explanation, thus making it all-the-more elusive.

In the same vein, al-Kalā‘ī affirms that epistolary writing is a noble craft of elevated status, calling on epistolary writers to remain pure from defilement in its practice and to be protected from perpetrating any ignominy therein, since,

it is incumbent on the one whom God has endowed with this virtue, granted a lofty station, taught him the forms of oration, and guided him in the arts of writing, to purify it from base deeds.

Since the literary letter rises to the rank of the divine message, protecting its composition from distortion becomes mandatory—a task that al-Qalqashandī sought to uphold in the introduction of his book. Accordingly, he endeavoured to guard it from anything that might undermine its sanctity or strip away its sacred nature, dedicating a chapter to:

defining its terms with letters so as not to allow for alteration or corruption.

Al-Qalqashandī does not conceal his belief in the sanctity of epistolary writing in terms of its social, cultural, and political roles, considering it the highest aim and noblest position, a rank equal to the caliphate itself. He calls it,

the most honourable position in the world after the caliphate; all virtues culminate in it, and all aspirations end at it.

Since letters and epistolary writing in general bear an analogy to the messages of the prophets and possess their features of sanctity, that sanctity also extends to its practitioners, just as prophetic messages extend their sanctity to the prophets who convey them. We find hints of this in references that mention certain epistolary writers of the prophets who themselves became prophets, as al-Qalqashandī says:

Historians mention that Yūsuf [Joseph], peace be upon him, was a writer for al-‘Azīz, and that Hārūn [Aaron] and Yūsha‘ ibn Nūn [Joshua] wrote for Mūsā [Moses], peace be upon him, and that Sulaymān ibn Dāwūd [Solomon, son of David] wrote for his father, while Āṣif ibn Barkhiyā and Yūsuf ibn ‘Anqā’ wrote for Sulaymān, peace be upon him, and Yaḥyā ibn Zakariyyā (John the Baptist, son of Zechariah) wrote for al-Masīḥ (the Messiah), peace be upon him.

Although this claim lacks supporting chains of transmission, it reveals al-Qalqashandī’s desire to reinforce the sanctity of epistolary writing. Indeed, by requiring that an epistolary writer be Muslim (as discussed earlier), al-Qalqashandī underscores that epistolary writers, too, share in this sanctity. He explains that the first attribute necessary for any epistolary writer is being Muslim so that,

he may be trusted in what he writes and dictates, and relied upon in what he omits or does.

Along with requiring the writer to be Muslim, al-Qalqashandī adds moral probity, that is, avoiding,

anything dubious, maintaining purity from it, for such acts incur God’s wrath and strip a person of his dignity.

Moreover, for al-Qalqashandī, the most vital quality of an epistolary writer is secrecy [‘kitmān al-sirr’]. Secrecy is the spirit of the letter. If the writer reveals the letter’s secrets, he breaches the conditions of his craft, undermining it and losing his eligibility to continue writing. The term “Dīwān al-Inshā’” itself is also called “Dīwān al-Sirr” [the Bureau of Confidential Matters], indicating that the substance of this craft is secrets, and its essence is concealment. Whoever preserves the trust of a letter’s secret thereby preserves the honour of his profession. Al-Qalqashandī writes that among the epistolary writer’s traits is,

keeping secrets, which is one of the finest manners of dealing with a sultan or others and among the most certain paths to success for its possessor. Infiltrations that destabilize states generally arise from the negligence of the sultan’s intimates in handling confidential information and their disclosing the intentions and decisions of rulers before the rulers make them known. In doing so, they give the enemy an opening to counter these plans with measures that undo them. Furthermore, revealing secrets is an attribute most people are naturally inclined toward and are unable to stop. Anyone who knows himself to be so disposed must avoid serving the sultan in his confidences and internal affairs, especially with regard to his wars and stratagems, because if his betrayal of secrecy becomes known, he will face destruction.

Among the most significant works on epistolary writing, which provides a lofty vision that elevates it to near-sacred status, is Shihāb al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Ḥalabī’s *Ḥusn at-Tawassul ilā Ṣan‘at at-Tarassul*. Al-Ḥalabī served in correspondence bureaus in both the Levant [Shām] and Egypt for fifty years. In this book *حُسن التوسل صداعة إلى التوسل*, he sets out a vision of epistolary writing and the conditions of its realization, founded on a set of qualities the epistolary writer must possess lest he merely adopt the outward form of a scribe without acquiring the deeper essence of this art. He states:

Since God has made epistolary writing (inshā’) my livelihood, I have undertaken positions in its service and through it I have associated with its greatest masters and leading practitioners, seeing their methods in its styles, observing with my own eyes what I have observed, and hearing through close contact and conversation what I have heard of its rules. I have immersed myself in it day by day with the variety of events and faced its countless challenges. Some of my sons have pursued it, and I was not satisfied with them merely wearing its outward appearance without acquiring its true meaning. So I wished to place before them—and those interested in it—these pages, laying out its essential principles in separate sections and

supporting them with evidence on what is indispensable of its fundamentals and branches, so that they might approach this craft through its proper entrances.

We quote this passage at length because it illustrates a vision in which the official epistolary letter (in the *Dīwān al-Inshā'*) parallels the divine message in many aspects of sanctity already noted. It is as if epistolary writing has become the writer's personal way of life and primary commitment, not to be forsaken lest he lose his worldly life. Indeed, for al-Ḥalabī, epistolary writing transcends a mere human activity subject to error. It becomes a domain protected from violation, a field in which infringing upon its rules is forbidden. He employs religious terminology to liken its stages of composition to the stages of transmitting heavenly revelation to humanity. We see him use words such as Allāh ['God'], A'immaḥ ['Imāms'], madhāhib ['paths'], ṭarā'iq [methods], uṣūl ['fundamentals'], furū' ['branches'], and riwāyah ['narration']. We may summarize these points as follows:

Epistolary writing is a domain that has its own Imāms and scholars who take it upon themselves to guide people to it and point them to its proper path. Al-Ḥalabī says, "...and through it I have associated with its greatest masters and leading practitioners."

For epistolary writing to continue through time, al-Ḥalabī urges the epistolary writer to study the arts and forms of this literature and how it developed under previous masters—by closely examining earlier letters and understanding how those writers selected vocabulary and developed compositional methods. The fledgling writer may begin by imitating those letters until increased exposure bolsters his ability to excel in his craft, echoing "and hearing through close contact and conversation what I have heard."

Al-Ḥalabī indicates the diversity of epistolary writing's artistic styles, observing that "I have seen their methods in its styles, observing with my own eyes what I have observed," which contributed to the growth of various epistolary "schools," each with its own intellectual orientations and stylistic perspectives.

As epistolary writing's styles proliferated and its uses expanded, writers found themselves compelled to practice *ijtihād* [independent reasoning] in the craft to address newly arising cultural and political contexts involving unfamiliar subject matter. Al-Ḥalabī points to this when he states, "and I have immersed myself in it... with the variety of events and faced its countless challenges."

Al-Ḥalabī further emphasizes that epistolary writing is not merely an honorary role; instead, it is a dignified station requiring anyone who holds it to grasp its honourable meaning, coupling sincerity in its practice with devotion to it, as well as reconciling outward form with deeper significance. Hence his statement, "I was not satisfied with them merely wearing its outward appearance without acquiring its true meaning."

Al-Ḥalabī thus divides his vision of epistolary writing in the *Dīwān al-Inshā'* into two parts: one focusing on epistolary writing as a literary art with its own stylistic and aesthetic approaches, and the other on the epistolary writer and the moral and behavioural guidelines he must uphold. He addresses the reasons behind epistolary writing's emergence, the imperative of believing in it, the explanation of its rules, the defined limits of *ijtihād* in it, the description of those who believe in it, the necessity that they know how to transmit its traditions with their proper *asānīd* [chains of transmission], as well as sincerity in practicing it and devotion to it by not violating its secrets. In enumerating the various methods and challenges of epistolary writing, he also underscores its "sanctity," in that it has ancient roots in written composition, relies on artistic and behavioural requirements (these being its "methods" and "styles"), has devotees keen on transmitting its arts to their followers, rests on a principle of creative reasoning in its branches without altering its fundamentals, and is inviolable, protected against distortion or corruption.

Having examined the manifestations of sanctity in this literary art among several of its masters, we must now consider how that sanctity appears in the novelistic realm and how it enriches narrative art in form and style, removed from the confusion that beset many epistolary-writing scholars who equated the message's discourse with historical reality. Such scholars,

deemed official (dīwānī) letters historical documents capable of replacing historical texts, failing to recognize that narrating events involves the imitation of events and utterances, crafted into a story in which the writer carefully selects narrative actions, arranges them, and constructs the characters according to a specific vision.

Indeed, the conditions of the epistolary writer and the conditions of a letter suggest a “specific vision” of letter-writing that exhibits formal elements akin to the narrative structure in novels—a robust storytelling dimension.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, after examining some manifestations of the sanctity of epistolary writing among several of its masters, we can assert that the connection of epistolary writing to religion endows it with creative energies and facilitates the attainment of its discursive objectives. Perhaps describing epistolary writing as ‘sacred’ makes it easier to examine how this sanctity is manifested in the novelistic space, where authors employ epistolary writing as a narrative device, and to assess how its sanctity enriches narrative art and content. This approach diverges from that of most scholars of this literary genre who mistakenly conflate the message’s discourse with historical reality. They,

have considered official letters historical documents that may substitute for historical texts, without appreciating that narrating events is an imitation of them and of spoken utterances. Those events and utterances are then shaped into a narrative in which the writer is keen to select its narrative actions, arrange them, and build its characters in line with a particular vision.

Indeed, the conditions of the epistolary writer and the conditions of a letter suggest a “particular vision” of composing a letter that renders it a narrative work akin in composition to the structure of the adventure in novels, incorporating artistic elements that are highly reminiscent of narrative discourse.

We can summarize the study’s findings and recommendations as follows:

## Findings of this Study

- The connection of epistolary writing to religion bestows upon it a strength in building and realizing discursive objectives, enhancing its effectiveness as a narrative tool.
- Analysing older literary letters can reveal the sanctity of epistolary writing in novelistic narratives and how it influences the enrichment of narrative art and content—apart from conflating letters as historical documents with factual reality.
- A literary letter has its own artistic and intellectual vision, turning it into a narrative work that contains artistic elements close to narrative discourse in novels, where events are ordered and characters chosen according to that vision.

## Recommendations

- The study recommends broadening research on the development of epistolary writing across various Islamic eras and exploring its impact on other literary forms.
- The art of epistolary writing should be taught to students for its emotional, ethical, and intellectual dimensions.
- Greater awareness should be promoted regarding the importance of epistolary writing in contemporary contexts.

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