

DEALING WITH DANGER: THE PRACTICES OF KEEPING AND DISCARDING MAGICAL LETTERS

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Disposing of a piece of paper with a textual apotropaios might be even more problematic than storing or sharing it. A perfect example is a type of amulet named “heavenly letters”, “luck letters” or “chain letters”. Such a letter is often framed by its owner as an object or sacred/magic artifact which can act and produce non-beneficial effect on its own, without any human agency: one does not necessarily need to read or otherwise handle a luck letter to receive *bad* luck, while to receive *good* luck certain actions must be undertaken. Most often bad luck or a curse affects those who ignore or neglect a luck letter, and some of the later examples of this genre define at length different punishments for those who tear it or throw it away. Finding themselves in this situation, people turn to contemporary traditions of discarding sacred or malign artifacts. However, people often choose an intermediate strategy of giving a letter away, taking it to a specialist or discreetly passing it to a neighbor. The latter case is considered a malign magical activity. The intertwining between a luck letter as an autonomous force with a potential negative effect, “lay” senders and receivers and “specialists”, all bound together with the problem of discarding a magical object forms a complex and dynamic network of actors.

Keywords: apotropaios, chain letter, framing, heavenly letter, textual amulet, written folklore

The context of folklore transmission has been discussed by researchers for decades. The main object of these discussions has been oral folklore, the context being primarily the immediate situation of text (re)production such as social relations of the participants, environment, related activities and rituals. In this paradigm, the verbal component of the assemblage is considered to be the one shaping the interaction. Yet there are a large number of folklore genres where

verbal, visual, artifactual codes are so entangled that it can be difficult to say which of them is the leading one.

One of the most immediate examples is the genre of written charms, which function both as magical texts and protective artifacts (though the text seems to be the leading component, the charm can still be used as a *apotropaia* by an illiterate person who is not able to “activate” it). Another widely spread folklore form is the chain letter. These letters are programmed to circulate while retaining key elements of the text: many of them contain an explicit instruction not to change anything within the text, and all of them require the receiver to maintain the line of transmission in a certain way – that is, to copy the verbal text (sometimes illustrated) a number of times and pass the copies to others.

The requirement to pass on the copies – i.e., operate material objects – defines the artifactual functioning of the genre. If the text is considered sacred or magical, the artifact that carries it often shares its qualities, and this, in turn, defines the mode of interacting with it (keeping, moving, destroying, etc). Conversely, we can hypothesize that if a specific “magical” mode of interaction with an artifact is observed, the text is also considered as having some supernatural power. With a folklore form such as the chain letter which has dramatically changed its pragmatics over the course of its existence, this hypothesis can actually give an answer to the question of its place within the system of folklore at any given historical period. The examination of practices related to the materiality of the text can thus reveal the beliefs and ideas which ensure its very existence and longevity. In order to develop an idea of the chain letter as a genre with magical pragmatics, we will discuss the practices of sharing, keeping and discarding it over the course of a century.

In the early texts preceding the contemporary tradition of chain letters, it was prescribed to keep the text and share it with others and to copy whenever such request is made. This type of text is labeled *Himmelsbriefe*/Letters from Heaven/celestial letters (see Koehler 1912). These are texts which are claimed to be received from heaven. The appeal to copy and circulate them is secondary for this group of texts, although they describe both a profit for the obedient and a punishment for those who fail to meet the prescriptions.

Those who doubt and will neglect the truth of this holy writing... will be punished on the day of Last Judgement; and those who will tell about it will be blessed and cleared of all sins even these are as numerous as stars in the sky... Those who keep the letter piously in their homes, will be blessed, and neither an evil spirit, nor thunder, nor fire, nor plague, nor any other evil will ever touch them (Iosif, archbishop 1864: 73).¹

To a large extent this type of prescription is defined by the type of transmission. “Letters from Heaven” were normally sold by wandering merchants or monks or copied by literate peasants from each other. In contrast with many other charms and amulets, it was considered beneficial to share such letters with others and advocate their magical powers. As a result, the appearance of such letter in one peasant’s household generally led to dissemination of heavenly letters throughout a village.

A heavenly letter was supposed to be kept by its owners and read on certain occasions. In the late 19th century Russian peasants normally followed one of two key practices. Following the first practice, the letter was perceived primarily as an artifact, its textual qualities being ignored. In this case one did not need to read it to prevent the house and its inhabitants from disaster and danger. Hence, the access to the letter could be rather limited, and the sheet itself was kept with sacred objects, normally behind icons:

During pastoral visits to his parish members, an experienced priest notices on the icon shelf a folded piece of paper, and to the hosts’ embarrassment, takes the letter (Znanie 1901: 584).

An indirect sign that the letters were considered as artifacts belonging rather to religious culture than to the area of magical artifacts, is the following evidence of handling it. In one of the villages of Penza region, a clergyman preached that the heavenly letters had no connection with Orthodox religion, contained false information and had, therefore to be burnt – which was a typical practice for destroying evil/magical/heathen objects to purify the space from them. Yet, one peasant woman transformed this prescription: “*Well, my father, do you remember how you spoke about the “Holy Mother’s Dream” and told me to burn it? So did I, and the ashes, so to say, I’ve put in the water, to make it right.*” (Bystrov 1895). By putting the ashes into water she frames the letter as an object with sacral qualities which have to be destroyed in such a way that its remains cannot be desecrated. In the last decade of the 20th century, burning, putting ashes in water and then pouring the water in a “clear” place where nobody walks (or simply burying the ashes in the same place), became a typical practice for dealing with unwanted consecrated objects – from icons to shells of Easter eggs and willow branches which were infused with holy water to any piece of paper with names of God or saints on it.

The extreme form of “artificialization” of a heavenly letter was its usage as a war amulet. Most often the power to protect soldiers was ascribed to the letter type called “Braker Himmelsbrief”, which involves an offer to divert bullets and to stop wounds from bleeding: *wehn das bludet oder sonst bludige wuden hatt, der lege den Brief daruf, das wird das Blut gestillt warden* (Kloberdanz 1988:

44). There are, however, some cases in which the power to protect at war was ascribed to a heavenly letter without such explicit information. One of those is the “Languedoc” letter (Radchenko 2015) which, according to a widely spread belief, was carried by victorious General Skobelev and protected its owner from bullets (Maslovsky 1882: 20).

Being perceived as a personal amulet, a heavenly letter could be kept folded in a pocket, sewn inside clothing, or worn in a piece of cloth over one’s neck. This practice survived till at least World War II. Below are two examples of this practice:

When Anastasia Ivanovna’s brother was sent in 1945 to clear mine fields in the vicinity, on his mother’s demand she copied the texts of the “Sunday prayer” and “God’s letters” in a small booklet 10 to 15 cm. This book her mother put into her son’s pocket. His safe return from this work was likely to support the belief of future healers in the power of “God’s words.” (Loginov 2009: 77).

In Mataev’s war biography there’re plenty of battles. He was wounded a few times. But he stayed alive in this bloodbath. “I was probably saved by the holy letter with a prayer which my mother gave to me when I was leaving. I wrapped it in a piece of cloth and attached it to the inner side of my shirt” – says Vassily Grigorievitch. (Shcherbinina 2012).

In case of emergency, the owners of a letter turned to those who could read it or knew the text by heart to reinforce the power of the amulet. This practice was based on an idea that a heavenly letter is primarily a prayer or a charm which is “activated” by reading it, preferably out loud. The letter which was primarily seen as such a text was either kept inside a prayer book or copied into a hand-written collection of similar texts, which in turn could be kept with other similar objects, e.g. in the box with clothes or cloth prepared for one’s funeral. It could be then taken out and read by a local “man of letters” or female magical specialist on certain occasions, e.g. during childbirth, illness, etc. (Bystrov 1895). The extreme variant of reading to activate the letter appeared in the second half of the 20th century when amulet wearing became a despised practice. It was understood as a practice of uneducated, conservative, and primarily elderly village inhabitants, so while the function of an amulet was not put in question, it could no longer be carried by its owner. In some cases, then, the letter was read over a glass of water, which then was drunk by the one who had to be protected or expected benefits from the letter. This practice changed the military apotropaic practices: “Today, if a letter is found, soldiers and commanders may laugh at it, so texts are read three times on a glass of water to be drunk by the soldier” (Loginov 2007: 76). A similar practice is also

found in the 1970s–2000s as a part of teenage girls' tradition of exchanging chain letters which promised love to the one who sent out a certain number of copies and either just drank some water or burnt the original copy, dissolved the ashes in a glass of water and drank it.

In other words, activation practices of textual amulets could vary from simply keeping it in a prescribed way to reading it out loud in situations when apotropaic power had to be reinforced. On certain occasions, their text could even be alienated from the artifact, which was destroyed and consumed to receive the promised benefits.

Since at least the first quarter of the 19th century, the model begins to change. Roughly in 1830s – 1840s the so-called “Jerusalem prayer” appears, which in the Russian tradition was ascribed to Archbishop Anthony of Voronezh. This type of letter includes a legend in which the Lord's voice is heard miraculously in Jerusalem, a prayer, and a prescription to pass the story and the prayer to nine other persons. The instruction to read or keep it becomes rare (see S-kiy 1905), giving way to another way to activate magical power contained in the letter – copying and transmitting them. It became the base for the formation of the chain letter genre in which this appeal is central, even to the point that in some cases it even displaces the celestial message itself. The letters prescribed to fulfill this instruction in a very limited number of days. Ignoring the letter, it was claimed, would result in danger to the receiver and/or one's family. Since the introduction of this strategy of multiplication of the artifact, the problem of the status of the original copy appeared. The receivers wondered if the original was included in the number of copies to be sent out, was it to be kept at home or discarded. In limited cases the letter included direct instructions on this, e.g. (ZMBOR 1928), but mostly it was left to the imagination of the receiver.

This model of transmission is different from the one typical for heavenly letters in a number of ways. Firstly, in it the receiver did not explicitly have the intention of receiving the letter and with it the responsibility for its proper handling. Heavenly letters were often bought with an intention to protect one's household; chain letters arrived unexpectedly. Secondly, this model requires much more effort from the receiver: one has to find a number of contacts to share the letter with. In 1908, a Syberian edition commented with subtle irony a story of a shop owner who received the prayer with a request to copy it:

The task was simple, but in these remote places it was undoable: with all his effort, the shop owner could not find nine literate persons neither in Ayan, nor in the area. This issue was of great concern for the superstitious shop owner. (Vinogradov 1908: 84).

To ensure that the letter is transmitted in this situation, it started to be enriched with more concrete promises of good and bad luck rather than just a list of possible consequences. In many variants of the “Jerusalem prayer” from 1910s there appears a list of “cases”: information about people who presumably received the letter but failed to follow its prescriptions and were punished. These cases are quite detailed but anonymous: no names of presumed victims of the letter are given:

The “facts” which are supposed to confirm the message, are also given: one inhabitant of Kharkov burnt this prayer and on the ninth day after this his only daughter was killed. Then it is related about some “young wife” in Petersburg who received the prayer, tore it apart and threw away, and on third day found the prayer undamaged on her table – but on this very day her husband was conscripted and went to war (S-kiy 1905: 766).²

The increase in the flow of chain letters in social networks with a limited number of available contacts led to the oversaturation of the social environment with chain letters: the chances that someone will receive the same letter several times from different senders increased significantly. In 1913, poet Alexander Blok writes in his diary: “In the evening I received the prayer which several days ago was received and sent to nine persons by Lyuba”³ (Blok 1963: 206). Within just several days, members of one family have received the prayer twice – and may have received more, since Blok was extremely popular and had a vast number of correspondents. This oversaturation, in its turn, made chain letters more and more unwelcome by the beginning of the 20th century, and sending such a letter could result in certain social consequences. Due to this, people began to spread letters anonymously, sending them without the return address or leaving them at somebody’s door or in a mailbox. An interviewee informed that she avoided social shame by sending letters out to random people: “I’ve sent to various addresses... I knew the street, say, in Tomsk, and so I sent it there to a random house” (Interview 1, F55+, 2013). In other cases, people used the addresses from address books, private advertisements, etc., for the same purpose.

This transformation led to the reframing of chain letters: a paper with a magical text appearing seemingly from nowhere and having no authority of a magical/religious specialist or a relative to advocate its power personally to the receiver began to be perceived not just a nuisance but a danger. It started to be associated with malevolent magical intention to ‘spoil’ someone using an artifact. The text, offering bad luck to those who do not pass the letter to the others, supported this idea. A century later, one of our informants confessed that she would not pass this letter to someone she knew personally, the only

exception was a girl with whom she had quarrelled at school [Interview 2, F30+, Moscow].

The explicit threat described in the prescriptions and examples of chain letters and implicit perceived danger that was generated by the change of transmission mode are, however, only a part of the problem. As was already mentioned above, in the practice of handling chain letters magical danger is combined with very real social danger. In different periods of the tradition's development, this danger could vary from ridicule to repressions by authorities on all levels. In the 1930s, for instance, owning a chain letter was regarded by the authorities as keeping a religious (and hence counter-revolutionary) pamphlet, which, in turn, was a reason to cause legal proceedings on grounds of state treason against its owner, sometimes ending in the death penalty.

Thus, the letter became a double threat, even if one was going to fulfill the prescriptions. In other words, both strategies were understood as dangerous: keeping and transmitting the letter could result in criminal prosecutions; refusal to transmit and destroying it could lead to magical punishment. Before the 1980s this idea was continuously supported by exempla, which passed from the Jerusalem prayer to another text – the letter about a boy who met God:

Holy Letter.

Hail to Father and Son and holy spirit, holy Mother of God. Amen!

A boy of 12 years was ill, he met God. God told him: “copy this letter 22 times and send to various lands”. The boy did this and got better. One family copied the letter and got happiness, another family tore the letter and got grief. This was checked. Copy this letter 22 times and in 36 days you will get happiness and joy. But if you keep the letter for more than 3 weeks, you will get grief. Copying started in 1936.

Note on 36th day. (Author's collection, approx. 1988.)

Despite being non-specific, these exempla proved to be a powerful suggestive instrument. Thus, the campaign against superstitions, which went along the lines of anti-religious campaign, was forced to include some counterbalance to the chain letters' exempla and, more important, threats. Since at least 1960s, the critical press publications on chain letters are filled with “first-hand accounts” about receiving and ignoring chain letters. These texts were presented in the form of “letters to the editor” and included stories of how a particular person or family (names, ages, localities included) received one such letter, how they interpreted it and what happened (or rather, did not happen) to them:

Dear editors! I'm 49 years old and I'm a welder. As you understand, I work with fire, and when I work neither devil nor saint spirit can approach me. I consider myself an atheist and understand that my happiness is in my

own hands. I'm writing this to you because recently I received a chain letter, which says: if I copy it nine times and send to various addressees, I'll get happiness. And if I don't I'll get an incurable illness. Nonsense! I did not write to anybody, but instead I've written to your newspaper: I'm happy to live and work in the Soviet country! When I'm ill – I get cured in good hospitals, I go on vacations to Crimea and Caucasus! So, dear religionists, it won't work with us, you'd better take on some useful job instead of spreading nonsense. (Ivanenko 1983: 4).

This technique of exemplum concretization was then reflected in the chain letter tradition. In the 1980–1990s a new chain letter type appeared, which we will refer to as “The Letter from Holland”. It had a direct answer to the testimonials in the atheistic press – it contained names of people who presumably received it before, and detailed information on outcomes of nonfulfillment of the instructions. The type most probably started as a translation of a text in English, German or Polish, which contained exempla with particular names since at least the 1930s (Anderson 1938: 17).

This letter type very soon adapted to the cultural context. Instead of abstract and often weird names the new subtype of “Holland Letter” includes fake stories about prominent figures of (mainly) Russian history of the 20th century. Notably, all of them are presented as suffering punishment for disobeying the instructions of the letter. Marchall Tukhachevsky presumably burnt a letter and then was arrested and shot; Conan Doyle ignored it and got into an accident, his hands were amputated; Nikita Khrushchev threw it away (sometimes into the toilet) and was cast down by other members of the government; pop singer Alla Pugacheva copied the letter and won a significant contract with an American company.

Two aspects are significant in this list. Firstly, it exploits the knowledge about particular persons and context of Russian history as an authoritative source to support the power of the letter. Secondly, it forms an idea that the letter's “revenge” is symmetrical with the means of destruction of the letter – those who destroy the letter, die; those who ignore it or throw away, are devoid of something – from hands to political position; finally, following the instruction will also result in a very concrete form of luck – receiving an unexpected income.

Being put in this rigid frame, the receivers of the letters become even more concerned with the elimination of danger. Since the destruction of the artifact on which the charm is written means an immediate threat of death, the need appears to find a safer solution to the problem.

A very typical way to deal with chain letters throughout their history in 19th–21st centuries was to consult a local priest and ask him to destroy the

letter (Narodnoye sueverie 1892). Before the revolution, all documented cases of destroying the letter involved a priest. In the Soviet period there are very few such cases, but after 1991, when religious practices again became legitimate, this number is growing again up to almost 50% of documented cases in our database. Interestingly, in the late Soviet period some of the priests confessed that they recommended to ignore and burn these letters, but some used to collect a few of them and pass this collection to a representative of the Council for Religious Affairs⁴ (Lebedev 1988: 11).

Notably, the particular practices of destroying the letter change over time as well. Before 1917 and after 1991 the most common practices were burning or tearing it apart. In the Soviet period the practice, which was propagated was ignoring the letter and throwing it away. In many cases, the way of destroying a letter after consulting a priest differed depending on who was actually destroying it. If a lay person was to do it, he or she was normally recommended to burn the letter (which returns us to the practice of handling sacral objects described above). In a situation when the priest did it, he normally tore the paper apart and in many cases said a short prayer or pronounced a religious formula (which may be a psychological manoeuvre to calm the anxiety of the person who brought the letter, yet proves to be more significant than that):

He took it and saying “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” tore the envelope and threw the pieces into the box with the candle ends. (Konstantinov 2008).

The letter gave me a buzz and I left it as a keepsake. And what do you think? Exactly in four days <time limit of this letter type – DR> I caught a bad cold, while it was +25 degrees Celsius outside! Normally I’m not superstitious. I’m not afraid of black cats and do not look for a trigger to quarrel if I spill the salt. But when you are pregnant you begin to look differently upon things. As for the ill-fated letter, I brought it to the church. The priest destroyed it, spoke a prayer to the Lord and advised not to circulate the letter (which I already thought myself). (Pargina 2002).

This confirms the idea that even when the clergy declines any connection of the chain or heavenly letter to religious texts, the practices of destroying it link the letter to either sacral or evil magical objects. In both cases, the letter is destroyed with obvious intention not just to get rid of it, but also to purge oneself and to disempower the amulet: a lay person does it by burning the letter, a clergyman by reading a prayer before or while tearing it.

The situation changed with the development of electronic communication networks which led to the almost complete extinguishment of paper chain letters. Going virtual, the chain letter obviously loses its artifactual dimension.

This dematerialization of the chain letter leads, on the first stage, to the erosion of its amulet role. At this stage, when the letter is mainly transmitted through email, the tradition does not consider it a problem that the text is saved onto the hard drive or in the “Sent” folder of the electronic mailbox. The instructions in the letter say nothing regarding the operations with the initial letter – the only instruction is not to ignore (i.e., in practice, not to delete it or leave it hanging in the mail list unprocessed) and send it out.

The tradition, however, begins to compensate for the loss. Since the early days of electronic chain letters, the users tended to decorate them with visual imagery, from ASCII-arts to photos. In the 2000s, chain letters in the form of Powerpoint presentations became popular. During the last decade, chain letters became more independent from the addresser. It is often enough to place it on one’s Facebook page (Voolaid 2013) and others would themselves repost it. Most of these texts are presented in a visual form and to a certain extent retain their amulet role. Once again, it becomes important to keep them and allow them to be viewed by others.

The next major change in the practice of handling chain letters is due to the fact that, while retaining its dangerous qualities it also can become a bother when the mailbox becomes full with letters. It can also bring social discomfort for the sender because of this, leading sometimes to consequences for one’s personal relations with friends and relatives and for one’s career. This means that despite state repression, chain letters continue to be a double threat to the receiver – both as a magical danger and a rational threat to one’s comfort and social status. To oppose these, a number of practices have been developed.

The users of these practices claim that the goal of these is just to prevent their contacts from sending them more chain letters; however, the practices also bear traces of reverting bad luck. The easiest options are sending the letter back or sending a number of copies of the same letter to the initial sender. A more exquisite form is sending a parody on chain letters or a parodying menace answer to it:

New game: send me a chain letter and be fucked off my contact list.

Send this message to your 10 friends and in a minute you won’t have 10 friends. If you do not send it in 10 minutes your feet will rot off. And then hands as well. Do not send back because I don’t want my feet to rot off. It’s true. One girl did not believe and died and all her family died and her cat died and her dog also died. And I’ve burnt her house.

In some cases, “anti-chain letter” charms in visual form are placed on personal pages on social network sites to prevent one’s contacts from sharing electronic chain letters with the owner of the page or sent personally. Notably,

the popularity of these forms is dependent on their size: the number of words is inversely proportionate to the average number of publications. Parodies up to 200 words are republished approximately three times less often than cliché menaces with a word count not exceeding 40, and pictures are more popular than word-only menaces.

In almost 200 years of heavenly/chain letter history, these items played a multifaceted set of roles. As a magical text and an artifact at the same time, they can be perceived both as an apotropaic and a dangerous item. In the first case, the text can be alienated from the artifact, but the tradition always returns to the material dimension of a magical letter in some way. The power of the magical letter is contained in this combination of reading and writing words. In cases, when a heavenly letter is stored with sacral objects or amulets, its power can be reinforced by reading it, preferably out loud. In the situation of total dematerialization of the letter in cyberspace, the tradition attempts to put the words into some visual frame to at least imitate the lost artifactual dimension.

The second quality of a heavenly/chain letter is that it can become dangerous – both in magical and social dimensions. In this case, it has to be avoided and if encountered it should be destroyed. Throughout the history of the genres of folklore text, audiences and authorities engage in a complex dialogue of testimonials considering safety/unsafety of discarding the text. In the case of refusal to interact with the artifact, specific practices and specialists are required.

Notably, the changes to the text, sometimes critical, do not affect these two qualities. Any given variant of a chain letter or even a subgenre retains the combination of two dimensions of an assemblage, verbal and artifactual, in which the text not only gives sense to the object and increases its value (for example, a prayer or a relation of a vision makes the letter not just an amulet but a valuable source of religious information, especially when the latter is limited), but also protects the object from destruction. The increase of opposition to chain letters is indirectly reflected in the change of their texts, both the prescriptions and exempla. The object, in turn, ensures the protection and transmission of the text. The danger associated with a magical or sacral object limits the possible ways of handling it: in many cases even the perspective of social risks associated with chain letters do not prevent them from being shared precisely because the profits and dangers of handling the apotropaicos are seen as more immediate and significant, and the counter-measures (be it consulting a priest or a counter-amulet) are perceived as risky, hard to get or unreliable. Seemingly, this combination of relatively flexible and interchangeable texts with fairly rigid practices of handling a magical object has at least partially ensured the survival of the genre through decades of repression by church and state authorities.

NOTES

- ¹ All translations of texts in Russian are made by the author
- ² In 1905, the Russian-Japanese war was being fought, so the threat of the letter was quite immediate.
- ³ Lyubov Dmitrievna Mendeleeva-Blok (1881–1939), the poet’s wife.
- ⁴ A governmental body existing in the Soviet Union from 1965 to 1991, which was engaged into administration of all religious bodies on the territory of the state, with a special focus on the Russian Orthodox Church.

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