

The second of the *Lettere di Giustificazione* written by G. B. Piranesi to Lord Charlemont, translated into English.

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Introduction

The second of Piranesi's three *Lettere di Giustificazione* is dated February 1757, even though the whole booklet was not published until later that year. The second letter is here translated for the first time into English. The translation of the first letter, with an introduction, will be found in «Italogramma» 2014. Piranesi's original paragraphs have been numbered, as for the first letter. The capitalization of words has been kept, along with Piranesi's original note numbers.

The *Lettere* arose from Charlemont's failed patronage of Piranesi's *Le Antichità Romane*, a four volume work published in May 1756. Piranesi's letters to Lord Charlemont provide a unique example of the breakdown in the relationship between a patron and an artist. Charlemont, was aloof, and distant, having left Rome in 1754. He did not respond to Piranesi's requests for 'justice', a word recurrent here as in the first letter.

Piranesi complains bitterly in the second letter, as in the first, about the inadequate support he felt Charlemont was offering him for his lavish publication. In §3 of the second letter we are told that he had spent 840 scudi (today about 42000 euros) on Charlemont's account, and had been offered only 100 scudi in return. It may be remarked here that *Le Antichità Romane* were sold for 15 gold zecchini (about 1500 euros).

Something needing clarification is Piranesi's reference in paragraph 2 to a 'confusion of rank' *confusione fra i ranghi*, and also to 'modesty' *modestia*. Piranesi is hinting at the confusion between his position as an artist and that of a patron like Charlemont. Piranesi means that an aristocrat should think and act in a grand manner, whereas here Charlemont behaves meanly, with *modestia*. In contrast, it is Piranesi who manifests 'magnificenza'. A letter to Charlemont from his agent in Rome, John Parker, dated 22 May 1756 reveals the truth of Piranesi's accusation:

Pyronese [Piranesi] has at last published his 4 vols. of Antiquities, the whole dedicated to my lord Charlemont, and is a very fine work; he has ordered to be bound two sets, to send your lordship. I could not

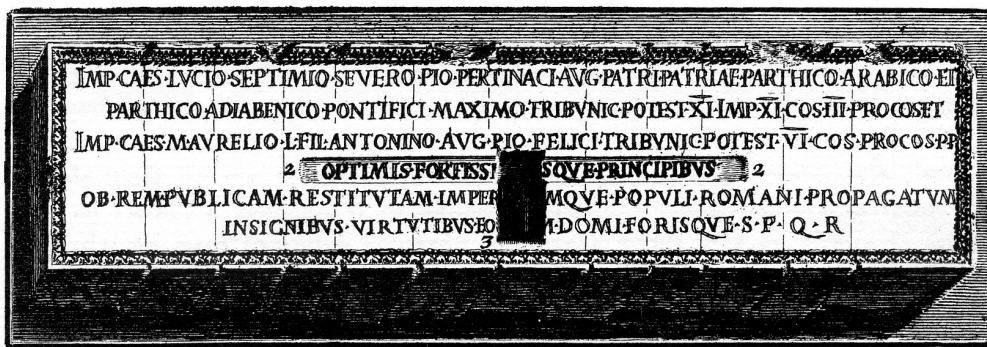
persuade him to send them loose; he would bind them con magnificenza, disse, per mostrare, etc. [Gilbert p. 227]

Piranesi in his second letter is alluding to the contrast between ‘*magnificenza*’, and the modesty of Parker in wanting the volumes unbound. Piranesi also attributes ‘*modestia*’, meanness, to Charlemont, a thing hardly to be expected from a noble lord, whereas Piranesi in this ‘exchange of rank’, takes for himself the magnanimous role.

Another point requiring clarification is Piranesi’s reference to the ‘suspension’ *sospensione* of his four dedications to Lord Charlemont in the volumes of *Le Antichità Romane*. To explain what he means by *sospensione*, Piranesi in note (2) to the letter refers the reader to Plate VII of the *Lettere di Giustificazione*, shown here as Fig. 1. In this Plate the four dedications are grouped together, but now with the text erased. ‘*Suspension*’, therefore, refers to the temporary erasure of the old dedications which, if Charlemont finally decides he does not want, Piranesi intends to replace by new dedications to ‘the Public’, which he considers the ultimate reliable judge of the whole matter (see §1 & 4). Since this apparently temporary ‘*suspension*’ is still visible, one can appreciate how lasting this terrible insult to Charlemont has been. It seems clear that the artist did not expect an answer to this letter, unlike the first one, and that it is mainly addressed to the public, present and future, in order to denigrate Charlemont openly.

As one can see in Piranesi’s Plate VIII (shown here as Fig. 2) the new dedication is addressed to his contemporaries, AEVO SVO, and to future generations, POSTERIS. Therefore, Piranesi had in *Le Antichità Romane*, his first major work, a clear perception of his enduring artistic worth. He was then 36 years old. The words VTILITATI PVBLICAE, to the public benefit, which appear in Plate VIII, are taken, he explains in the caption, from the dedication which Charlemont wanted him to publish, and which Piranesi had criticised in the first letter (§4) for its ‘singular pomp’.

Turning, as always, to the ancient Romans for inspiration, Piranesi shows, in the vignette at the head of his second letter, an example of a *damnatio memoriae*, taken from the Arch of Septimius Severus in Rome. The *damnatio memoriae* in ancient times, consisted in the removal or deletion of everything which could recall a person whose memory was decreed to be forgotten. Piranesi does not use this expression, but this is what is meant by the erasures (see Gavuzzo-Stewart 1999, pp. 112 & 114). Indeed, this vignette, with its caption, summarizes the main substance of the second letter.



Iscrizione dell' Arco di Settimio Severo in Campo Vaccino. 2. Linea donde fu tolto il nome di Geta come si ravvisa dalla scarpellatura fattavi per appianare i cavi, a' quali erano raccomandate le anteriori lettere di metallo. Vi fu poi sostituito il complimento che vi si legge. 3. Forame fattovi dai Moderni

The caption translated reads: *Inscription on the Arch of Septimius Severus in Campo Vaccino. 2. Line whence Geta's name was removed, as one can see from the chiselling intended to smooth the cavities where the previous metal letters had been secured. Their place was later substituted by the complimentary phrase now seen. 3. Hole made in recent times.*

S E C O N D L E T T E R

M I L O R D .

1. The Public, and Your Grace, have seen from my previous letter that six months have elapsed since I found myself forced to give you my word of honour that I would have it printed if You had not granted me justice (1). Since you did not think me worthy of an answer, I find myself in the painful necessity of keeping the promise I gave you, and revealing matters which I would have always kept secret, if my honour, my reputation, and my friends were not obliging me in such an extraordinary case, to resort to publication, which alone can render me justice, either from You, or at least from the Public. Nevertheless, Milord, the little deference still left in me, which perhaps I am not obliged to feel for you, but which the respect I profess towards Your Grace yet requires me to have for you, still makes me wait for your answers, to find out once for all from You yourself your final decision. If this is inadequate to what justice demands for me, you will allow me to have both this letter and the previous one placed at the head of the Work [*Le Antichità Romane*], which is the cause of the whole affair. I have thought it right to temporarily remove the dedications from Copies to be distributed henceforth (2) until Your Grace honours me with an answer, that is to say for a period of three months; because after this deadline I will not expect any further reply; and then according to the kind of answer either favourable or not, I will either leave the dedications the same as they have been up to

now, or I will remove them; and in order not to waste my copper Plates, I will imitate what can be seen on the Arch of Septimius Severus in the line whence Geta's name was removed by order of his brother Caracalla (3), and I shall put instead a complimentary dedication to the Public, that will be both judge and witness of the things which have occurred between our two parties regarding this dedication.

2. Nevertheless, I should be in the dark about my letter having reached you if Mr. Parker had not said publicly that you did not deign to read it. Nevertheless, on the 20th of last January the same Agent summoned my Bookseller and obliged him to leave two Copies of my Work for himself [Parker], with the explanation that You had ordered them to be taken in part payment for the two hundred *scudi* which I owe you. The Public and You already know from my last letter the unsuccessful attempts made by me repeatedly for a long time to persuade your Agent to accept that sum, and to give me back the receipts.

3. Being then firmly resolved not to have any Copy issued with your dedications, I ordered the same Bookseller to return to me the Copies he still had, and those he had given to your Agent, to whom I thought fit to send my lawyer in order to give him back the aforementioned sum of two hundred *scudi*, but he refused to accept them (4) maintaining, nevertheless, that You had ordered him to take from me goods to the value of one hundred *scudi*, and to leave as a present the other warrant for one hundred *scudi* (5). I naively assure You, I did not expect such a thing, because I did not make the dedications to you out of self interest (6); and furthermore it seems to me that this sum is little suitable either to the quality of the one who gives it as a present, or to the reputation of the person who might receive it. Therefore, Milord, if this should be your intention, something that no one could be induced to believe, I beg you to order your Agent not to carry it into effect; because in the end the Public, knowing from the preceding letter the expenses I incurred for Your Grace, and from the present letter the gift which you intend to give me, and making a comparison between the eight hundred and forty *scudi* spent by me on your account, and the one hundred *scudi* which you offer me as a settlement for such expenditure, the Public, I say, would not fail to blame both of us; You for having given me such a present, and me for having accepted it. Indeed this confusion of rank which leaps to the eyes of the reader, cannot avoid persuading him that self interest has led all the steps taken in this issue. Yet, I want to defer about this to your modesty, and also to that of your Agent, who, if he is capable of blushing,

will no doubt feel ashamed of offering in the name of his Master fifty *zecchini* to someone, who at times has rewarded him with one *zecchino* for having served him in dispatching some Copies of the said Work.

4. I am sending to You, Milord, the original copy of a letter by a Foreign Gentleman, whose name you might know, being well acquainted with the London Court, where he has been three times. You will see that he has an entirely good opinion of You, and You will also see the offer he proposes to me of seven hundred *scudi* for the dedication of my Work, in case that the affair, he has heard about, is not settled. But my indifference to my own interest, and the regard that I will always have for You, will never allow me to give the dedication, which I had destined for you, to anyone else, and from now on will make me consider no one else but the Public as the esteemer and approver of my Works; so that I have also abandoned the idea which I mentioned to Your Grace of dedicating the Work in question to a great Prince. Meanwhile, I belong with my greatest respect

MILORD,

TO YOUR GRACE

Rome February 1757

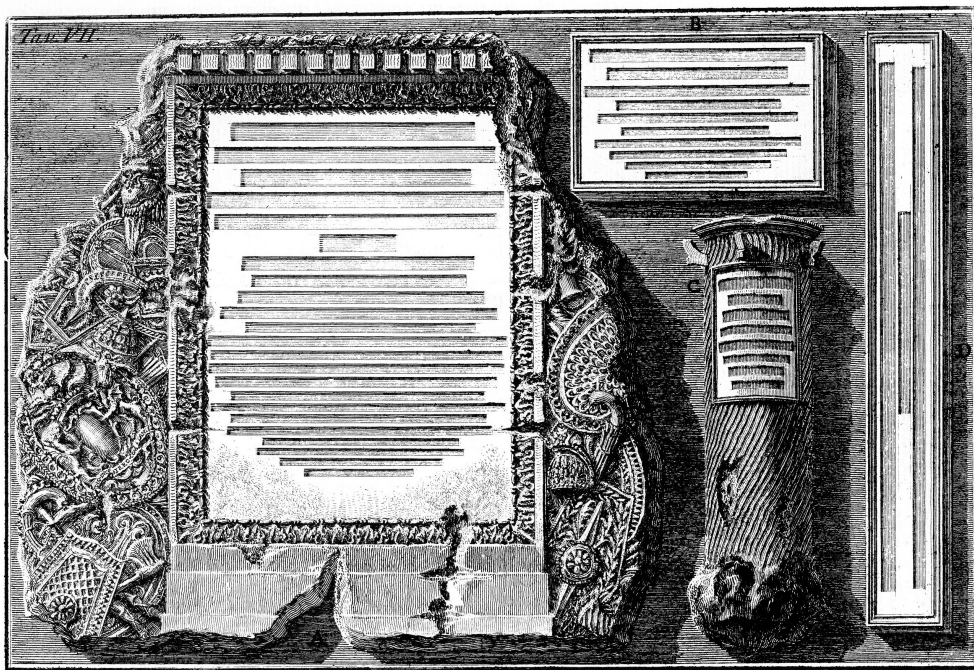
Your most Humble Devoted, and Obsequious Servant

G. B. Piranesi

Piranesi's notes to the second letter

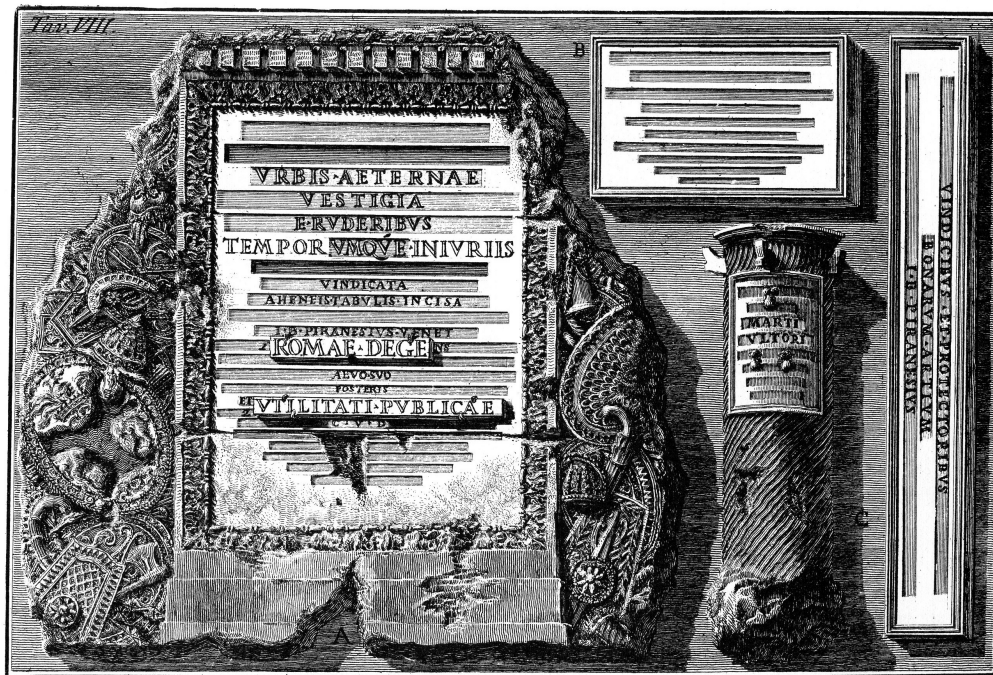
- (1) Although here it is reported to Milord that the Public had seen the previous letter six months after its date, the assertion was, however, based only on its printing then effected together with the present letter; indeed the Author has waited five months further before publishing them, that is, two full months after the date of the following third letter. [31 May 1757]. Therefore, not only in view of all that has been pointed out, and about to be pointed out in the following pages about how much he [Piranesi] suffered both from Milord's Agents and for the silence of this Gentleman, but furthermore in view of the very long period of time given to him [Charlemont] to consider his honour in a decorous and appropriate way, the decision taken later of suppressing the dedication, and of publishing these letters cannot be attributed either to imprudence or haste.
- (2) This is the reason why some Copies of the Work were issued with the aforementioned suspensions in the manner shown at the end in Plate VII [shown here as Fig. 1].

- (3) See the line from the Arch of Septimius Severus in the image put here at the head of the present letter; and the complimentary address to the Public with which the Work appears nowadays is shown at the end in Plate VIII (shown here as Fig. 2).
- (4) Afterwards he was forced to do it by legal action.
- (5) From this assertion of Mr Parker it likewise appears clear that Milord had accepted the dedication of all four Volumes, and that the claim that there should be only one Volume is an expedient that followed publication of the letters.
- (6) Therefore, everyone will be more and more convinced that the Author has not suppressed the dedications for avarice, since he had bound himself not to be self-interested and to leave them unchanged if Milord had given him the Justice that he [Piranesi]demanded from him [Charlemont].



A. Lapide del primo Frontespizio colle rasure della iscrizione che importano la sospensione della Dedica di Milord. B. Lapide del secondo Frontespizio colle stesse rasure. C. Colonna rostrale del terzo, colle medesime. D. Epistilio del quarto, parimenti con esse.

Fig. 1. *Lettere di Giustificazione, Tav. VII*, 141 × 214 mm. Plate VII shows Piranesi's four original dedications to Charlemont in *Le Antichità Romane* erased, while his arms and motto are still visible. A translation of Piranesi's caption reads: **A.** Stone slab of the first Frontispiece showing the erasures of the inscription which imply the suspension of the Dedication to Milord. **B.** Stone slab of the second Frontispiece with the same erasures. **C.** Rostral Column of the third [frontispiece], showing the same [erasures]. **D.** Architrave of the fourth [frontispiece], likewise with the erasures.



A. Complimento al Pubblico sostituito nel primo Frontespizio alla Dedica di Milord, con lettere che vi fingono di metallo incastrate nelle scarpellature della stessa Dedica. 1 & 2. Frammenti della iscrizione di Milord che vi fingono tolti dai Canali delle linee II, e VII. della iscrizione medesima per servire al Complimento. B. Lapide del secondo Frontespizio, che resta anonima. C. Mutazioni delle iscrizioni nei Frontispizii terzo e quarto.

Fig. 2. *Lettere di Giustificazione, Tav. VIII.* 142 × 215 mm. This Plate VIII, dedicated now to his contemporaries, to posterity and to public benefit, summarizes all the changes Piranesi made in the original dedications to Charlemont. His arms appear now in pieces, and his motto has disappeared. For a translation of the Latin dedication on this plate see Gavuzzo-Stewart (2014), Fig.3. A translation of Piranesi's caption follows: **A.** Complimentary address to the Public, substituted, in the first Frontispiece for the Dedication to Milord, with simulated metal letters inserted in the chiselled grooves of the same Dedication. **1 & 2.** Fragments of the inscription to Milord imagined removed from the chiselled grooves of lines II and VII of the same inscription, to be used for the Complimentary Address. **B.** Stone slab of the second Frontispiece which will remain empty. **C.** Changes to the inscriptions in the third and fourth Frontispiece.

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