‘The Kiss of Death’: farewell letters from those condemned to death
by firing squad in Civil War and postwar Spain (1936-51)

I remember those terrible times in Porlier when the condemned were living their last night and were sent down ‘to the chapel’. Access to this final place was impossible. You had to cross wide corridors and go through locked gates which the guards kept under permanent surveillance. When the condemned man got there, his arrival was recorded, his pen and paper were removed even down to the smallest pencil butt [...] Theoretically in their last hours these men never had a moment free from surveillance. However, a few hours after the lorries of death had dragged them away, some papers circulated amongst us, sometimes minute ones, full of pain and pride: these were the ‘chapel notes’. As prisoners, we were forced to take our turn to clean the chapel rooms every morning [...] Some of us did it willingly, so we could read and copy the last farewell messages which comrades had written on the walls or secreted in the most unlikely hiding places.¹

1. Definition and Context

This opening testimony is from the recently-published memoirs of Marcos Ana. Their title - ‘Tell me what a tree is like’ - is taken from one of hundreds of poems written in Francoist jails, those ‘cathedrals consecrated for death’, as he called them in his
poems. They stole 23 years of his life, from May 1939 when he entered Porlier at the age of 19, until November 1961, when he was released from Burgos prison.

Significantly, he called them ‘notes’, describing the tiny pieces of paper which the condemned men hid and which their comrades retrieved after they were shot. What differentiates ‘chapel notes’ from ‘chapel letters’ is the fact that the notes were clandestine, written in secret and without authorisation, whereas the letters were an official concession to the condemned man as his last wish. Logically the letters were subject to censorship, while the notes went no further than fellow-prisoners who took upon themselves the risky job of smuggling them out of prison and into the hands of the people to whom they were addressed. These differences determined the content, length and format of each genre. Nevertheless, quite apart from their legality or illegality, or whether they circulated through official or unofficial channels, both letters and notes form part of the same history.

Chapel notes and letters can be defined as exceptional writings because they constituted the final testimony of those condemned to death; they contained the last words and wishes which those about to die dedicated to their loved ones in the hours before their execution. The name, however, refers not so much to the functions and uses of these writings but rather to the place where they were produced. This was a very specific place - the prison chapel - where prisoners waited to go before the firing squad and where, if they desired, they could take communion and be confessed. Hence they have passed into history as ‘chapel letters’. Of course chapel letters are not exclusive to the Spanish Civil War, and their equivalents have been written by
prisoners the world over since very early times, but only recently have they acquired this name.

Why study the chapel letters? What can they tell the historian of this period? As I have emphasised elsewhere, there is an increasingly urgent need to descend to an intimate level in order to comprehend fully the experience of repression during the war and the Franco regime. One necessary task is to investigate the uses and meanings of private writings in prison, given that writing becomes identified with life itself in such an environment, where the prisoner writes to live and lives to write. Writing was a daily practice for prisoners, but out of all the letter-writing produced by the prison system, the chapel letters constitute our most precious evidence about aspects of the system which are still not well known: the prisoners’ last thoughts, their most profound desires, their most intimate feelings. Feelings and ideas are also part of History, even if many people continue to undervalue this type of evidence and consider it useless.

Armando Petrucci, one of the founders of the history of scribal culture, published Writing the Dead (Le scritture ultime) over a decade ago. As he himself explained in his introduction, his aim was simply to sketch out the complex map of writing practices and production employed since Antiquity for the public commemoration of the dead.

The evidence he analysed was mainly produced for public exhibition, such as gravestone epigraphs as well as celebratory and commemorative books, manuscripts, journals and manifestos. All these forms of writing were produced for public
consumption, but they also had in common the fact that they were produced by living people to be read by other living people. Thus, as Petrucci writes, what is most interesting and perhaps surprising about ‘last writings’ is that they tell us not so much a story of death and the deceased but rather a story of life and the living. ‘Last writings’ is for me a perfectly valid label for the chapel letters, because they too form part of the history of the living and of life recorded in funereal writing.

But where does this leave the public dimension if the letters were composed for the most private needs? This leads me to an important caveat. Although the chapel letters, like any other epistolary writing, are theoretically private documents, intended for circulation within a well-defined and intimate space, the exceptional conditions of their creation brought about a transformation of their original character. The chapel letters were converted into public writings, as testimony to the political struggle which was continuing behind bars, as effective propaganda, as fierce indictments of the system, and as symbols of the heroism of their authors, who were frequently regarded as true martyrs. The chapel letters filled page after page of the clandestine press, they were read out in foreign radio broadcasts, they were published in commemorative books, and organisations were set up to collect them to prevent their loss or destruction (like museums of the war and the resistance in France and Italy). They circulated privately, to be commented on by friends, acquaintances, fellow-workers and party members, neighbours and families of other executed men. So we can conclude that the chapel letters evolved from private documents into genuine public monuments. This double dimension of the public and the private also turned them, one might even say, into more interesting writings, open to multiple perspectives and diverse readings.
2. The Sources

My study is based on a corpus of 110 letters dated between 26 August 1936 and 25 June 1951. Of course many more letters than this actually existed. Here I am presenting preliminary results based on a source which will grow in future years, as more testimony comes to light from individuals, anonymous or otherwise, who recorded their last living breath on paper.

Up to now, unfortunately, the letters and private writings of those condemned to death during the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath have not enjoyed the same fate as those written by executed prisoners in other parts of the world during the two World Wars. The latter have been conserved, exhibited and published in homage to their authors, as a living record of their sacrifice and an example to future generations. But the Spanish Civil War letters have always been obscured, if not destroyed by individual families for fear of possible reprisals.

Thus I have found to date only three publications or compilations of the last letters from Spanish condemned prisoners, one produced by a publisher and the others sponsored by individuals or promoted by associations and friends of the victims. One, containing 14 letters, is the work of the Association of Widows for the Defence of the Republic and the Popular Front in the Asturias (Rosario Acuña), established in Gijón on 16 November 1977 in order to sustain the memory of family members shot between 1937 and 1952. The second compilation is by Antonio Ontañón, president of the Heroes of Freedom and the Republic Association, and in it are transcribed about 40 chapel letters written by victims from Santander and elsewhere interned in camps between 1937 and 1948. The third collection is that of Jesús Cañones, which contains...
(not always in their entirety) 29 letters. Their authors were natives of various villages in the province of Córdoba, mostly from the Right, who were judged and sentenced to death in the first months of the war by the Tribunal Popular Especial of Jaén, and shot between October and December 1936 in the Jaén provincial jail, and in that city’s cathedral, converted into a prison at the outbreak of the conflict.7

The other letters referred to here are found embedded in memoirs, diaries or autobiographies written by officials, workers, priests, monks, guards and prison wardens of the time, as well as by prisoners, their families, friends and acquaintances. But they appear in piecemeal and isolated fashion, and there may only be one or two in any one book.

Finding these sources is a complex task which requires patience. Spain does not have as other countries do, museums or archives dedicated to collecting and conserving this kind of personal documentation from the Civil War, except for the recently established Archivos de la Escritura y la Memoria Popular.8 The vast majority of chapel letters have remained in private hands. Many have been lost, destroyed or ended up in the possession of individuals to whom they were not addressed. Occasionally, they turn up in the public records,9 filed with documents proving the prisoners’ guilt or protesting their innocence. If so, the original manuscript has rarely survived. Usually they were machine-copied before being delivered to their addressees.
Chapel letters true family relics. Conserving them, in the last resort, is like fulfilling a final promise: to remember for ever those who had disappeared and to prevent such injustice ever being committed again.

3. Characteristics and Functions

What are we looking for in the last words from prison chapels? If we can separate the emotional charge of these documents from their historical significance, if we can strip them for a moment of their dramatic aspects and look at them as exceptional evidence of their period, we will realise that we can access rich data unavailable in other official or private sources. Composed in complete lucidity in the final and most solemn moment of life, the letters represent the prisoner’s ultimate conversation with himself. This has persuaded several researchers that they are ‘the most authentic and true witness to the period’ we can find.10

What characteristic and functions do they present? Most importantly, they all, with a few variations, share the same tripartite structure with which we are familiar (greeting, text, farewell). This structural uniformity of the letters is echoed in their textual homogeneity. Faced with death, one’s feelings, thoughts and sensations are all as one, so that the letters read as a continuum. Each one says practically the same thing, and often in exactly the same way. They are a conventional and ritual form of writing. This does not mean, however, that there is such a thing as a typical author. Different circumstances and family situations, and the individual personality of the writer produce variations between some letters and others.
The material support and the length of the letters are also different in every case. Depending on the time available to the condemned men and on his state of mind, the letter might be long or brief, ranging from several pages to just a few lines. Scarcity of paper forced the writer to select the most important among many things he might have wanted to say. So attached to postcards and proper writing paper we find sheets torn from notepads and exercise books, and small pieces of paper or blank pages from books. They also used materials which could not be removed from the prison, writing letters on the walls which, as Marcos Ana recalled in my opening citation, other workers would transcribe. In many cases, the kind of paper chosen depended on how the condemned writer wanted it to reach its destination and whether or not it had to be hidden.

The letters usually began with the news of the death sentence and its imminent execution, normally by firing squad but occasionally by much-feared garrotting, according to the gravity of the charges:

Dearest parents and soul brothers: this will be the last letter you will receive from me and since I only have a few hours to live, I want my last moments to be spent with you.\textsuperscript{11}

My dear wife:
I pray to God that when this reaches you, you will be in good health and with our children and the rest of the family. Maria, when this gets to you come for my clothes, because I already will no longer exist in this world, I will be staring at the stars, my whole body at rest.\textsuperscript{12}
After communicating the fatal news, the letter takes on another consolatory function. The author tries to comfort his loved ones, using strategies which were emotional rather than rationally considered. In the first place his attitude to death has to be defined. Although every condemned man had a different attitude, most letters promote a positive image of the victim. The author had already assumed the inevitability of his end, and so expressions of courage in face of death should not surprise us; nor should resignation and the tranquil acceptance of one’s destiny, although sometimes authors could not completely conceal their fear and anguish. Approaching death with courage was a last heroic act, and to avoid fear and despair it was essential not to show the enemy one’s suffering. The letters express euphoria in this moral victory, and they hope their loved ones will share this attitude and spread their sense of triumph beyond the prison walls:

Dear parents and brothers and Elvira:

I am writing this in the chapel at 2 in the morning…Anyway you can be sure that I am calm and not afraid, and not a single muscle in my body is tense before the journey I am about to take. I would like you not to weep for me.¹³

My dear comrade:

Greetings. This is to say goodbye to you and our dear children, I know that when you read this I will already have ceased to live, I hope that when you receive the sad news you will have enough strength as I have to face my death, without losing hope in my ideals and I hope you will do the same and never for a moment let our enemies see you weaken.¹⁴
Alongside these consoling strategies, the authors protest their innocence and justify their actions against their accusers. Convinced that he has followed the dictates of his conscience, the condemned man defends his innocence up to the end, knowing that he dies for his ideals, his hands clean and with a clear conscience, without remorse, proud not to have done anything unworthy or made any ideological compromise. To be certain of their own goodness and integrity is fundamental because it allows their loved ones to live without shame and to resist any imputation of blame. Their death is not their fault but the result of duty accomplished. For many, consolation lies in knowing that the sacrifice is not in vain, but that it helps to build the future of their dreams, a better world full of peace, hope and life.

My beloved wife: I don’t know when you will read these lines. I have been perfectly relaxed for some time now…My conscience now is like a lake full of deep clear water over which storms and squalls pass without disturbing it or stirring it up. I do not regret my life nor how I thought, how I felt, how I worked. My daughters can lift up their heads proudly knowing that their father was a martyr for an ideal and the victim of ferocious cruelty. I leave them my example to follow and my memory as an endless source of pride.¹⁵

Lastly, in order to console one’s loved ones it is also important to give them the final thing they desire – one’s intense love for them, which gives them the strength to endure their situation. The prisoners’ love as parents, brothers, husband and wife, children, boyfriends and friends assumes a superior strength; it is a love which behind
bars has acquired a spiritual dimension capable of overcoming death and enabling them to live on eternally, especially for those who were fathers, since their children were the fruit of love and symbolise their reincarnation after death.

When our Army triumphs and you see the flag, kneel down and kiss it. This is what your father lost his life for, and for it you must give up your own if the need arises. The Motherland is built on the strength and sacrifices of each of its subjects, offer it your own grain of sand, as I have already done.\textsuperscript{16}

Dear Tere, If I’d had 50 lives, I would have given 50 lives to defend the democratic freedoms of the people of Spain. I ask you not to cry for me. The Republic will have justice.\textsuperscript{17}

The condemned man expanded at length on this consolatory theme, insisting that nothing and nobody could wipe out his memory, and that he would always be with his loved ones, since they lived on in his love, just as he lived on in theirs. The letters thus express a non-death. Ultimately this last piece of advice is one that the condemned man gave to himself, as he desperately clung to the life that was ending, hoping that he would still somehow be present in the world after his execution. Hence the express desire that they should not forget him, that his memory should not die and that his loved ones should keep it alive, together with the personal effects that accompanied the letter and became silent witnesses to his presence.
I ask for your strength to deal with this terrible disaster and although I am no
longer present with you, I know that my memory will never be erased from your
heart.\textsuperscript{18}

Be very happy, my good dear Luisina, look after my poor little ones so they grow up to be fine good men. Talk to them about me constantly so they don’t forget their poor father, who dies an innocent man.\textsuperscript{19}

Having fulfilled the main purpose of the letter, having given news of the sentences and offered consolation, the condemned man then expresses his concerns, asking forgiveness for his mistakes, and thanking those he has loved and who have given him pleasure in life. His main concern, which appears especially in the main body of the texts, is the grief and feeling of vulnerability and abandonment that his death will cause among those most dear to him. Here the letter sometimes takes on a testatory tone, and the writing may adopt some of the formality of this kind of document which jars with the natural sincerity of the rest of the letter. These epistolary testaments take on distinct characteristics, including a list of tasks and obligations which the prisoner has left unfinished, or even enumerating his possessions and financial assets. We must not forget the cases where the last wishes turn into a kind of spiritual testament outlining the basic principles according to which his loved ones should conduct their future lives.
[..] and further I will tell you all that I am leaving you, I will entrust it to my friend Jesús Sanchez who has been like a son to me […] Take what I leave you

The leather

The clock

A wallet

180 pesetas in 10-peseta notes

Julián owes me 1,900 pesetas […]

For Olga, when she understands things.

Dearest daughter; your father asks you to love your mother very much, as well as your little brother and your grandparents and uncles, respect them all and follow their advice. Mama will explain to you why I can’t be with you any more. Don’t be deceived by the people who are going to kill your father, they will try to tell you that they are killing us because of the crimes we have committed; but they are the ones who have committed the crimes. I tell you this in case fascism wins the struggle in which we are now engaged. I don’t think it will, but if evil should triumph over reason, I ask you […] not to support this band of thieves and assassins in any way […] If it turns out you are living under a republic, which is what I hope for, work to prevent injustice from blinding reason. My good little Olga, love your grandparents and your uncles and brother, and don’t do anything to displease your mother. This is what your father asks you at the gates of death.
The sense of guilt for abandoning ones loved ones is present throughout the letters, hence the prisoner asks forgiveness for all the repercussions his death will cause. This is in fact a request which applies to his whole life, for this is the time to take stock, to recognise where one has acted badly and hurt other people, so it can all be forgotten and the record wiped clean.

My Eulalia, don’t be surprised if I talk to you this way because it’s the last time I will do so and I hope you forgive me if I have made you suffer at any time in the 20 years that we have lived together, if we have disagreed about anything, but I die certain that you have been faithful to me and that you have loved me with all the affection of a good companion and a good mother to our dear children.²²
I ask your forgiveness dear wife for anything I may have done to offend you […] I beg you to forgive me. I don’t want to die! I am sorry for you and the children who I am leaving so young […]²³

They don’t ask forgiveness only for themselves, but also for their executioners. With their thoughts already on the afterlife, and detaching themselves from the vicissitudes of the present, the prisoners preferred to depart in peace, expressly asking their loved ones, with some evangelical overtones, not to perpetuate the cycle of violence. Only a minority demand vengeance for their murder.

The chapel letters close, as all letters do, with the farewell, which given the circumstances, is a particularly tragic moment. As well as stereotypical formulae and
the final expressions of love and devotion towards all those people the prisoner remembers in his last moments, the idea of a definitive goodbye surfaces in outstandingly dramatic fashion.

I am sorry, my baby, I am running out of paper and out of life, so I will use what I have left to send you my last thought with all my love, all my life, all of it, everything, absolutely everything, with the biggest hug for all time from your Fernando. For ever yours until death.24

Goodbye, dear daughters, for ever, remember your father every day, many kisses to you and your brothers, goodbye for ever, your father […] Goodbye Angelines and Dina, pieces of my heart, my last thought will be for you, your father who dies innocent and in peace.25

4. Conclusion

In conclusion I only want to say that writing had a strong therapeutic and remedial value for condemned prisoners. Perhaps they felt a little less alone in these last moments of life. It was a morphine that killed the fear, anguish, despair and madness. It helped them prepare for death. It has been pointed out that these letters only show men and women as they idealise their lives before death. Possibly. Some may have done so. After analysing these hundred or so letters, I think that they were looking for a meaning, even where none existed. But we must not forget that many wrote deliberately to create a memory and to leave an example for future generations. ‘Let
my name be remembered in History’, pleaded Julita Conesa, one of the 13 Roses, in her chapel letter. Those condemned to death are what they write, and these last letters without response, sometimes extreme, are exactly what they are: the last embrace they wanted to give those they loved and testimony to a time that today only words can measure. The words they wrote. And those they didn’t write.

[Translated by Martyn Lyons]

Verónica Sierra Blas

Universidad de Alcalá – SIECE – Grupo LEA

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1 Marcos Ana, Decidme cómo es un árbol. Memoria de la prisión y la vida, Barcelona (Umbriel), 2007, p. 103.


3 Armando Petrucci, Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition Stanford CA (Stanford UP), 1998.


5 Verónica Sierra Blas, ‘<El último abrazo> Cartas en capilla de los condenados a muerte (España, 1936-51)’, in Josefina Cuesta Bustillo, ed., Memorias históricas de España (siglo XIX), Madrid (Fundación Francisco Largo Caballero), 2007, pp. 280-312.


8 The Red de Archivos e Investigadores de la Escritura Popular en España (RedAIEP), directed at the University of Alcalá by Antonio Castillo Gómez and co-ordinated by Verónica Sierra Blas was established in 2004. See <http://www2.uah.es.siece/redaiep>.

9 See the immense documentation classified as ‘Causa General’ in the Archivo Histórico Nacional, Madrid.

10 Fausto Díaz Padilla, *Estructura y sentimiento de las cartas de los condenados a muerte*, Oviedo (Universidad de Oviedo), 1991, p. 3.

11 Andrés Fernández Muela to his parents and brothers, Jaén, 5 Nov. 1936.

12 Manuel Hevia to his wife Maria, no place, no date.

13 Manuel Ceballos Ugalde to his family and wife, no place, no date.

14 Anon to his wife, Eulalia Iglesias. No place, no date.

15 Joan Curto Pla to his wife Marina Daufí, Pilatos Prison (Tarragona), 19 October 1939.

16 Alberto Albiñana Zaldivar to his children, Guadalajara provincial prison, 1 November 1936.

17 Manolin to his wife, Modelo Prison, Oviedo, 27 September 1938.

18 Román Velarde Martinez to his wife and children, no date, no place.

19 Angel Pardo Galiano to his wife, Luisa, no place, 17 November 1937.

20 Julia Prada Fernández to his wife and children. Santander provincial prison, 16 May 1938.

21 Narciso Gil to his daughter Olga, Modelo Prison, Oviedo, April 1938.

22 Anon to his wife Eulalia Iglesias, no date, no place.

23 Virginio Puente Coballes to his wife and children, Burgos central prison, 25 November 1939.

24 Isidoro Martos Escudero to his wife Anunciación, no date, no place.

25 Anon to his daughters Angelines and Dina, no place, 7 March 1938.

26 The 13 Roses were 13 young girls, who were legally minors and militants in the United Socialist Youth (JSU). They were shot at dawn on 5 August 1939 after being falsely convicted, together with
other members of JSU, of complicity in a plot to assassinate Franco. This is one of the most notorious episodes of the Francoist repression, and has recently given rise to numerous books and films.