**Autobiographical accounts for a non-Jewish friend**

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**ABSTRACT:** The Livornese Jewish scholar Joseph Attias (1672-1739) is known for his contributions to eighteenth-century Tuscan culture as a book collector and mediator. Attias sent two autobiographical letters to a beloved correspondent, renowned Modenese historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori, in 1724 and 1733. This presentation will analyze the documents as self-conscious life narratives and examples of early Enlightenment self-fashioning that shed light on the strategies employed by a Jewish member of the Republic of Letters to present his formative years, his training, and his achievements to one of the most esteemed representatives of eighteenth-century Italian culture.

**This presentation is for the following text(s):**
- Letter to L.A. Muratori (December 22, 1724)
- Letter to L.A. Muratori (November 20, 1733)

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Introduction

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In the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, European scholars established complex networks of correspondence for the circulation of information and ideas. Usually, this “literary commerce” concerned the acquisition and distribution of books and specimens, thereby ensuring the progress of research. This sort of epistolary social sphere also profoundly transformed eighteenth-century culture, ultimately leading to the legitimization of new models of scholarship rooted in cooperation, autonomous from older structures of patronage, and engaged with society and politics. It was one of the characteristic and lasting products of the early modern Republic of Letters.

An example of such literary commerce is the correspondence between Livornese Sephardi savant, Joseph Attias (1672-1739) and Modenese historian Ludovico Antonio Muratori (1672-1750), one of the most respected protagonists of the early Italian Enlightenment. The extant twenty-four letters that Attias sent to Muratori between 1724 and 1734 are today held in the Archivio Muratoriano/52.3, Biblioteca Estense Universitaria, Modena. Most of Attias’ letters contain information about his scholarly interests, requests or offers for books and scientific specimens, personal and literary news about common acquaintances, along with some details about current events in his life. Thus, the exchange differs greatly from earlier examples of correspondence between Jewish and Christian scholars, such as that between Solomon Azubi and Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, or between Isaac Orobio de Castro and Philip van Limborch. Attias’ letters were not a vehicle for polemic or apologetic discussion, and in fact never referred to theological questions.

Two of Attias’ letters, written almost nine years apart, at the very beginning and end of his known correspondence with Muratori, also provide autobiographical narratives that offer an early example of “life writing,” or ego-document, composed by a Jewish author for a non-Jewish friend. The first, shorter text, written on December 22, 1724, presents a succinct summary of Attias’ background, education, and aspirations. The second text,
dated November 20, 1733, spans over six tightly handwritten pages that elaborate on his upbringing, intellectual inclinations, and accomplishments.

“Life writing” was an accepted scholarly custom by the early eighteenth century. Unlike previous Jewish authors, such as Leone Modena, Attias did not have to elaborately justify his engagement with it. The very fact that Muratori had expressed an interest in his background was sufficient for this Jewish savant to present him with details about his early years, youth, endeavors, and intellectual proclivities. In this sense, Attias’ letters mirror the growing interest in autobiography and the increasingly widespread notion among eighteenth-century individuals that one’s personal experiences are inherently interesting. Additionally, these documents reflect many of the conventions of self-representation in the Republic of Letters, although their author’s Jewish identity renders them quite unusual.

The autobiographical letter was a sub-genre within the literary correspondence of the Republic of Letters. As a strategy of self-representation, this practice was frequent among seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars who used it to control and protect their cultural legacies and reputations and to shape intellectual genealogies, both individual and collective. It was also a common method by which scholars advanced their fame and forged new networks of friendship and patronage.

While Attias’ letters are representative of certain prevalent norms in the broader community of contemporaneous scholars, as a Sephardi Jew he was nonetheless a highly atypical member of the Republic of Letters, a literary space that incorporated Protestant and Catholic authors, but included only a handful of Jews (and mostly, later in the century). If any autobiographical letter entails strategies of self-representation, then, Attias’ life narratives should be subjected to especially careful scrutiny. What kinds of balancing acts were required of an early eighteenth-century Jewish intellectual who aspired to participate as a peer in an eminently non-Jewish social and cultural sphere? By studying Attias’ autobiographical letters as consciously crafted narratives of the self – exploring how Attias chose to depict himself, what credentials he emphasized and what elements he glossed over – it will be possible to identify the ways in which a Jewish scholar justified and demonstrated his merit and worth as an exponent of the Republic of Letters.

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Letter to L.A. Muratori (December 22, 1724)
Lettera a L.A. Muratori
December 22, 1724

Translated by Francesca Bregoli, Queens College of the City University of New York, USA


December 22, 1724
“[...] My ancestors took refuge in this land from Spain, therefore the language I drank with my mother’s milk is Spanish. In my Nation’s schools, by way of practicing, I learned a bit of Hebrew, which I subsequently cultivated together with the other Oriental languages by means of the grammatical methods of those very Jews who lived in the 12th and 13th century, and of the Christian Hebraists. Afterwards, in Florence, I studied Aristotelian philosophy according to the school of sig. Dr. Giannetti and the principles of mathematics through a disciple of sig. Viviani. Since in this country everyone is busy and immersed in their own businesses, there are no conversations or literary gatherings. I must pass my time as best as I can, enticing some foreigners encountered by chance in the local shops or the store [bookstore] of sig. Donato Donati, and attracting them to my place with the excuse of seeing a few books I have been putting together. [...] I resolved to abandon commerce and live isolated on my modest revenues. To this end I renovated and enlarged the house where I live, and here it will be my greatest pleasure to serve You...”

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Lettera a L.A. Muratori
Letter to L.A. Muratori (December 22, 1724)
December 22, 1724

Prepared by Francesca Bregoli, Queens College of the City University of New York, USA

Livorno, 22 dicembre 1724

[...] I miei antenati si sono refugiati in questo paese dalle Spagne, e però la lingua che ho bevuto col latte è la spagnuola, e nelle scuole della mia Naz.ne ho imparato per pratica un po’ di lingua ebraica, che poi ho coltivato coll’altre lingue orientali per mezzo de’ metodi grammaticali degli stessi ebrei del secolo 12 e 13 e dei Cristiani Ebraizanti. Dopo presi in Firenze la Filosofia Aristotelica alla moda del sig.r D.r Giannetti ed i principi della matematiche da un discepolo del sig.r Viviani. E come in questo paese son tutti occupati ed immersi ne’ Negozi, non vi è Conversazione né Crocchio Letterario, e bisogna passarsela alla meglio allettando alcuni Forestieri che s’incontrano casualmente per le botege o nel magazino del s.r Donato Donati, ammassandoli in casa col motivo di vedere alcuni pochi libri che vado mettendo insieme. [...] Ho risoluto d’abbandonare il negozio e vivere ritirato colle mie modeste entrate, per il qual fine o rimodernato e ampliata la casa di mia abitazione, e quivi avrò grandiss.mo piacere di servire VS ill.ma [...]
Letter to L.A. Muratori (November 20, 1733)
Lettera a L.A. Muratori
November 20, 1733

Translated by Francesca Bregoli, Queens College of the City University of New York, USA


November 20, 1733

“To satisfy Your inquiry about my signature, I have to tell You, in all philosophical frankness, that I was born with a burning desire and the greatest curiosity to know, more as a way to get to comprehend the extent and limits of human knowledge than to practice any profitable profession, or [obtain] some honorary office, by these means. When I opened my eyes I realized that it would not be possible to proceed without the help of languages, both living and dead. Although my father had been a lawyer and a student in Salamanca (and then became a merchant), I could find at home only eight volumes of Spanish comedies by Lope de Vega, Calderon, Montalbàn, Solís, Salazar and other playwrights of extremely dissolute poetry, which mixed tragedy and comedy and, moreover, were authored by people unfamiliar with Greek literature; beside these volumes of comedies, there was a lonely Latin Bible printed in Paris and a small treatise on some astronomical quadrants by Gemafrisius.

Until I was 15 I had a teacher of Spanish with whom I studied reading and writing, and a tutor for Hebrew, whom we paid a little more than two paoli per month. But the poor fellow was not able to teach it to me, since he did not know it himself to begin with. At the same time, through my mother’s influence, they started making me velvet clothes with ribbon trims and golden tassels, etc.
When I turned 16, I was betrothed to a little niece of mine, a daughter of an older brother of mine, because my old father, who had me with his second wife, hoped with this to leave us [i.e., the two parts of the family] as allies and in peace (what followed is too long to discuss by letter).

So behold me 18, with a wife by my side; we spent the first little monies earned from investing the dowry on a diligent Latin teacher as well as a rabbi, who had perfect mastery of the Hebrew Bible and Hebrew grammar. I stocked up daily on authors writing in good Latin, though very poorly printed, because the country was much more backward (lit. barbaric) then; and thus I also began acquiring some books of Hebrew literature, which I hid away in an airy room outside my house and away from my father’s gaze, who used to reproach me, since those few books that I would let him see seemed to him already unnecessary and superfluous.

Thus I went on for a while, gathering all the foreigners who went through [the port]. I learned arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy from somebody called Piselli, a good engineer who died in the siege of Gaeta; and I would sometimes travel to Florence, where I learned Aristotelian philosophy with some new modifications from sig. Giannetti, whose brother is currently a lecturer in Pisa. I forgot to say that before getting married I had learned [to read] music perfectly, and how to play the harpsichord and the double harp, so that I can improvise an accompaniment on these two instruments while singing. Since they are very similar to each other, it is worth noticing, the practical study of one made the other easier to play, and that helped me when composing music. Back to my frequent trips to Florence, I had conversations with men of letters and academics on their summer vacations from the University of Pisa; out of necessity, because of some disputes which arose between members of my family, I had to apply myself to civil and canon law. I served as my own counsel, acquainting the judges of the situation on my own behalf; therefore I had to get some books on Roman law. In addition, there was the torture of having to study statutory law, found in the handwritten, unpublished statutes attributed to Paolo di Castro, alongside a long series of laws and edicts published in the “city of laws,” as Florence is called, and finally the legal statute of Livorno, commercial laws, maritime laws, and Jewish rites [i.e., laws]. Eventually I managed to acquire some peace thanks to my money, and by knowing how to write up a deed or legal instrument with a more specific know-how than our inexperienced notaries. In Florence, then, I visited the academies and became close friends with men of the best taste, enjoying their intimacy and confidence, which I maintained until their death. Lately, I recruited a brood of young and highly talented men as a way to make up for their loss, such as sig. Dr. Cocchi, abbé Perelli, cavalier Venuti, etc.

After I learned French, I acquired most of the literary journals, histories, and memoirs of the Académie Royale, together with the methods of the various sciences as composed
by the French. I am a bit more uncertain in English, and I own some books only to consult them as originals, because I do not trust their translations. In Arabic, Syriac and Samaritan I can understand those passages that help me with Hebrew literature and to penetrate the sentiments of Bochart and other eminent non-Jewish men of letters, who are Hebraists. Although I have always disliked meddling with theological matters, and especially with polemics, I have been very upset by the impertinence of some people who immediately want to talk about religion: if you answer courteously, avoiding conflict, they call you apathetic (and on such an important matter!), if you joke, unbeliever, if you object, stubborn and obstinate. So, I try to abstain from it whenever I can. Finally, just as the most serene Duke of Modena was so kind as to summon me and listen to me for a whole night, on my way to France, my royal lord amused himself several times in my company, quizzing me on languages and sciences, and he honored me with the title of “doctor.” Sig. Marchese Rinuccini, secretary of state and war, imitates him when he writes to me [i.e., using the title “doctor”], and so do sig. Senator President Ricci, moderator of the University of Pisa, and all the doctors of the said University, hence I could no longer refuse [the title], as I had done until that moment with the crowd of knights, gentlemen, and men of letters that vied with each other to make me a doctor. Here I am, a doctor just like Dr. Ricciardi, the Tuscan poet who, having been sent to teach moral philosophy at the said University, replied to Grand Duke Cosimo: “I am no doctor,” to which he retorted, “I am making you one.” And just last week my Nation bestowed on me the title of rabbi. As for the name Filalete, there are already two Joseph Attiases in Livorno and one in Amsterdam, so letters addressed to me used to go astray because of the ambiguity of the name. That is why I took the nickname “Filalete,” which scholars gave the historian Josephus, because my friends teased me about my particularly strong love for truth. I was forgetting to say that the blessed memory of the illustrious sig. Dr. Redi, during the visits that he made to Livorno with the most serene Cosimo, used to call on the botanist Cestoni, where they conducted experiments and held conversations of the most refined taste over natural history. I was born in 1672 and traveled around Italy, where I dwelled in the principal cities for many months, and in France, particularly in Paris, where I met the great men of our time. I do not want to bore you any longer; if I will have better health, I will tell you further details of my life in other letters [...]”
Livorno, 20 novembre 1733

Per soddisfare il dubbio di VS ill.ma quanto alla mia sottoscrizione, io devo dirle coll’ingenuità filosofica, di esser nato con un ardente desiderio e moltissima curiosità di sapere, più per arrivare a comprendere l’estensione ed i limiti del sapere umano che per esercitare alcuna professione lucrosa, o carica onorifica, con questi mezzi. Quando ho aperto gli occhi me n’accorsi che senza l’aiuto delle lingue, tanto viventi che morte, non si poteva andar avanti, ed abbenche, mio Padre era stato Avvocato e graduato in Salamanca (e poi datosi alla mercatura) non ho trovato altri libri in casa che 8 tomi di comedia spagnuole di Lope di Vega, Calderon, Montalban, Solis, Salzar, e altri Autori teatrali di sregolatissima Poesia, mescolando la tragedia colla comedia, e finalmente, composte da Persone alieni della letteratura greca; oltre i detti tomi di comedia v’era una solitaria bibbia latina di edizione di Parigi e un piccolo trattato di alcuni quadranti astronomici di Gemafrisio.

Fino a 15 anni ebbi il maestro di leggere e scrivere in lingua spagnuola, e un pedante di lingua ebraica, a cui si pagava poco più di due pavoli al mese, e il poverino perché non la sapeva conseguentemente non me la poteva insegnare; nello stesso tempo, a persuasione di mia madre, mi facevano abiti di velluti galonati e frangiatti d’oro, etc.

Arrivato a 16 anni mi promessero in matrimonio ad una mia nipotina che nasceva da un mio fratello maggiore, con la speranza di mio vecchio padre (che mi haveva havuto dalla seconda moglie) di lasciarci in alleanza e pace. (ciò che ne segui è lungo per scriversi in lettera).

Eccomi agli anni 18 con la moglie accanto, i p.mi quattrinelli de frutti della dote si spesero in un Maestro assiduo di lingua latina, ed in un Rabino che possedeva
perfettamente la Bibbia Ebraica, e gramatica di questa lingua, e giornalmente si andava facendo la provista degli autori di buona latinità, ma di cattiviss.ma edizione, perché il Paese era m.to più barbaro allora, così ancora mi andava provendo dei libri di letteratura ebraica, e questi libri si rimpiazzavano in una stanza ariosa fuori di casa mia dal cospetto di mio Padre, che mi bravava, parendoli quei pochi che io li lasciavo vedere eccessivi e superflui.

Così s'andava un po' avanti, ricettando tutti i forestieri che passavano, e da uno chiamato Piselli bravo ingegniere che morì nell'assedio di Gaeta, imparai l'Aritmetica, Geometria, e Astronomia; dava delle scappate a Firenze, dove dal sig.r Giannetti Frattello di quegli che presentem.te è Lettore in Pisa, ho havuto la sua Filosofia Aristotelica con alcune novità; mi scordai di dire che avanti prender moglie haveva imparato perfettam.te la Musica e sonare il cimbalo e l'Arpa doppia, à segno che accompagnò all'improviso à cantare con questi due strum.ti, i quali, per ess.re simili.ss.mi, è da notarsi, che lo studio pratico in uno, mi facilitava l'eseguire nell'altro, e mi giovarono per comporre in musica. Tornando poi ai viaggi frequenti di Firenze, trattavo con i Letterati e i Dottori che la state si ritirano nelle vacanze dello Studio di Pisa, e per necessità essendo nati delle liti fra la mia Famiglia bisognò che mi applicassi al Gius civile e cannonico, e facevo le mie consultazioni a mio favore, informando i Giudici, e questo mi pose in impegno di provvedermi di libri legali alla Romana, e in oltre v'era il tormento dello studio del Gius statu[t]ario, che si trova negli statuti manoscritti che si dicano fatti da Pavolo di Castro e inediti ed in una infinità di Leggi e Bandi pubblicati nella Città delle Leggi che così dicesi Firenze, e per ultimo delle leggi dello Statuto di Livorno, leggi mercantili, leggi marine, e Riti ebraici. Hò conseguito per fine il procurarmi la Pace a forza de' quattrini, e saper distendere una scrittura, ò strum.to con più precise intelligenze di ciò che fanno i n.ri inesperti notari. In Firenze dunque mi sono trovato nelle Accademie, e contratto dell'Amicizia stretta cogl'uomini di miglior gusto, e goduto della lor' confidenza che ho conservato fino alla lor morte, e ultimamente hò reclutato la lor perdita con una covatura di giovani di gran talento, fra q.ali il sig.r D.re Cocchi, Abb.e Perelli, Cav.re Venuti, etc.

Imparata la lingua Francese, mi sono provisto della magg.r parte de' giornali de Letterati, Istorie e memorie dell'Accademia Regia e dei metodi di varie scienze, composti da Francesi, e nella lingua Inglese vado zoppicando, e ho alcuni libri per poterli consultare come originali non fidandomi delle traduz.ni. Della lingua Arabica, della siriaca, e samaritana, posso intendere i passi, che mi aiutano alla letteratura ebraica, e à internarmi nei sentimenti del Bocharto, e di altri insigni letterati non Ebrei ma ebraizanti, e non ostante che sempre ho havuto repugnanza d'ingerirmi nelle materie teologiche, particolarm.te nelle polemiche, mi son trovato molto inquietato dall'impertinenza di alcuni che subbito subbito vi entrano nella Religione, se si risponde cortesem.te fuggendo il contrasto, siete un indolente (in materia così importante), se scherzando, miscredente; se obbiettando, caparvio e ostenato, che però sempre che
posso me n’astengo. Finalm.te, siccome il seren.mo di Modona ebbe la bontà di chiamarmi e sentirmi una intera nottata nel mio passar per Francia, il mio Real signore si è divertito spesse volte meco, interrogandomi delle lingue e delle scienze, con onorarmi il nome di Dottore, e à sua Immitazione il sig.r Marchese Rinuccini, segretario di stato e di guerra, mi scrive così, come il sig.r Presid.te senatore Ricci Moderatore dello studio di Pisa, e tutti quanti i DD.ri della d.a Università, non ho potuto ripugnar più come fino allora havevo fatto alla folla de tt.i i Cavalieri, ss.ri e letterati, che à gara mi addottoravano. Finalm.te, eccomi addorato come il D.re Ricciardi, Poeta Toscano che, sendo stato mand.to à legg.e morale nel d.o stud.o rispose al G.n Duca Cosimo io non sono Dottore, il quale replicò io v’addottoro, ed hora la settimana passata la mia Naz.ne mi dichiarò Rabino. Quanto poi al nome Filalete, essendovi in Livorno due Josef Attias, e uno in Amsterdam, con l’equivoco di q.ti nomi si straviavano le mie lettere, però hò preso il Filalete, che i letterati hanno dato a Gioseffo Istorico, e perch i miei amici mi burlavano per la mia delicatezza di amar tanto la verità. Mi scordava di dire che la B. M. dell’insigne S.r D.r Redi, nelle campagne che faceva col Ser.mo Cosimo à Livorno, si fermava dal Cestoni speziale, dove si facevano sperienze e discorsi di rafinatiss.mo gusto nell’Istoria naturale.  Son nato nel 1672, e ho viaggiato per l’Italia, fermatomi più mesi nelle città del p.mo ordine, ed in Francia, e particolarm.te in Parigi, dove hò conosciuti i grandi huomini della n.ra Età. Non voglio più tediarla e, se haverò più salute, con altre mie gli dirò altre minuzie della mia Vita [...]  

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