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A History in *Letters*? The Intersection of Epistolarity and Historiography in Pliny

The past twenty-five years have witnessed a significant evolution in scholarship on Pliny's *Letters*.¹ Mommsen, Syme, and Sherwin-White poured through the prosopographical treasure trove that Pliny left to posterity, leaving future generations of scholars to probe the letters for their "literary" merits.² The first nine books of the *Letters* – that is, those excluding the correspondence with Trajan – have been examined from manifold perspectives: Henderson's monograph on Pliny's treatment of the plastic arts; Gunderson's use of Pliny's correspondence as a fulcrum for investigating the correlation between prose epistles and Catullan poetry; Marchesi's meticulous work on allusion and intertextuality; and numerous uses of the *Letters* as a laboratory for self-fashioning investigations.³ Central to this focus has been the recognition that the *Letters* present signs of intricate arrangement, both within and across book units. In this vein, Alessandro Barchiesi has remarked upon the parallel between the first and last addressees of the collection, Clarus and Fuscus, as an indicator of both Pliny's reputation and as a signal of near cosmic order. This relationship is one already recognized by earlier readers of the *Letters*, including Sidonius, who follows Pliny's lead when framing the bookends of his own collection of epistles.⁴ This emphasis on the interconnectedness of individual letters, their tendency to answer one another as if in responsion, and their overall polish are approaches that have come full circle. A literary reading of Pliny that considers the *Letters* akin to a book of Hellenistic poetry is, now over fifteen hundred years post-Sidonius, once again the norm; as Gunderson reflects, "the question is how far one might go in such a direction, not whether or not it should be pursued at all."⁵

1 I would like to thank Mario Baumann and Vasileios Liotsakis for their work organizing the conference and in editing the present volume, and to all of the conference participants and the anonymous reviewer for their ready feedback and helpful critiques.

2 Mommsen 1869, Syme 1960 and Syme 1968, and Sherwin-White 1966.

3 Henderson 2002; Gunderson 1997; Marchesi 2008; and, e.g., Riggsby 1995 and Riggsby 1998.

4 Barchiesi 2005; Writing in the 5th-century CE, Sidonius produces his own nine-book collection of letters, beginning with a letter addressed to a "C" (Constantius) and ending with an "F" (Firmius). Sidonius' first letter echoes Plin. *Ep.* 1.1 explicitly: *Diu praecipis, domine maior, summa suadendi auctoritate, sicuti es in his quae deliberabuntur consiliosissimus, ut, si quae litterae paulo politiores varia occasione fluxerunt, prout eas causa persona tempus elicit, omnes retractatis exemplaribus enucleatisque uno volumine includam, Quinti Symmachi rotunditatem, Gaii Plinii disciplinam maturitatemque vestigiis praesumptiosis insecuturus. nam de Marco Tullio silere melius puto, quem in stilo epistulari nec Iulius Titianus sub nominibus illustrium feminarum digna similitudine expressit* (Sidonius, *Epistles* 1.1.1–2; text according to Anderson 1936).

5 Gunderson 2007, 3.

But while this increased attention to the *Letters* has elevated the corpus from a niche text of prosopographical import to the ranks of those works more worthy of “literary” considerations, it has done so while largely obfuscating their fundamental form as letters. It is not my intention in this paper to push the dial back to the days of Sherwin-White or Syme or Mommsen, but instead to reemphasize and prioritize the epistolarity of Pliny’s *Letters*. Letters, after all, like Hellenistic poems, have a tendency to answer one another. Indeed, in a society like 1st-century CE Rome, the advanced social commerce of epistolography demands that they receive their due response.⁶ My interests are not in intertextual or intergeneric contacts between Pliny and his predecessors themselves, but instead in the significance of the epistle as the *site* of these interactions. This approach stresses that form – in this case letters – is inseparable from content. Letters can be thought of as the solution in which Pliny performs his self-fashioning, his self-monumentalization, his experiments with historiography. It stands to reason, therefore, that the characteristics of this medium will necessarily tinge and influence the results. Most essentially, I ask (and hope to answer) what are the effects of inscribing letters with other generic elements, how the use of the epistolary form as an intertextual bridge represents a unique hermeneutic challenge, and finally, how this reoriented approach affects our understanding of Pliny and his orientation towards his ancient readers.

I.

Any inquiry into the particular readings that letters can create raises the thorny issue of isolating what makes a letter a letter. The question “What is a letter?” invites a rash of complications surrounding theories of genre. Positivist approaches to genre involve a kind of hermeneutic circle; in order to make evaluations of what a letter, an epic poem, or a satire is, we begin from a place already understanding what that form is, however hazy it may be.⁷ With letters, however, such a starting point leads both everywhere and nowhere. A quick glance at a recent anthology of ancient (Greek and Latin) letters includes examples from familiar prose writers including Cicero, Seneca, Pliny, Fronto, and John, various Greek epistles recovered at Oxyrhynchus written by and addressed to otherwise unknown personages, pseudo-epigraphic missives from “Phalaris” and “Aeschines,” selections from Alciphron writing under the guise of Greek sailors and courtesans, and verse epistles from Horace, Ovid, and Martial. Very little apart from a tendency to use second-person forms of address ties these works together; even less binds them when we make demands

⁶ For the status of letters and letter books as a commodity of gift exchange, see particularly Wilcox 2012; more generally, on the status of the gift between across social strata in Rome, see Roller 2001, 129–212; and as regards the relationship between Pliny and Trajan, see Noreña 2007.

⁷ On the hermeneutic circle and genre, see for instance Garber, Orsini, and Brogan 1993.

upon their content.⁸ The only standard that can be found that applies to each of these letters is that they were written. Derrida's assertion that "Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself" rings especially true when we survey the breadth of ancient source material.⁹

Ancient literary theory on letters – at least that which survives – is likewise light on answers and is mostly concerned with providing descriptive catalogues of letter types.¹⁰ Demetrius' *de Elocutione*,¹¹ however, includes within its larger discussion of the plain (ισχνότητος) style a digression on the so-called ἐπιστολικὸς χαρακτήρ. Demetrius distinguishes his account from that of Artemon, the editor of Aristotle's letters, who regarded the letter as one of the two sides of a dialogue (εἶναι γὰρ τὴν ἐπιστολὴν οἷον τὸ ἕτερον μέρος τοῦ διαλόγου).¹² Demetrius thus stresses the letter as a point of communion between author and audience. A letter ought to avoid the oftentimes broken and halting structure of conversation, and with it, any possibility of obscurity. Length should be controlled, as well as stylistic range (λέξις); attaching a salutation (τὸ χαίρειν) to a lengthy tract of Plato or Thucydides does not a letter make. Only certain topics – namely those that convey friendly feelings (φιλοφρόνησις) succinctly – are appropriate. Likewise, gnomic sayings may be included, provided they express a quotidian philosophy, and again are imbued with φιλοφρόνησις.

But the crux of Demetrius' discussion centers on his point that "everyone writing a letter more or less composes an image of his own soul" (σχεδὸν γὰρ εἰκόνα ἑκάστος τῆς ἑαυτοῦ ψυχῆς γράφει τὴν ἐπιστολήν).¹³ He goes on to note that it is possible to make such judgments from other forms of writing, but the letter holds primacy in this regard. Perhaps the question that we should ask, therefore, is not "What is a letter?" but instead "What possible valences of meaning are created when a text makes a claim to be a letter?" Or, more prosaically, what happens when I write "Dear so-and-so"? A letter from Cicero to Atticus and one of Ovid's *Epistulae ex Ponto* may not find the kind of formal unity that is sought in aligning like texts under a cohesive rubric but, I suggest, each similarly foregrounds the relationship between author and audience by operating under an epistolary conceit of openness, familiarity, and honesty. The idea that letters are able to look *into* the soul may partially help to explain the popularity of the epistle as a means of talking *about* the soul. Among such "phil-

⁸ However, that has not stopped many from trying. Collections or commentaries on ancient letters contain *de rigueur* definitions (some looser than others) of the form. See for instance Trapp 2003, 1; Gibson and Morello 2007 very usefully push against texts of a more tenuous "epistolary" to tests the boundaries of the form, and argue for a more fluid approach.

⁹ Derrida 1987, 48; See also Altman 1982, 212 on the idea that "epistolary literature exposes the conflicting impulses that generate all literature."

¹⁰ Trapp 2003, 42–45; 180–93.

¹¹ Text taken from Roberts 1969.

¹² *Eloc.* 223.

¹³ *Eloc.* 227.

osophical letters,” formal elements are disparate; what unite the letters of Epicurus, Horace, Seneca, and John are precisely their joint claims to be letters, and thus, their ability to co-opt and utilize the epistolary conceit that content is rendered to the reader without mediation and in such a way to be able to create community. Likewise, the quotidian, utilitarian nature of the letter – its tendency to directly engage, to ask of its addressee, and to invite an answer – further focalizes this relationship between writer and responsive reader.

At the same time, however, the *raison d'être* of the letter is the distance between that writer and reader. That distance can be physical – Cicero is at Rome while Atticus lives in Athens; Ovid is exiled in Tomis while his addressees remain enfranchised in Italy; or metaphoric – Seneca’s use of the form, *sans* epistolary paratext, in order to simulate a philosophic journey; or temporal – for instance, Petrarch’s adoption of the epistolary mode to answer Cicero’s letters at the remove of some 1400 years, an example which also highlights the overweening impulse that letters ask to be answered.¹⁴ In short, letters operate under a set of conflicting impulses, as both the bridge that makes possible communication over distance and across time, and the reminder that such separations exists, as such gulfs are otherwise unable to be spanned.

We might think of these distinct, and sometimes competing, qualities of letters as the particular set of “affordances” that letters have. In her monograph *Forms*, Caroline Levine borrows the term “affordance” from design theory, where it is employed “to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials and designs.” Just as we may describe glass as “affording” transparency and brittleness, she argues, we may also describe elegiac couplets, sonnets, or letters as affording certain qualities.¹⁵ Affordances are, therefore, a convenient way of clarifying what literary forms are capable of doing and what potentialities lie latent within them. Taking our brief sketch of the generic scope and theoretic underpinnings of ancient letters, we might list as a possible set of epistolary affordances such ideas as “openness,” “sincerity,” “distance,” “clarity,” “prose,” “poetry,” “closeness,” and “generic inclusivity,” to name a few. Several of these affordances quite directly contradict each other – “distance”/“closeness” and “prose”/“poetry” most obviously – while others have no apparent relationship at all. For Levine, determining how these different affordances interact in anticipated and unexpected ways, as well as the hierarchical precedence one affordance takes over another, makes up the central basis of analytical work.

My focus on this interaction between forms, their particular affordances, and content is motivated not only by my own selfish interests, but also by Pliny’s words themselves. In the opening sections of the *Panegyricus*, Pliny bemoans the difficulty he faces in bestowing sincere praise upon Trajan in the light of years of forced

¹⁴ Petrarch’s famous critical, personal responses after reading Cicero’s letters is a further indication of the priority given to letters as revealing an individual’s true, unvarnished character; see also Hinds 2005 on Petrarch’s use of the epistolary form in creating virtual communities.

¹⁵ Levine 2015, 6.

approbation under Domitian. Pliny's chief antithesis is between open (*palam*) and private (*secreto*) speech: under the tyrant, flattery was reserved as the public discourse for the singular audience of the Emperor, whereas hidden Roman hearths and hearts heard only scorn.¹⁶ Pliny's wistful "solution" to the issue is as perverse as it is revealing of the extent to which the very idea of public praise has been broken by years of abuse:

Queri libet quod in secreta nostra non inquirant principes nisi quos odimus. nam si eadem cura bonis ac malis esset, quam ubique admirationem tui, quod gaudium exultationemque deprenderes, quos omnium cum coniugibus ac liberis, quos etiam cum domesticis aris focusque sermones!

We should like to complain that emperors do not inquire into our private affairs – except the ones we despise. But if the same interest belonged to both good and bad ones, how much admiration of yourself would you hear, how much joy and exultation, what conversations with our wives and children at our private altars and hearths would you everywhere find!¹⁷

What Pliny describes is essentially the permanent disconnect between the form of the panegyric, if not public approbation as whole, and the content of that discourse. The premiere quality of imperial praise had become its insincerity, making honest assessments of "good" emperors impossible. Indeed, it is only an invasive breach of privacy that would allow Trajan to hear his praises – an act befitting of bad emperors and one that would therefore make that joy and exultation ring false.

I linger on this point here if only to raise the issue that Pliny is intimately concerned with the tension between form and content in the post-Domitianic world. Pliny understands well that it is not words themselves but the form in which they are delivered that most influences his audience's reception of them. If public discourse, in a time immediately following an era of *delatores*, censorship, and political violence, has lost any affordance of frankness, he understands that a new form is necessary to achieve that end. Of secondary interest is the fact that the remainder of this chapter will concern itself with letters – a presumably private discourse – that carry with them that same "window into the soul" through which an eavesdropping emperor might catch a snippet of "true" praise. With this in mind, I will focus mainly on a subset of epistolary affordances – "sincerity," "distance," and "generic inclusivity" – to test how these elements abut against the content of Pliny's letters, particularly as relates to historiographical subjects. Part II will look closely at *Letters* 1.1 and the way in which the opening epistle problematizes the relationship between epistolography and history at the outset, while Part III will trace this issue through a number of subsequent letters in the collection.

¹⁶ *Panegy.* 2.2; for an extended discussion on the public/private dynamic and the impossibility of sincere praise, see Bartsch 1994, 148–188.

¹⁷ *Panegy.* 68.7.

II.

Though among the briefest of his published epistles, *Letters* 1.1 displays the push and pull between proximity and distance, spontaneity and polish, and engagement and absence that is emblematic of the collection as a whole. The first of his 235 non-Trajanic letters,¹⁸ *Letters* 1.1 is addressed to C. Septicius Clarus, a recipient of three other letters in the collection (1.15, 7.28, and 8.1), and himself the dedicatee of Suetonius' *Lives* (*Ep.* 1.1):

C. Plinius Septicio <Claro> Suo. S.

Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus venerat. superest ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii. ita enim fiet, ut eas quae adhuc neglectae iacent requiram et si quas addidero non supprimam. vale.¹⁹

Pliny to Septicius Clarus

You have often urged me to collect and publish any letters that I have written with some care. I have collected them here not as a slave to chronology – since I'm not writing history – but as each one came into my hands. It's up to you not to regret having asked, and for me not to regret having listened. So let it be done; I will seek out any letters that still yet lie about, and I will not suppress any that I may write in the future.

Two points about the composition of the *Epistles* are immediately apparent from this letter. The first is the idea that Pliny is offering up letters that have been written “with some care” (*paulo curatius*). At the most basic level, the statement indicates that these are letters that have been curated. Pliny is elusively vague about in which direction or directions this idea of “care” is pointed – whether to letters that are written with tactful social or political care, or stylistically, to ones that have received more of his time and attention and thus have a more “literary” quality.

While it is obvious that Pliny would not voluntarily publish a letter that would breach the laws of decorum or reflect badly on his social standing, his admission that these letters may have been written with more care than others is cause for consideration. As has been pointed out by Sherwin-White and others,²⁰ this remark is suggestive of two immediate contemporary intertextual parallels with Quintilian and Statius. Quintilian, like his pupil Pliny, states at the opening of the *Institutio Oratoria* that his move to publication came as the result of outside pressure (*Efflagitasti*

¹⁸ *Ep.* 1.1 was initially written as a dedicatory letter for the first wave of publication of the *Epistles*, rather than for the nine books of letters to *familiares* as we have them; for more on the date of composition of *Ep.* 1.1, see Sherwin-White 1966, 85; on the legacy of 1.1 on the reconstruction of the publication schedule of the *Letters*, see Bodel 2015.

¹⁹ Text for the *Letters* is taken from Radice 1969.

²⁰ Sherwin-White 1966, 2, 16, 42; see also Bodel 2015, 13, 18, 42–57 on the wider influence and stylistics of the dedicatory letter to which Pliny may be responding and how this relates to the organization of Book 1.

cotidiano convicio ut libros [...] iam emittere inciperem).²¹ So, too, in the proem to the first book of the *Silvae* does Statius express his hesitancy in the publication of these poems (*Diu multumque dubitavi*), and writes that he only sanctioned their complete dissemination since they were already in circulation; Stella, to whom the *Silvae* are dedicated, and other friends are already in possession of the work (*quid quod et serum erat continere, cum illa vos certe quorum honori data sunt haberetis?*).²² However, both Quintilian and Statius make a concerted effort to frame their efforts as underdeveloped, a feint that while a literary device nevertheless contextualizes the works within their authors' respective careers. The point is especially true for Statius, who contrasts the occasionality of the *Silvae* and the swiftness of their composition (*nullum enim ex illis biduo longius tractum, quaedam et in singulis diebus effusa*) against the authority of his *Thebaid*. The gambit is clear, as Statius is quick to point out that even in his day the *Culex* and the *Battle of the Frogs* are widely read. Statius will be no different from Vergil and Homer in offering up his light verse in tandem with his grand epic. Pliny's *paulo curatius*, however, lacks the tongue-in-cheek *recusatio* and on-the-nose self-aggrandizement of Statius. Granted, he avers a similar hesitancy over publication as both Quintilian and Statius do with his apprehension that he or Clarus may one day regret the production of the *Epistles*.²³ Within this context, Pliny appears to take a risk – he admits at the start that these letters have not been published against his will, that they are not a mere reflection of his greater works, and that above all, they have received their due attention.

In addition to these overt intertextual gestures, there is one further, unspoken contrast that Pliny makes with his declaration about the level of attention he has given to the curation of the *Letters* – indeed, inherent with their very publication at all. Though Pliny does not explicitly mention him in *Ep.* 1.1, Cicero stands as the most conspicuous antecedent against which to evaluate this collection of prose epistles. As we read through Pliny, it must be admitted that the Ciceronian corpus had significant impact on the shape and tenor of Pliny's collection, whether it be in letters where Cicero is explicitly mentioned – including the one that follows, *Ep.* 1.2²⁴ and *Ep.* 9.2, wherein Pliny explicitly recalls how Sabinus has suggested that Pliny follow Cicero as an example in his letter writing, and bemoans the fact that he lacks the same material with which to fill out his epistles,²⁵ – or in letters, or groups of letters,

21 Quint. *Inst.* pr. 1.1; text taken from Winterbottom 1970.

22 Stat. *Silv.* pr. 1; text from Shackleton Bailey 2015.

23 Quint. *Inst.* pr. 1.3 (*Multum autem in tua quoque fide ac diligentia positum est, ut in manus hominum quam emendatissimi veniant*); Stat. *Silv.* pr. 1.15–16 (*quam timeo ne verum istuc versus quoque ipsi de se probent!*).

24 At *Ep.* 1.2.4, Pliny states that in speech-writing, *non tamen omnino Marci nostri ληκύντους fugimus [...]*.

25 The passage in question reads as follows: *Neque enim eadem nostra condicio quae M. Tulli, ad cuius exemplum nos vocas. illi enim et copiosissimum ingenium, et par ingenio qua varietas rerum*

that rely on more subtle readings of either the Plinian or Ciceronian collections. But Pliny signals that the most essential difference between his letters and those of Cicero is a matter of personal publication in the first sentence of 1.1 – *frequenter hortatus es, ut epistulas si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque*. While there is significant debate over the date of publication of Cicero's letters and on the authorial intents of their publication (whether to publish at all, which letters to publish), it is clear that letters as we know them were not widely circulated at least until the mid-1st-century CE, and even then, it was likely done in a piecemeal fashion.²⁶

We have then in the opening sentence of Pliny's *Letters* an intersection of familiar themes, a seemingly straightforward introductory passage. Leaning on similar presentations by Statius and Quintilian, Pliny presents his work as something in demand; these, he avers in case his reader has missed the opening salutation, are letters; they have been worked on, but perhaps not worked over. The tricolon of first-person verbs that concludes the sentence only adds further emphasis – "If I had written any, I would collect them and I would publish them." I think it safe to assume that by the late 1st-century CE any reader, Septicius Clarus among them, would understand that these prose letters by a consular Roman have a Ciceronian, and perhaps even republican, pedigree. But Pliny, unlike Cicero, here takes ownership over the project from the start – *he*, not Atticus, not Tiro, not any compiler of jokes or *sententiae* – is sending these letters out into the world a second time. This is not a document that has slipped away from its original author; it has been published according to his will.

But as with so much of the *Letters*, there is a complication at work that challenges the ways in which we read Pliny *vis-à-vis* his literary predecessors. The dedication of the work to Clarus is not only operative as an honorific, but contains within it a particular threat that goes beyond the standard obligations of such gift debts. If Clarus or any other reader were familiar with the *ad Atticum* and *Epistulae Morales* 21, they would not only understand from Cicero's letters the dear friendship between Cicero and Atticus, but would also glean from Seneca that Atticus' fame was only sustained by virtue of his famous friend – *Nomen Attici perire Ciceronis epistulae non sinunt*. Clarus is forced to reckon with a similar problem from Pliny's dedication – will he be remembered on his own merits, or merely survive as a reflection of Pliny's fame? That so many of the *Letters* deal explicitly with fame, and in particular, literary fame, underscores the point further. Through the act of addressing, Pliny places himself in a privileged position, taking control not only of how he will be remembered,

qua magnitudo largissime suppetebat; nos quam angustis terminis claudamur etiam tacente me perspicis, nisi forte volumus scholasticas tibi atque, ut ita dicam, umbraticas litteras mittere (Ep. 9.2.); for more on this letter and its implications, see below.

²⁶ Cornelius Nepos is the first to cite Cicero's letters, doing so in his *Life of Atticus* (Nep. Att. 16.3); for a broad treatment of the early publication history of Cicero's letters, see Nicholson 1998.

but his *familiares* as well. If Clarus were ever to complain, Pliny has provided his response in the very first line – *Frequenter hortatus es [...]* – “Well, you asked for it.”²⁷

This sense of complication follows immediately in the next line, where Pliny (again, emphatically beginning where his previous sentence left off with a first-person verb) writes: *Collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus venerat* (“I have collected [them] here not beholden to chronology – since I’m not writing history – but as each one came into my hands”). While this sentence has historically been interpreted as indicating how Pliny wrote and organized the *Letters*, I think it is far more useful to see this statement as an expression of how to read them. The two elements of this statement – *collegi non servato temporis ordine [...]* *sed ut quaeque in manus venerat* and the parenthetical *neque enim historiam componebam* each suggest different strategies of reading and serve a programmatic role in interrogating the nature of the *Letters*, forcing readers (and re-readers) to question what kind of literary project the work as a whole represents. If we take Pliny at his word that the organization of the letters as we have them precludes them from being history, we must necessarily follow up: what is he writing? Pliny, at the start of his work, lays down an essential question about what force the organization of a collection of prose letters can have, and the kind of literary implications that these architectonics bear out.

Once again, Pliny’s dense intertextuality helps support such a reading – in this case, Ovid and the *Epistulae ex Ponto*. At the close of Book 3, Ovid issues a denial on consciously organizing the letters with some kind of purpose – *Postmodo conlectas utcumque sine ordine iunxi/hoc opus electum ne mihi forte putes*²⁸ (“Later collecting them, anyhow, I linked them regardless: in case you think perhaps this work was selected by me”). The allusion is a striking one on several counts. Most obviously, Pliny has invited another form of writing, here poetry, into the already crowded catalogue he has offered in just the first two lines of *Ep.* 1.1. We can now be even more confident in reading *sed ut quaeque in manus venerat* as heavily ironic, a learned wink that signals from the start that the arrangement of the letters is anything but accidental. Instead, rather than seeing the predecessors of these prose letters as Ciceronian (and thus organized by recipient) or the philosophically chronological (a Seneca), we ought instead to consider the *Letters* as a book of poetry with Hellenistic sensibilities much in line with the contemporary readings listed above and to seek thematic echoes intratextually that create a work that is greater than its individual parts.²⁹ From a further structural standpoint, Ovid’s poem closes the third book of his *Epistulae*,

27 The last letter of Book 1 likewise addresses the theme of regret, where Pliny asks Baebius Hispanus to secure a fair price for an estate for Suetonius: *Haec tibi exposui, quo magis scires, quantum esset ille mihi ego tibi debitor, si praediorum istud, quod commendatur his dotibus, tam salubriter emerit ut paenitentiae locum non relinquat* (*Ep.* 1.24.4).

28 *Ov. Pont.* 3.9.53–54; for text see Wheeler 1924.

29 For thematic cross-references in the *Epistulae ex Ponto*, see Galasso 1995, 17–39.

which at the time of its original publication was the final book of the work.³⁰ We are encouraged, therefore, to reflect on this statement in reverse, with a backwards glance over poems we have just read. According to Bodel and Sherwin-White,³¹ Pliny's first batch of published letters also amounted to three books. Providing this allusion to Ovid at the start has us instead looking forward, serving as a kind of road-map by which to navigate the letters. This single pointed reference to Ovid's own half-hearted denial of having any hand in organizing the *Epistulae ex Ponto* signals that Pliny has done just the opposite.

But while the alignment with Ovid on the one hand gestures toward a kind of control-through-randomness in terms of the arrangement, it at the same time establishes an uncomfortable parallel between Pliny and the figure of the exiled poet. The implications are beyond playful and border instead on gallows humor.³² Ovid has recourse to the epistle because he is separated from Rome and his library; the letter activates, as it so often does, an expression of loss and a desire to bridge the disconnect between distant shores. Ovid writes letters because it is all that is left for him to write. Pliny is far more enigmatic. He does not tell us explicitly from whom, or perhaps, from when, he is exiled, though his aforementioned lament at *Ep.* 9.2 provides a strong indication. Writing in answer to Statius Sabinus' request for more frequent and longer letters, Pliny complains that there is simply not enough material for him to call upon (*Ep.* 9.2.2–4):

Neque enim eadem nostra condicio quae M. Tulli, ad cuius exemplum nos vocas. illi enim et copiosissimum ingenium, et par ingenio qua varietas rerum qua magnitudine largissime suppetebat; nos quam angustis terminis claudamur etiam tacente me perspicis, nisi forte volumus scholasticas tibi atque, ut ita dicam, umbraticas litteras mittere.³³

My situation is not the same as that of Cicero, whose examples you ask me to follow. His was a most expansive talent, and to match it was supplied a great variety of important issues. You know without my saying how I am confined by these narrow limits. Perhaps though I will send you an schoolboy's exercise that, so to speak, "plays the part."

³⁰ Galasso 1995, 195.

³¹ On the publication periods of the *Letters*, see Sherwin-White 1966, 52–56 and Bodel 2015, 13–19.

³² Pliny is not the first writer in his family to begin a sprawling prose text with a reference to poetry – Pliny the Elder begins his *Naturalis Historia* with his own *licentior epistula* reworking Catullus 1 (*namque tu solebas/nugas esse aliquid meas putare*) (Plin. *Nat.* pr. 1); see Rackham 1938 for text. The self-deprecation is familiar from Quintilian or Statius and though the esoterica of the *NH* may be written off as *nugae* for some, no one could confuse Pliny the Elder's 37 books for Catullus' *lepidum novum labellum*, or for that matter, Cornelius Nepos' *tribus [...] chartis, doctis [...] et laboriosis* of all Italic history.

³³ For similar remarks on the paucity of contemporary material, see *Ep.* 3.20 and Tac. *Ann.* 4.32.

Now nine books and over 200 epistles in, we are told that these letters may just be an extended rhetorical exercise, Pliny writing *in persona Ciceronis*.³⁴ The political capital of these letters, first called into question by Pliny's self-alignment with Ovid at *Letters* 1.1, is seemingly confirmed as counterfeit as we near the end of the collection. With *Letters* 9.2, Pliny tells us he has mined Cicero's epistles like any good student of style, but he reminds us to look at his letters as written by an ersatz republican.

If Pliny's Ovidian reference suggests approaching the *Letters* as a book of Hellenistic poetry, and one written mindful of the gulf between imperial present and republican past at that, his comment *neque enim historiam componebam* establishes a contrast between epistolography and history that likewise runs through the collection. The legacy of this statement has been concerned overwhelmingly with the content outside the parenthetical – *sed ut quaeque in manus venerat* – in efforts to reconstruct the internal chronology of the letters and to date their initial drafting and publication.³⁵ As in the case of the early modern attempts at the chronological reorganization of the Ciceronian letters, Mommsen and those scholars that followed his lead saw in Pliny's letters a unique opportunity to reconstruct his character and his past, much in the same way the Ciceronian corpus has been viewed as a window into its author's soul, a legacy that recalls Demetrius.³⁶ Even modern critical works that rightly reject such transparent readings of the *Letters* elide³⁷ Pliny's statement here – *neque enim historiam componebam* – and in doing so ignore a panoply of generic questions that are foregrounded at the start of his work.

It must be asked, if Pliny had arranged the letters chronologically, would the *Letters* be a form of *historia*? Such an equivocation between sequential organization and *historia* is highly reductive, and would do so to the exclusion of histories that do not conform to such strict guidelines. Furthermore, as Gibson has recently shown, only one major letter collection can be said in any sense to be chronological, the *Epistulae Morales*.³⁸ Even with Seneca, the letters exclude authorial datelines and rarely refer to secure events; they maintain a sequence to the extent that one builds on what has come before to blaze Lucillius' philosophical trail. This fact further underscores the irregularity of Pliny's statement – if these are explicitly *epistulae*, then why contend that they are not *historia*? If it was the standard in presentations of ancient letters to eschew chronology, then why make the statement at all?

³⁴ The adjective *umbraticus* is quite rare; Cicero (*de Orat.* 1.157.6 and *Orat.* 64.2) uses the word to refer to specialized scholastic activities, as does Quintilian (*Inst.* 1.2.18.4); Petronius uses the word to refer to "learned" teachers of rhetoric (2.4).

³⁵ Mommsen 1869 provided the initial framework for grappling with this question.

³⁶ Shackleton-Bailey 1972, xii in his biography of Cicero likewise leans on the letters for their insight into character: "In Cicero's case, the materials do not allow a full and balanced biography, but there is enough to show the manner of man he was. The design of this book is to let him do that, as far as possible, for himself."

³⁷ Sherwin-White 1966, 86; the heading for his note on this line tellingly reads: *collegi non servato temporis ordine [...] sed ut quaeque in manus venerat*.

³⁸ Gibson 2012, 62.

Part of the answer to this question lies with Cicero, and the early reception of his letters. In his *Life of Atticus*, Nepos, after commenting on the usefulness of certain rolls of Cicero's correspondence in reconstructing the relationships between Cicero and both his *familiares* and Atticus, remarks of the letters: *quae qui legat, non multum desideret historiam contextam eorum temporum*³⁹ ("he who reads the letters would not want for a continuous history of these times"). Nepos goes on to state that the letters contain within them the mind-set and inclinations of the pivotal actors within the Republic during Cicero's life and that (mirroring the faith of so many modern editors) "everything within them is clear and it is easily understood that the wisdom within them is a kind of divination." Indeed, Nepos concludes, Cicero not only predicts the future (*futura praedixit*), but he does so "singing like *vates*" (*cecinit ut vates*).⁴⁰ In light of Nepos' comments, Pliny's movement away from *historiam* [*contextam*] is an implicit rejection of one way that Cicero's letters were read and interpreted after his death. Rather than provide a window to the soul, a clear picture of an era, and a prophetic view of the future, Pliny instead offers obfuscation. The paratextual elements of *Ep.* 1.1 and its companion, *Epistles* 9.40, the final non-Trajanic letter in the collection, only bring this motif into further relief, opening the collection with a letter to Clarus and closing with a missive to Fuscus.⁴¹ The effect is one that moves from Pliny as protégé to Pliny as patron, and the movement from dawn to dusk casts the author as a master of time. However, in light of Nepos' comments and Pliny's rejection of the vatic elements of an "historical" reading of prose letters, one that is grounded in *historiam contextam*, Pliny's dateless letters that come to the reader *ut quaeque in manus venerat* are the opposite of the Ciceronian model. The more we read Pliny, the more clouded he, the world he inhabits, and the future becomes.

III.

As with his invocation of Ovid, the more we read through the collection and follow these threads, the more Pliny challenges the foundations of these generic models. Pliny may aver in *Letters* 1.1 that he is not writing history, but his consistent returns to the topic throughout the collection are cause for reevaluation. In what amounts to a condensed guide to historiographical writing, Pliny stresses in several letters that accuracy and truth are the essential elements of the genre. At *Letters* 7.17.3, defending the public performance of history, Pliny calls the genre one *quae non ostentationi sed*

³⁹ Nepos, *Life of Atticus* 16; for text, see Rolfe 1929.

⁴⁰ The entire passage reads (Nep. *Att.* 16.4): *Sic enim Omnia de studiis principum, vitiis ducum, mutationibus rei publicae perscripta sunt, ut nihil in his non appareat et facile existimari possit prudentiam quodam modo esse divinationem. non enim Cicero ea solum, quae vivo se acciderunt futura praedixit, sed etiam, quae nunc usu veniunt, cecinit ut vates.*

⁴¹ Cf. Marchesi 2008, 250 on the same relationships.

fidei veritati componitur. This same connection between historiography and accuracy is drawn in *Letters* 9.19, wherein Pliny quotes an anecdote from the early imperial historian Cluvius Rufus who, in asking for pardon from Verginius in case anything in Cluvius' work should offer offense, says: *Scis, Vergini, quae historiae fides debeatur* ("You know, Verginius, what fidelity is owed to history").⁴² *Ep.* 7.33, a missive to Tacitus in which Pliny offers up a trial in which he participated for possible inclusion within Tacitus' work,⁴³ begins with language reminiscent of Nepos' comment on the effects of Cicero's letters: *Auguror nec me fallit augurium, historias tuas immortales futuras* ("I believe that your histories will be immortal; a prophecy which will surely prove correct"). He closes with the following (*Ep.* 7.33.10):

Haec [res], utcumque se habent, notiora clariora maiora tu facies; quamquam non exigo ut excedas actae rei modum. nam nec historia debet egredi veritatem, et honeste factis veritas sufficit. vale.

These affairs, however you see them, you can make more well-known, famous, greater. Do note, though, that I am not asking you to go beyond the due measure of the facts. History ought not to exceed the truth, and truth in turn suffices for honest deeds.

Once again, we have truth and accuracy – *veritatem [...]* *honeste [...]* *veritas* – as the essential components of *historia*. This kind of definitional consistency of history runs throughout the *Letters*,⁴⁴ as does the emphasis on making events *notiora clariora maiora*; indeed, the central element of that triptych, *clariora*, raises allusions to *Letters* 1.1 that are only intensified by the fact that the letter that follows, *Ep.* 7.23, is addressed to Septicius Clarus. The role of history, then, seems clear – its goals, its purpose, even its lofty position in the hierarchy of genres.⁴⁵ If we take Pliny's disavowal of history at *Ep.* 1.1 to heart, we are left to wonder to what extent he has jettisoned its effects along with it.

Nowhere is this tension between historiography and epistles more expressed than in *Ep.* 6.16 and *Ep.* 6.20, Pliny's account of his uncle's death on Vesuvius addressed to the most prominent historian of the day, Tacitus. These letters are perhaps the most enduring of Pliny's entire corpus, lively examples of the kinds of death nar-

⁴² *Ep.* 9.19.5; the entire section reads: *Ipse sum testis, familiariter ab eo dilectus probatusque, semel omnino me audiente proventum, ut de rebus suis hoc unum referret, ita semel aliquando Cluvium locutum: 'Scis, Vergini, quae historiae fides debeatur, proinde si quid in historiis meis legis aliter ac velis rogo ignoscas.' ad hoc ille: 'Tune ignoras, Cluvi, ideo me fecisse quod feci, ut esset liberum vobis scribere quae libuisset?'*

⁴³ The account of the trial, which took place between 93 and 94 CE, had presumably not yet been reached by Tacitus' *Histories*. It is unclear if the episode was included.

⁴⁴ For more on history and truth, see also *Ep.* 7.17, 8.13, 9.19.

⁴⁵ At *Ep.* 9.27, Pliny writes: *Quanta potestas, quanta dignitas, quanta maiestas, quantum denique numen sit historiae, cum frequenter alias tum proxime sensi.*

ratives that pepper contemporary Latin historiography.⁴⁶ But at the close of *Ep.* 6.16 and *Ep.* 6.20, Pliny remarks on the incompatibility of history and the epistolary mode, both in terms of form and content (*Ep.* 6.16.21–22):

Interim Miseni ego et mater – sed nihil ad historiam, nec tu aliud quam de exitu eius scire voluisti. Finem ergo faciam. unum adiciam, omnia me quibus interfueram quaeque statim, cum maxime vera memorantur audieram, persecutum. tu potissima excerptes; aliud est enim epistulam aliud historiam, aliud amico aliud omnibus scribere. vale.

Meanwhile my mother and I were at Misenum – but this does not pertain to history, nor did you ask to know about anything other than my uncle's death. Therefore, I will finish, except to add one thing, that I have described everything for which I was present or which I heard immediately after, when events are most easily recalled as accurate. You select what is most useful; for there is a difference between what belongs in a letter and what suits a history, and to write to a friend versus for all.

Ep. 6.20.20

Nobis tamen ne tunc quidem, quamquam et expertis periculum et exspectantibus, abeundi consilium, donec de avunculo nuntius. haec nequaquam historia digna non scripturus leges et tibi scilicet qui requisisti imputabis, si digna ne epistula quidem videbuntur. vale.

Not even then, despite the dangers we had experienced and were yet expecting, did the idea of leaving strike us until we heard news about my uncle. These details are not worthy of history, nor when you read them will you intent to write them down; but if they do not even seem fit to be recorded in a letter, you should blame yourself for asking for them in the first place.

While certainly playful, these closing statements appended to the heels of some of Pliny's longest and most narratively rich letters issue the same set of provocations as *Ep.* 1.1. Pliny comes perilously close to writing history, and all that seems to hold Pliny from slipping from the epistolary mode, quite literally, is his mother entering the scene – *Interim Miseni ego et mater*. Though the conceit stresses obedience to notions of epistolary stylistics (namely, focusing a letter on a single topic),⁴⁷ the separation of the *Ep.* 6.16 and *Ep.* 6.20 makes explicit the break between any notion of *historia contexta* and the *Letters*. Ash is certainly correct in characterizing *Ep.* 6.16 and *Ep.* 6.20 as a kind of “miniaturisation” of history within the collection,⁴⁸ an action that is itself echoed by Pliny's self-described actions at *Ep.* 6.20.5, wherein amidst Vesuvian discharges he reads and excerpts Livy.⁴⁹ These letters, then, on their own as individuals, stand as a kind of history; when placed in their sequence,

⁴⁶ Cf. Sen. *Suas.* 6.21 on the popularity of *exitus* letters; note that Pliny's friend Suetonius closes each of the *Lives* with an account of the death of the Caesar; Tac. *Hist.* 1.3.1 remarks on this as well, as does Ann. 16.16.2; see also Pomeroy 1991 on the *exitus* scene in general, and Ash 2003, 222–225 on its position in Pliny in particular.

⁴⁷ *Volui tibi multa alia scribere, sed totus animus in hac una contemplatione defixus est* (*Ep.* 2.1.12); for more on this idea of “thematic unity,” see Sherwin-White 1966, 3–4.

⁴⁸ Ash 2006, 224. Additionally, Ash suggests the possibility that the two letters were originally one, a point that gives further credence to the idea that the separation of these letters is emphatic.

⁴⁹ *Posco librum Titi Livi, et quasi per otium lego atque etiam ut coeperam excerpto* (*Ep.* 6.20.5).

separated, betray their form as epistles, and in doing so, potentially withhold any of the notoriety, truth, and fame that they at first presented.

Borrowing from the terminology of affordances, we can observe how Pliny establishes an at times paradoxical work that problematizes a number of qualities at the intersection of epistolography and historiography. First, there is the affordance of sincerity – the latent openness of the letter, contrasted with the intricate arrangement and intertextual play that can only come from a polished, worked-over text. Second, the idea of distance, one that we have seen Pliny interrogate in two distinct ways: the physical distance as suggested by the gulf between the writer and addressee; and the metaphorical distance between Pliny's political and literary antecedents, some of whom – Ovid and Cicero most prominently – suffered their own literal and figurative isolation. Finally, there is the direct generic conflict that Pliny establishes between letters and history that baits the reader to evaluate and filter information through two competing hierarchies. Within each of these dynamics, Pliny does not allow for a simple resolution, nor can we confidently state the tenor of his program. Do the tensions that Pliny establishes in the *Letters* underscore the statement that he made in the *Panegyricus*, that certain forms of discourse are broken after years of abuse? Or, can we read his experimentation in a positive light – that what we have the *Letters* is precisely the new kind form that is the necessary rejoinder to all those years of bad emperors?

With all this in mind, what then may we say that history looks like for readers of Pliny, and how can his use of epistolography influence audience reception and experience of his work? The pessimistic view of Pliny's attempt at creating his "History in *Letters*" ignores one crucial aspect of the epistolarity noted above – the idea that letters, by their very nature, seek responses from their audience. Audiences may take up the *Letters*, respond to them as Nepos did to Cicero, and read and create from them a history that never was written. Indeed, at several points in the *Letters*, Pliny speaks of this very kind of reaction that he receive from his reading public, both among those works which he had already published prior to the *Letters*⁵⁰ and the *Letters* themselves. The success of the their publication even leads to one friend successfully requesting that he be addressed in a forthcoming volume of the correspondence.⁵¹ To these must be added *Ep.* 9.23, in which Pliny reports on an anecdote from Tacitus', wherein an *equites* listening to the learned exposition of the historian at the Circensian games asks: *Tacitus es an Plinius?* But while these letters indicate that Pliny's readership appears to act positively towards his own self-memorialization and myth-making, it is necessary to point out his anxieties regarding how his contemporary audiences – and particularly audiences of history – respond and behave. At *Ep.* 3.16, Pliny writes to Maecilius Nepos relating the story of Arria, whose fame and famous words – *Paete, non dolet* – have spread throughout Rome. But while

⁵⁰ *Ep.* 1.2

⁵¹ *Ep.* 9.11.

Arria and her courage in the face of Claudius will never be forgotten, Pliny bemoans the fact that she is remembered for the wrong reasons; instead, it is her resolve to die a noble death when her son-in-law Thrasea attempts to persuade her not to commit suicide that is more worthy of remembrance. His statement at the opening of his letter (echoed in its close) is nothing short of axiomatic: *Adnotasse videor facta dictaque virorum feminarumque alia clariora esse alia maiora* (“I think that I have stated before that among the famous deeds and actions of men and women, others are more noteworthy and greater”). The same sentiment is echoed at *Letters* 6.24, in which Pliny regrets that station, rather than actions themselves, are what affect fame and remembrance: *Quam multum interest quid a quoque fiat!* (“How much difference it makes by whom some deed is done!”).⁵²

But as I emphasized from the start, letters merit a response and seek to be answered. The *Letters* present a world where who and what history remembers is a fickle thing. Immortalization is contingent on opportunities to perform great and memorable deeds, and in a Rome pacified by benign autocracy of Trajan, such occasions for remembrance are few and far between. Indeed, for an individual like Pliny the Elder – or for a writer like his nephew – recourse for fame may be best sought outside the political sphere and in the natural world. And even if one is fortunate enough to qualify for inclusion in the work of a Tacitus, there still remain the capricious audiences of the moment. But if we are to consider the *Letters* holistically, I believe it is necessary to consider these utterances and complaints protreptically, in a similar vein as presented by Duchêne in this volume. Pliny calls on audiences to relearn how to consume and how to appreciate their history, and in doing so, creates a network of readers who must respond, write back, and create a history where there was not one before. His self-presentation in the *Letters*, much like the letter form, exists as a contradiction of itself. He performs the role of an active, engaged elite, hearkening back to republican Rome, a government insider with the ear of the emperor, the center of an expansive coterie of *familiares* representing the heights of contemporary power and culture, and himself the author of a work which unites poetry and prose, and with its balance between first and last addressee, imparts a sense of universal order. But at the same time, he stands as the ultimate outsider, the figure of Ovid at Tomis, writing back to the Rome that he has lost for help in bending the will of that most august emperor, a writer of prose letters exiled from a time when prose letters contained content that had actual import, an author and statesman who, despite indications to the opposite, nevertheless admits at the start of his work that its ultimate organizational power does not rest with him. Pliny’s *Letters*, the relationships they depict, the interaction between epistles and history, function under the same set of tensions, the same push and pull, that is operative for all such epistolographic works. Pliny establishes his prose letters to be considered as a kind

52 *Ep.* 6.24; he goes on to state: *Eadem enim facta claritate vel obscuritate facientum aut tolluntur altissime aut humilime deprimatur.*

of poetry, to not be read in isolation, but as a whole, polished book. But whatever strength Pliny's epistles may gather from this holistic treatment is undermined by their relationship to historiography. These letters cannot offer the truth and fame that history offers, making the deeds of men and women *notiora clariora maiora*. These "snapshots," no matter how historical they may be, will nevertheless never be history, precisely because they are snapshots. Instead, they are doomed to represent Pliny as always existing at the margins, somewhere in the spaces outside his letters. But by reading, by responding, Pliny's audiences, contemporary and otherwise, are able to make his *Letters* history.

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