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Neque enim historiam componebam: Pliny's First Epistle and his Attitude towards Historiography

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Abstract: In his prefatory epistle Pliny the Younger in various ways aims at *captatio benevolentiae* and reveals his inmost interest in historiography despite his disclaimer. He restricts the differentiation of his epistles from historiography only in the non-observance of the chronological order, implies the validity and credibility of his work and uses *topoi* which are conventional in the historiographical *exordia*. The modesty that dominates here is consistent with his intention of a more modest, less ambitious, alternative attempt at historical writing that includes autobiographical details. In this way Pliny satisfies his desire without being obligated to comply with the demands of historiography and avoids a comparison with Roman historians. This sense is further reinforced by an intertextual discourse with Tacitus' *Agricola*, which allows Pliny to connect himself with a behavioural model of his time.

In all probability, the first letter in the first book of Pliny's Epistles is the last prior to its publication and it would seem to be selected so as to act as an introduction to it¹. In the particular text Pliny states that he accepted Septicius Clarus' request to collect and publish all of those epistles that he composed with some care and provides information as to the method that he followed:

C. PLINIVS SEPTICIO <CLARO> SVO 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.

You have often urged me to collect and publish any letters of mine which were composed with some care. I have now made a collection, not keeping to the original order as I was not writing history, but taking them as they came to my hand. It

1 See A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford 1966) 85, where the resemblance with the prefatory letters attached to several volumes of Martial and of Statius' *Silvae* is also noted. According to Ch. E. Murgia, "Pliny's Letters and the *Dialogus*", *HarvSt* 89 (1985) 181: "Ep. 1.1 forms an epistolary preface for the collection, though originally it seems to have been written as a preface for Book 1 alone"; cf. also Fr. Beutel, *Vergangenheit als Politik: Neue Aspekte im Werk des jüngerer Plinius*, Studien zur klassischen Philologie 121 (Frankfurt am Main 2000) 157 with n. 437.

remains for you not to regret having made the suggestion and for me not to regret following it; for then I shall set about recovering any letters which have hitherto been put away and forgotten, and I shall not suppress any which I may write in future.²

In this brief letter, however, the writer reveals much more than is at first evident³. Thus, apart from expressing his decision to publish his epistles and despite the overriding tone of decency and modesty, Pliny implicitly attempts to promote his work and secure its best possible reception, meanwhile protecting his image. In the meantime, some further elements are brought to light, which prove useful to the comprehension of his work and his stance as to other literary genres, particularly historiography.

The first point worth noting is that Pliny attributes the decision for the publication of his epistles to another person and the pressure he received from him. Thus, he presents it as a request on the part of the society which he must respect and not as a result of his own free will. In this way Pliny is depicted as modest and even hesitant as to the task in question, while he also removes part of the responsibility from his person⁴, in the case that the published work is not received as positively as was hoped. Furthermore, he seeks to create the benevolence of the public with regard to any literary weaknesses that may exist in his work, which are overlooked in favour of the pressing need to satisfy public demand for publication. In other words, there is the implication that Pliny himself has not been too particular about the stylistic elaboration of his epistles, since, while writing them, he did not have publication in mind and that had that been the case, he may have taken greater care. Hence, his work should be received with leniency and be judged as merely intended for communication purposes.

The same is achieved by the use of the phrase *si quas paulo curatius scripsissem*, since with *paulo* Pliny on the one hand is expressing modesty⁵, while on the

2 For the Latin text, I follow the OCT edition C. Plini Caecili Secundi, *Epistularum Libri Decem*, ed. Sir R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford 1963); the translation is that of B. Radice, *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus*, in two volumes (Cambridge, Mass./London 1969) for Loeb.

3 Quite aptly this epistle has been regarded as programmatic. For its programmatic role, see S. E. Hoffer, *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger*, American Classical Studies 43 (Atlanta, Georgia 1999) 15–27; Beutel (above, n. 1) 157ff., who also investigates its function at a meta-epistolary level; J. Henderson, *Pliny's Statue: The Letters, Self-Portraiture & Classical Art* (Exeter 2002) 21.

4 This motif is very popular especially during late antiquity; see T. Janson, *Latin Prose Prefaces: Studies in Literary Conventions*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis; Studia Latina Stockholmiensia 13 (Stockholm 1964) 116–124; cf. also M. Ludolph, *Epistolographie und Selbstdarstellung: Untersuchungen zu den 'Paradebriefen' Plinius des Jüngeren*, Classica Monacensia 17 (Tübingen 1997) 99–101 and Hoffer (above, n. 3) 21, who, however, rightly observes (n. 19): “The usual version, that the friend gave the writer the confidence or motivation to write the book [...], obviously cannot be used for the letters, which are theoretically already written”.

5 Cf. Hoffer (above, n. 3) 20–21, who underlines that the comparative *paulo curatius* serves as a diminutive and reinforces the modest tone of the passage.

other hand is implying that he was not as thorough as he could have been with regard to the literary value of his work⁶. Pliny thus achieves multiple aims. On the one hand, he protects himself by ensuring that he does not raise the expectations of his readers, which if great, could eventually expose him to negative criticism. On the other hand, he aims to surprise his readers positively, as the latter will discover an evident literary elegance which they did not expect.

This sense of lack of particular care that Pliny wants to convey to the reader regarding his work is also evident in the phrase *colligerem publicaremque*. The choice of the specific words could possibly be attributed to a tendency towards variation and sound play (*-rem -rem-*) according to the stylistic principles of Asianism. Their presence, however, also implies how unprepared Pliny appears to be for the publication of his epistles. He does not even appear to have made the effort to collect the corpus, let alone publish it, and that he is doing so as a result of Septicius' frequent prompting. In fact, as he adds below, many of his epistles *adhuc neglectae iacent*. This phrase also points to how remote the idea of publication was for him and underlines the absence of any particular care he may have paid to the publication of the collection.

Despite all the modesty and apparent anxiety the writer exhibits as to the outcome of his undertaking, his confidence in the value of his writing is also evident. Through the phrase *si quas paulo curatius scripsissem* Pliny indirectly calls on his readers to appreciate his work, hinting that some literary quality will be enjoyed; at the same time, he implies that his real literary abilities are far greater, since in the particular examples that Septicius had in mind the *cura* shown by Pliny was far from great. In the meantime, by drawing attention to his minimal *cura*, Pliny hones the ground for thoughts concerning the primary role of his *ingenium*⁷. In other words, since the *cura* in the composition of the epistles is not great, then it implicitly follows that Septicius' positive reception must primarily be attributed to the presence of the *ingenium*. Furthermore, the fact that his epistles have already enjoyed some response acts as a herald to the final result. More specifically, if Septicius liked the epistles enough to prompt Pliny frequently to have them published, it is likely that the rest of the reading public will feel the same way. Thus, Septicius is employed as an example that others are expected to follow.

By attributing the collection and publication of his epistles to his friend's prompting rather than to his own personal intention, Pliny adroitly underlines

6 According to Henderson (above, n. 3) 196, n. 17, with this phrase "Pliny specifically repudiates Seneca's apology for his *Letters* (75.1): *minus tibi accuratas a me epistulas mitti quaeris. quis enim accurate loquitur nisi qui vult putide loqui?*".

7 On the connection of the two concepts in Pliny's literary views, cf. his comments on Pliny the Elder and Silius Italicus respectively: *Epist.* 3.5.3: '*De iaculatione equestri unus*'; *hunc cum praefectus alae militaret, pari ingenio curaque composuit*; 7.5: *scribebat carmina maiore cura quam ingenio, non numquam iudicia hominum recitationibus experiebatur*. Cf. also *Epist.* 9.14.

his work's credibility, as in this way he is implying its authenticity⁸. Thus, Pliny appears to be publishing real epistles that he had already sent out and not fictitious letters or even revised versions of the originals. Besides, the fact that when these epistles were composed Pliny did not have their publication in mind, removes any suspicions concerning a possible distortion of the truth in favour of a positive reception of his work. Moreover, the case for its credibility is further reinforced by the reference to the little *cura* taken during the composition of the epistles, since in this way it is implied that literary affectation did not affect their validity and authenticity.

Similar conclusions could be reached through Pliny's claim that the collection and classification of his epistles happened without any criteria, but just as they came to his hand. He justifies his decision not to follow the chronological order by stating that he was not writing history⁹. This statement is not entirely accurate; besides, such prefatory proclamations often invite justifiable suspicions¹⁰. It is most likely that the various books were not published simultaneously as a whole and it is reasonable to assume that Pliny is referring to the internal order of the letters in a book. Every epistle deals with a separate subject, which Pliny handles with care and attention to literary elegance, while the structure of each of the books is not random, but is based on the principle of alternation of themes and motifs, so that through *varietas* monotony is avoided and the audience spared¹¹. Pliny's justification, however, concerning the non-observance of the chronological order, i.e. that he was not composing history, presents a subject of special interest and conceals deeper expediencies.

By referring to the lack of a strict chronological order, Pliny continues his attempt to underline the absence of affectation in a collection which was undoubtedly published with great care¹² as well as to conceal his interest in the

8 The question of whether Pliny's epistles are authentic or not has given rise to many discussions; see, e.g., F. Gamberini, *Stylistic Theory and Practice in the Younger Pliny*, *Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien* 11 (Hildesheim/Zürich/New York 1983) 122–161; Sherwin-White (above, n. 1) 11–20; A. A. Bell, Jr., "A Note on Revision and Authenticity in Pliny's Letters", *AJPh* 110 (1989) 460–466.

9 For the chronological order as a characteristic of historiography since Thucydides, see Beutel (above, n. 1) 158–159, who cites (158, n. 444) Thuc. 2.1.

10 Cf. Murgia (above, n. 1) 200, n. 59: "Prefatory disclaimers are conventional, and usually ground for suspecting just what is disclaimed".

11 On the whole subject, see Sherwin-White (above, n. 1) 21–22 and 86; Ludolph (above, n. 4) 57–58 and 92; for *varietas* as a main stylistic principle of Pliny's Epistles, see also Beutel (above, n. 1) 133–134; S. Mratschek, "*Illa nostra Italia*. Plinius und die 'Wiedergeburt' der Literatur in der Transpadana", in: L. Castagna/E. Lefèvre (eds.), *Plinius der Jüngere und seine Zeit*, *Beiträge zur Alttertumskunde* 187 (München/Leipzig 2003) 226.

12 Cf. J. Cowan, *C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi Epistularum libri duo. Pliny's Letters, Books I. and II., with Introductions, Notes, and Plan*, *Classical Series* (London/New York 1889) XXVIII: "The words *not servato*, etc., were simply intended to give a stamp of agreeable negligence to a collection which had undoubtedly been edited with the greatest care. In any case the words prove nothing, for the books may have been published separately, and the words may only

literary elegance of his work. Furthermore, it has already been noted¹³ that via this statement Pliny attempts to underline the differentiation of his epistles from those of others, as for example those of Cicero's to Atticus, which were published in chronological order and could therefore be read for their historical significance¹⁴ and not necessarily for their literary value. Let us not forget that, according to Pliny, history gives pleasure even when lacking in *eloquentia*, because it satisfies people's natural curiosity¹⁵. By admitting, however, that he does not follow a chronological order, which would make his work resemble historiography, Pliny has two further primary aims. On the one hand he is following a common practice in Latin literature requesting his audience's benevolence (*captatio benevolentiae*), based on the premise that his work must not be judged strictly as if it were historiography. Latin historiography had already been elevated to a demanding genre of a high standard and its undertaking did not merely presuppose that the writer gave an account of events, but also that he spoke the truth with literary elegance¹⁶. On the contrary, Pliny seems to be claiming that his work is of a lesser literary genre¹⁷. Consequently, by separating him from the practice of historiography, Pliny avoids a comparison he clearly feels would not favour him, namely between himself and the Latin historians, especially Tacitus¹⁸, who had by then entered the field of historical writing.

On the other hand, Pliny's statement suggestively highlights the value of his letters. By drawing attention to the fact that his work differs from that of histo-

refer to the first book"; cf. also E. T. Merrill, *Selected Letters of the Younger Pliny*, Classical Series (London 1903, rpt. 1935) 160, who suggests that the phrase *ut quaeque in manus venerat* is "not to be taken too literally. A skilful selection and a careful arrangement are evident in all the books, but the author's effort is to give the effect of casualness, as if his most elaborate efforts were tossed off *currente calamo*". For the phrase *ut quaeque in manus venerat*, see also the interesting remarks of E. Gowers, *The Loaded Table: Representations of Food in Roman Literature* (Oxford 1993) 275ff., who suggests that the phrase could be connected with the *cena* presented in *Epist.* 1.15, where she finds social, moral, and literary connotations.

13 See Merrill (above, n. 12) 159–160; Hoffer (above, n. 3) 22–24.

14 For the resemblance of Cicero's letters to Atticus with historiography, cf. Nep., *Att.* 16.3–4.

15 Cf. *Epist.* 5.8.4: *orationi enim et carmini parva gratia, nisi eloquentia est summa: historia quoquo modo scripta delectat. sunt enim homines natura curiosi, et quamlibet nuda rerum cognitione capiuntur, ut qui sermunculis etiam fabellisque ducantur.*

16 Cf. Cic., *De orat.* 2.54, where most Roman historians of that period are referred to as *non exornatores rerum, sed tantum modo narratores*; cf. also the theory of historiography in Cic., *De orat.* 2.62ff. and Tacitus' phrase *pari eloquentia ac libertate* in the prologue to the *Historiae* (1.1) and see A. D. Leeman, "Structure and Meaning in the Prologues of Tacitus", in: id., *Form und Sinn: Studien zur römischen Literatur (1954–1984)*, *Studien zur klassischen Philologie* 15 (Frankfurt am Main 1985) 317–348, esp. 322ff.

17 Cf. Hoffer (above, n. 3) 22; Gowers (above, n. 12) 273.

18 For the relations between the two writers, see, e.g., M. Griffin, "Pliny and Tacitus", *Scripta Classica Israelica* 18 (1999) 139–158; K. A. Neuhausen, "Plinius proximus Tacito: Bemerkungen zu einem Topos der römischen Literaturkritik", *RhM* N.F. 111 (1968) 333–357; R. Syme, *Tacitus* I (Oxford 1958, rpt. 1997) 59–131.

riography only in that it lacks chronological order, Pliny is implying that in all other aspects there is not much difference. Thus, despite his claims supporting the opposite¹⁹, Pliny indirectly discloses his ambition that his own work could be compared to historiography and not be found wanting in crucial aspects such as validity and credibility. It has been argued that the demand for truth is a main point that differentiates Pliny's Epistles from historiography²⁰. I believe that by implying the credibility of his work Pliny endeavours to diminish the distance between them. This implication could be combined with the epistolographer's attempt to emphasize the absence of particular care in his letters. As already noted above, apart from its other expediencies this clarification also constitutes an implication that his work was not affected by any factors that would compromise the authenticity of his thought.

Such comments are frequently found in historiography, where the historian may feel the need to state that his approach to events is unbiased²¹. Interpreted in this light, Pliny's words could be seen in the same context as similar statements made by Sallust²², Livy²³, or Tacitus, whose famous phrase *sine ira et studio*²⁴ is the most characteristic example. At the same time, in this way Pliny appears loyal to the principle of *verum*, which is a central axis of historiography²⁵. Thus,

- 19 For prefatory disclaimers as usual ground for suspecting just what is disclaimed, see above, n. 10. Besides, in *Epist.* 5.12.3: *materiam ex titulo cognoscas, cetera liber explicabit, quem iam nunc oportet ita consuescere, ut sine praefatione intellegatur*, Pliny depreciates the role of an epistolary preface using the rationale that the subject of a *liber* is given by the title and everything else is explained by the text itself, which can speak for itself. For Pliny's views on *praefatio*, cf. also *Epist.* 4.14.8: *sed quid ego plura? nam longa praefatione vel excusare vel commendare ineptias ineptissimum est*. However, the conventional relevant views are criticized by R. Morello, "Pliny and the Art of Saying Nothing", *Arethusa* 36 (2003) 200ff.
- 20 Cf. Ludolph (above, n. 4) 72 with n. 218; Beutel (above, n. 1) 170.
- 21 See Janson (above, n. 4) 67: "It was also common for the historian to say something as to his own situation and his relationship to his work and his subject. An assurance of impartiality was more or less obligatory. Such an assurance is to be found in all three historians. Tacitus gave this idea its definitive form (*Ann.* 1.1.6): *sine ira et studio, quorum causas procul habeo*"; cf. also A. Nikolaïdis, "Comparative Remarks on the Prologues of Roman Historians", *Ariadne* 4 (1988) 31–60, esp. 37ff. with relevant examples and bibliography. On the ancient views on the nature of bias in historical writing, see T. J. Luce, "Ancient Views on the Causes of Bias in Historical Writing", *CIPh* 84 (1989) 16–31.
- 22 Sall., *Catil.* 4.2: *sed a quo incepto studioque me ambitio mala detinuerat, eodem regressus statui res gestas populi Romani carptim, ut quaeque memoria digna videbantur, perscribere, eo magis quod mihi a spe metu partibus rei publicae animus liber erat*.
- 23 Liv. *Praef.* 5: *omnis expers curae quae scribentis animum, etsi non flectere a vero, sollicitum tamen efficere posset*.
- 24 Tac., *Ann.* 1.1.
- 25 Cf., e.g., Plin., *Epist.* 6.16.1: *Petis ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo **verius** tradere posteris possis*; 7.33.10: *nam nec historia debet egredi **veritatem**, et honeste factis **veritas** sufficit*; Cic., *De orat.* 2.36: *historia vero testis temporum, lux **veritatis**, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?*; 62: *nam quis nescit primam esse historiae legem, ne quid falsi dicere audeat? deinde ne quid **veri** non audeat? ne quae suspicio gratiae sit in scribendo? ne quae simultatis?*

he seems to espouse a position that points to a conventional *topos* in the prologues of Roman historians, the so called *de persona*, where the historian gives information about his person and the method he followed in the composition of his work, including a statement concerning his objectivity.

It is, however, worth noting that in the introductory epistle 1.1 one also can detect similarities with the two other *topoi* that are conventional in a historiographical *exordium*²⁶, i.e. *de historia* and *de materia*, while the tendency for *captatio benevolentiae* is not absent either. More specifically, aspects of the *topos de historia*, which often develops into a *laudatio historiae*, can be detected in epistle 1.1 when Pliny mentions how those who are writing history need to follow a chronological order and implicitly acknowledges the superiority of the particular genre, which requires greater care and *labor*²⁷. The *topos de materia* is also implied here. Since the collection includes epistles of Pliny's that have some literary value, then the subject of his work relates to events of the recent historical period and presents autobiographical interest. The *topos de materia* is often followed by a clarification as to the reason for choice of subject²⁸. While in Pliny's case such a clarification does not exist, his statement that his work was published because of the pressure he received from Septicius could be taken to have been made with a similar aim in mind. Thus, the fact that the readers liked

26 On the *topoi* in the prologues of Roman historians the bibliography is extensive; see, e.g., E. Herkommer, *Die Topoi in den Proömien der römischen Geschichtswerke* (Diss. Tübingen 1968); Janson (above, n. 4) 64–83; Nikolaidis (above, n. 21) 31–60. Pliny seems to be aware of them. For example, as has been suggested by Morello (above, n. 19) 206, the final sections of Pliny's famous epistle 5.8 indicate his familiarity with selected *topoi* of historical prefaces.

27 For a characteristic example, see Sall., *Catil.* 3.2: *ac mihi quidem, tametsi haudquaquam par gloria sequitur scriptorem et auctorem rerum, tamen in primis arduum videtur res gestas scribere: primum quod facta dictis exequenda sunt; dein quia plerique quae delicta reprehenderis malevolentia et invidia dicta putant, ubi de magna virtute atque gloria bonorum memores, quae sibi quisque facilia factu putat, aequo animo accipit, supra ea veluti ficta pro falsis ducit*, where Sallust highlights the difficulties of historical writing; concerning the definition of his work as *labor*, cf. also Sall., *Iug.* 4.3: *atque ego credo fore qui, quia decrevi procul a re publica aetatem agere, tanto tamque utili labori meo nomen inertiae inponant*. It is also worth noting the occurrence of the concept of *labor* in Livy's preface: *res est praeterea et immensi operis, ut quae supra septingentesimum annum repetatur et quae ab exiguis profecta initiis eo creverit ut iam magnitudine labore sua* (4) and *ego contra hoc quoque laboris praemium petam, ut me a conspectu malorum quae nostra tot per annos vidit aetas, tantisper certe dum prisca [tota] illa mente repeto, avertam, omnis expers curae quae scribentis animum, etsi non flectere a vero, sollicitum tamen efficere posset* (5), for which see J. Moles, "Livy's Preface", *PCPhS* 39 (1993) 141–168. For the particular notion in Tacitus, cf. Tac., *Ann.* 4.32: *pleraque eorum quae rettuli quaeque referam parva forsitan et levia memoratu videri non nescius sum: sed nemo annalis nostros cum scriptura eorum contenderit qui veteres populi Romani res composuere. ingentia illi bella, expugnationes urbium, fusos captosque reges, aut si quando ad interna praeverterent, discordias consulum adversum tribunos, agrarias frumentariasque leges, plebis et optimatum certamina libero egressu memorabant: nobis in arto et inglorius labor; immota quippe aut modice lacessita pax, maestae urbis res et princeps proferendi imperi incuriosus erat. non tamen sine usu fuerit introspicere illa primo aspectu levia ex quis magnarum saepe rerum motus oriuntur*.

28 For this theme and its frequency in historiography, see Janson (above, n. 4) 67.

the work is presented as a reason justifying the decision to publish the collection, which also constitutes an indirect approval of the choice of the particular theme, at least in the epistles that follow. Let us not forget that the reception of a historical work by the readers is a matter that was of great concern to Pliny. As he characteristically mentions in his famous epistle 5.8, what concerns him about composing recent history is the fact that it entails *graves offensae* and *levis gratia* and that he will be criticized by his readers not only if he praises, but also if he reproves²⁹. Consequently, Septicius' favourable comments concerning his epistles help to alleviate such qualms³⁰. Finally, it is well known that *captatio benevolentiae* constitutes a common practice in the prefaces of historical works and seems to have come about as a result of influences from rhetoric³¹. In this way, the writer attempts to ensure the good will of his readers and the more positive reception of his work. This motif can also be observed in Pliny's introductory epistle, especially in his statements concerning the unprepared publication and lack of great care, by means of which he implicitly makes a request of his readers to judge his work leniently and keep extenuating factors in mind. Consequently, the adoption in Pliny's introductory epistle of themes and *topoi* that are frequently found in the prefaces of Roman historians highlights his interest in historiography and facilitates his intention to define his work in relation to the particular literary genre.

Thus, Pliny's latent interest in historiography appears programmatic from the very first epistle of his collection. Indeed, in many other epistles Pliny undoubtedly reveals his concern about historiography³², despite his frequent claims

29 *Epist.* 5.8.12–13: *intacta et nova? graves offensae levis gratia. nam praeter id, quod in tantis vitiis hominum plura culpanda sunt quam laudanda, tum si laudaveris parcus, si culpaveris nimius fuisse dicaris, quamvis illud plenissime, hoc restrictissime feceris*; cf. also *Epist.* 9.27.

30 The concern about the preferences of the readers and their response is also found in Livy's preface, though he actually disregards them (*Praef.* 4: *et legentium plerisque haud dubito quin primae origines proximaque originibus minus praebitura voluptatis sint, festinantibus ad haec nova quibus iam pridem praevaletis populi vires se ipsae conficiunt*).

31 When referring to the composition of prefaces in historical works, Lucian (*Hist. conscr.* 52–54) seems to believe that the historian need not attempt to ensure the good will of his readers. However, Janson (above, n. 4) 65–66 underlines the strong similarity between rhetorical and historical prefaces and notes: “as for making the reader well-disposed, it is impossible in spite of Lucian's words to demonstrate the absence of this purpose in historical prefaces, any more than in rhetorical” (66).

32 With regards to Pliny's relationship with historiography, see, for instance, H. W. Traub, “Pliny's Treatment of History in Epistolary Form”, *TAPA* 86 (1955) 213–232; J. Heurgon, “Pline le Jeune tenté par l'histoire”, *REL* 47 (1969) 345–354; Beutel (above, n. 1), esp. 157–173; Th. Baier, “Κτῆμα oder ἀγώνισμα: Plinius über historischen und rhetorischen Stil (*Epist.* 5, 8)”, in: L. Castagna/E. Lefèvre (eds.), *Plinius der Jüngere und seine Zeit*, Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 187 (München/Leipzig 2003) 69–81; Morello (above, n. 19) 187–209, esp. 202ff.; R. Ash, “*Aliud est enim epistulam, aliud historiam ... scribere* (*Epistles* 6.16.22): Pliny the Historian?”, *Arethusa* 36 (2003) 211–225; A. Augoustakis, “*Nequaquam historia digna?* Plinian Style in *Ep.* 6.20”, *CJ* 100 (2004–2005) 265–273. In my opinion, Gamberini (above, n. 8) 58–81 is not right in underestimating Pliny's interest in historiography.

stating the differentiation of his work³³. As he himself in fact admits in epistle 5.8, not only does historiography not find him indifferent, but it is something he would want to undertake: *Suades ut historiam scribam, et suades non solus: multi hoc me saepe monuerunt et ego volo* (Epist. 5.8.1)³⁴. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the particular epistle begins with a reference to the many incitements Pliny receives from a number of people to compose a historical work, i.e. with a similar motif to that which is found in the beginning of epistle 1.1. Thus, the analogy appears even clearer and the writer seems to be dealing with the same social demand in the case of historiography as he did with the publication of the epistles. Furthermore, the aforementioned demand implies that Pliny's literary talents have already been acknowledged by the public, who discerned in Pliny's work, possibly following the publication of the first epistles, that he had the ability to progress to historical writing.

It is worth noting that in the conclusion of the particular epistle Pliny appears willing to compose a historical work, so long as he is presented with a suitable subject. In fact he seems to prefer contemporary history³⁵, as he claims that he does not lack the courage to deal with whatever problems it may entail: *sed haec me non retardant; est enim mihi pro fide satis animi: illud peto praesternas ad quod hortaris, eligasque materiam, ne mihi iam scribere parato alia rursus cunctationis et morae iusta ratio nascatur* (Epist. 5.8.14). This statement reveals that the idea of historiography is present in his mind and attracts him. To a certain extent, the publication of the Epistles can be seen as an attempt to satisfy this attraction. Though they may not constitute a continuous historical account of a particular period, they do, however, describe isolated recent historical events³⁶ and allow

33 Cf., e.g., Epist. 6.16.22: *aliud est enim epistulam aliud historiam, aliud amico aliud omnibus scribere*.

34 As is stated in the following sections of the particular epistle, the epistolographer's interest in historiography is prompted by his *diuturnitatis amor et cupido* and by the *domesticum exemplum* of his uncle, Pliny the Elder. As regards his interest in historiography, it is worth noting that, as Morello (above, n. 19) 203ff. has already noted, Pliny deploys in the particular letter stylistic terms from the historiographical sphere when referring to both history and oratory. She also underlines (206) that in the final sections of the same letter Pliny "again displays his mastery of the historiographer's task by parading selected topoi of historical prefaces (e.g., the contrast between old material, which requires research into the works of others, and new material which causes offence, or the risk of praise and blame)". Thus his familiarity with historiography does not discourage his readers from prompting him again to write a historical work.

35 For this preference, see also Traub (above, n. 32) 221; Beutel (above, n. 1) 168–169.

36 See Ash (above, n. 32) 211–225, who uses the term "historical snapshots" (212; cf. also 221 and 224). Furthermore, she rightly draws attention (214) to the fact that Pliny's statement that he will include yet unwritten epistles in the collection affords him the advantage over the historians of contemporary events to "extend his endpoint indefinitely into the future" and concludes: "Pliny, by rejecting a continuous historical narrative, not only dispenses with the problems of chronological order, he also allowed himself scope to include letters which he had not yet written, about events which had not yet happened"; cf. also Traub (above, n. 32) 213–232, who deals with some letters that treat separate historical episodes. For the particular category of

the reader to formulate a satisfactory picture of the current period, while also including a plethora of autobiographical details³⁷. By doing so, apart from attempting to partially satisfy his strongly expressed desire³⁸, Pliny appears to be freeing himself from the high literary demands of the particular genre, while avoiding unwelcome comparisons. Within this framework, the modest³⁹ tone with which Pliny's entire collection begins seems to be in perfect accordance with the essence of his literary work, which could be interpreted as a more modest, less ambitious, alternative attempt at historical writing⁴⁰. Besides, as Cicero⁴¹ mentions in his well-known epistle to Luceius (*Fam.* 5.12.8), a text Pliny was most possibly aware of⁴², modesty is necessary when the writer attempts to give an account of historical events of which he is part. Hence, since, generally speaking, Pliny is very much part of the events he describes, it follows that the image of modesty should come across as programmatic in his introductory epistle, despite the fact that in the rest of the collection the writer frequently deviates from this principle⁴³. Examined in this light, the re-appearance of modesty in

historical letters in the Plinian corpus, see, e.g., Sherwin-White (above, n. 1) 42–52, who comments on classification and distribution of types, and A.-M. Guillemin, *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps*, Collection d'études Latines 4 (Paris 1929) 128ff.

- 37 According to J.-A. Shelton, "Pliny's Letter 3.11: Rhetoric and Autobiography", *CIMed* 38 (1987) 121, "Pliny published his correspondence in order to produce an autobiography". For similar views, cf. also R. Syme, "The Dating of Pliny's Latest Letters", *CIQu* n.s. 35 (1985) 183; J. Radicke, "Die Selbstdarstellung des Plinius in seinen Briefen", *Hermes* 125 (1997) 447–469; Griffin (above, n. 18) 151; J. Henderson, "Portrait of the Artist as a Figure of Style: P.L.I.N.Y.'s Letters", *Arethusa* 36 (2003) 118 and 124.
- 38 Cf. Traub (above, n. 32) 213–232, esp. 220 and 222.
- 39 Modesty and diffidence are also stated in Livy's preface, where, according to Moles (above, n. 27) 141 and 144–145, they contrast sharply with the historiographical norm and imply his differentiation from his predecessors. According to Ash (above, n. 32) 220ff., Pliny conceives of historiography very much in the Livian mode.
- 40 Gowers (above, n. 12) 273 has already noted that with the phrase *neque enim historiam componebam* "the collection announces itself as a casual alternative to grander writing"; cf. also Henderson (above, n. 37) 119: "Pliny's *Letters* offer an alternative route towards the same end as that [i.e. grand, monumental] *historia*" and B. Radice, "The *Letters* of Pliny", in: T. A. Dorey (ed.), *Empire and Aftermath; Silver Latin II*, Greek and Latin Studies, Classical Literature and its Influence (London/Boston 1975) 120, where Pliny's personal letters are regarded as "genuine social history of the greatest importance for a badly-documented period, the reigns of Domitian, Nerva and Trajan". According to Beutel (above, n. 1), Pliny's Epistles are "eine Art subjektiver, nicht kritisch reflektierter Geschichtsschreibung konzipiert" (163) and "einer subjektiven Geschichtsschreibung in Form von Briefen" (164). He also notes (165) that, although there are many similarities between Pliny's epistles and historiography, his work is not a traditional historical one either in content or in form.
- 41 More generally for Cicero's theoretical and practical approach to history and historiography, see A. P. Kelley, S.J., *Historiography in Cicero* (Diss. Univ. of Pennsylvania 1968).
- 42 Cf. Traub (above, n. 32) 226 and 228–229; A. D. Leeman, *Orationis ratio: The Stylistic Theories and Practice of the Roman Orators, Historians and Philosophers I–II* (Amsterdam 1963, rpt. 2001) 333.
- 43 For Pliny's self-praise, see, e.g., N. Rudd, "Stratagems of Vanity: Cicero, *Ad familiares* 5.12 and Pliny's Letters", in: T. Woodman/J. Powell (eds.), *Author and Audience in Latin Literature*

the conclusion of the epistles dealing with the eruption of Vesuvius⁴⁴ must not be considered coincidental either, since the aim of these epistles is to provide Tacitus with historical accounts and they are clearly of historical content⁴⁵; at the same time they include personal information, as they describe the activities of both his uncle and of Pliny himself.

The particular epistles are extremely useful here, as they shed light on another aspect of the relation between Pliny's Epistles and historiography. Despite the fact that the epistolographer claims in both cases that he is aware of the difference between *epistula* and *historia* and acknowledges the superiority of the latter, he has, however, ensured that the difference between them has been considerably reduced. More particularly, he has ascertained that the dividing line between the two genres is the different audience to which they are addressed (*Epist.* 6.16.22: *aliud est enim epistulam aliud historiam, aliud amico aliud omnibus scribere*). By his decision to have his epistles published, Pliny appears to have crossed the dividing line and to be moving away from the principles of epistolography (*amico*) and closer to those of historiography (*omnibus*)⁴⁶.

Pliny's attempt in epistle 1.1 to define his work in relation to historiography and the closely related biography is further reinforced by an echo of Tacitus' *Agricola*⁴⁷. The image of the modest Pliny so strongly highlighted in this introductory epistle undoubtedly connects him with the principle of *modestia*. Since this principle is combined with the occurrence of the term *obsequium*⁴⁸ at the end

(Cambridge 1992) 26–32; R. K. Gibson, "Pliny and the Art of (In)offensive Self-Praise", *Arethusa* 36 (2003) 235–254.

44 *Epist.* 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*; 20.20: *haec nequaquam historia digna non scripturus leges et tibi scilicet qui requisisti imputabis, si digna ne epistula quidem videbuntur*.

45 In the particular letters on the eruption of Vesuvius there are even stylistic similarities with historiography, for which see recently Augoustakis (above, n. 32) 265–273; cf. also Beutel (above, n. 1) 162–163 and Ash (above, n. 32) 214–216, who investigates historiographical *topoi* and techniques in the closure of *Epist.* 6.16.

46 For the *amico-omnibus* contrast and Pliny's new audience after the publication of his letters, cf. Griffin (above, n. 18) 149–150; Beutel (above, n. 1) 161.

47 Murgia (above, n. 1) 181 has already ascertained in epistle 1.1 some echoes of the *Dialogus de Oratoribus*, assuming (173) as already proven that the particular work is by Tacitus and that it was composed under Nerva. Let us not forget that Pliny, in an epistle to Tacitus, does not hesitate to admit that he has been imitating him from a young age: *equidem adulescentulus, cum iam tu fama gloriaque floreres, te sequi, tibi 'longo sed proximus intervallo' et esse et haberi concupiscebam. et erant multa clarissima ingenia; sed tu mihi (ita similitudo naturae ferebat) maxime imitabilis, maxime imitandus videbaris* (*Epist.* 7.20.4).

48 The selection of the term could not be attributed to a relevant *topos*. As Hoffer (above, n. 3) 20, n. 15 notes, citing Janson (above, n. 4) 119, "Pliny seems to be the first to mention 'obedience' in a dedication".

of the same epistle, Pliny comes across as though he is conversing with Tacitus and appears to be adopting a model of practical behaviour that is praised by the latter in his portrait of his father-in-law:

sciant, quibus moris est inlicita mirari, posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse, obsequiumque ac modestiam, si industria ac vigor adsint, eo laudis excedere, quo plerique per abrupta, sed in nullum rei publicae usum ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt. (Tac., Agr. 42.5)

Let those whose way it is to admire only what is forbidden learn from him that great men can live even under bad rulers; and that submission and moderation, if animation and energy go with them, reach the same pinnacle of fame, wither more often men have climbed by perilous courses but, with no profit to the state, have earned their glory by an ostentatious death.

(trans. Hutton, rev. Ogilvie, Loeb)

According to Tacitus, *obsequium ac modestia* is a necessary manner of behaviour under the Principate⁴⁹ and Pliny seems to correspond to that model, implying that he too lives according to these very principles. Hence, just as Tacitus' *Agricola* became *magnus vir* and earned his praise by following the principles of *obsequium ac modestia*, in the same way Pliny too hopes to be elevated to a similar level. Tacitus' *Agricola* had already been published⁵⁰ and in it Pliny finds a life model which he implies he approves of and which he would have no difficulty following. Thus, on the one hand he is suggesting a way of interpreting his behaviour under the Principate, especially under Domitian⁵¹, while on the other hand he appears to believe that by adopting the behavioural model that glorified *Agricola* and allowed him to enjoy the leading role in Tacitus' work, he too will enjoy glory in his own field, namely literary composition.

49 On the meaning of *obsequium* and *modestia* (*moderatio*) in Tacitus' *Agricola*, see mainly C. J. Classen, "Tacitus – Historian between Republic and Principate", *Mnemosyne*⁴ 41 (1988) 93–116, esp. 95–104, who concludes that the traditional values have changed in both content and meaning; cf. also S. H. Rutledge, "Tacitus in Tartan: Textual Colonization and Expansionist Discourse in the *Agricola*", *Helios* 27 (2000) 75–95, esp. 89–90; S. Tzounakas, "Echoes of Lucan in Tacitus: the *Cohortationes* of Pompey and Calgacus", in: C. Deroux (ed.), *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* XII, Collection Latomus 287 (Brussels 2005) 395–396, n. 4.

50 Tacitus' *Agricola* seems to have been published in A.D. 98; see Cornelii Taciti, *De Vita Agricolae*, eds. R. M. Ogilvie and I. Richmond (Oxford 1967) 10–11. Although there is not an agreement among scholars, the hypothesis that Pliny's Epistles were not published before A.D. 104 seems persuasive; see Radice (above, n. 40) 127; Murgia (above, n. 1) 191ff.; Griffin (above, n. 18) 144.

51 According to Radice (above, n. 40) 125, the example of *Agricola* described by Tacitus could help us to interpret Pliny's relations with Domitian. More generally for the similarities between Pliny and *Agricola*, see the interesting comments of Ludolph (above, n. 4) 82–88.

It is a well-known fact that Pliny does not conceal his *diuturnitatis amor et cupido*⁵². Thus, it would be useful at this point to take into account all that Pliny writes to the great historian concerning the fortunate man:

Equidem beatos puto, quibus deorum munere datum est aut facere scribenda aut scribere legenda, beatissimos vero quibus utrumque. (Epist. 6.16.3)

The fortunate man, in my opinion, is he to whom the gods have granted the power either to do something which is worth recording or to write what is worth reading, and most fortunate of all is the man who can do both.
(trans. Radice, Loeb)

This remark could also apply to his case, as the autobiographical dimension of his epistles serves both the parameter of *facere scribenda* as well as that of *scribere legenda*. Seen in this light, Septicius' frequent promptings for the publication of the Epistles in this prefatory letter constitutes an initial verification that Pliny's activities were worthy of recording, and that being of literary value this record was worthy of an audience.

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52 *Epist. 5.8.2: me autem nihil aeque ac diuturnitatis amor et cupido sollicitat, res homine dignissima, eo praesertim qui nullius sibi conscius culpaе posteritatis memoriam non reformidet.*