PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AS A FIGURE OF STYLE: P.L.I.N.Y'S LETTERS

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Dear *Arethusa*,

I shall take our banner—RE-IMAG(IN)ING PLINY THE YOUNGER—perfectly literally to get the collection started. What follows revives the Pliny I imagined a score of years ago,[1] before pointing summarily to the main shifts in his reception since and keying my remarks to the suite of papers to follow. Recycling earlier material is, for sure, a resource utilized by ancient letter writers, and this subtype may stand for the whole apparatus of self-commentary that impels these *Epistles*.

I

Pliny's *Letters* are introduced to English students by two scholars, A. N. Sherwin-White and Betty Radice. Their approach is similar: "The personal letters provide us with the fullest self-portrait of any Roman we know, with the possible exception of Horace, and they are genuine social history" (Radice 1975.120). "Pliny's letters deal with a wide variety of topics. They hold a mirror up to the high society of the capital of the Roman empire at the time of its greatest prosperity. Pliny observes with a friendly and complacent eye, but he observes with precision" (Sherwin-White 1967.xii). Another perspective is possible: the *Letters* are a creative self-dramatization, a literary stab at self-immortalization; Pliny has constructed

1 = Henderson 1983 (Part II = Henderson 1982). All translations are by me.

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a mosaic to vie with any grander *monumentum*.[2] My argument is that readers are invited to take very seriously the notion that the style is the man, with all the problems that it involves. It soon becomes clear that self-conscious self-representation is the source of unresolvable uncertainties for Pliny's readers, especially if they have the recovery of "genuine social history" in mind.

"He is not a social climber, and . . . the people who receive his letters are genuinely amongst his friends" (Radice 1975.126). This conclusion follows from the absence of many of the big names of the day from the *Letters.* But we may reflect that Pliny shows himself "in" with enough top people: he isn't going to be swamped by them. The point is for us to see the *nouus homo* who has reached the consulate and enjoyed continuous advancement throughout a sparkling and accelerated career, and to see him nonchalantly set at the top of his own social pyramid. Obeisance will only come in Book 10, to the emperor. Again, whatever theory we choose to hold about the compilation and publication dates of the various books or collections of books, we may well credit Pliny with considerable perspicacity in projecting into the future the likely success of young addressees. Let us just take two prominent cases: Book 1 is dedicated to Septicius Clarus, and its last letter is an appeal on behalf of Suetonius—who has already received the address of 1.18.[3] At the dramatic date of Book 1, around 100 C.E., both may rank as comparative nonentitities. It's surely important to know that Septicius will eventually become Praetorian Prefect under Hadrian and the dedicatee of Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* when Suetonius had moved from being chief secretary of the imperial libraries to being the emperor's personal secretary for correspondence (*ab epistulis*). Not simply because Pliny *may* only have begun to publish his *Letters* (much) later than their dramatic dates, but because Pliny could—admittedly at the risk of history springing some surprises—see some way ahead into the future and associate budding talent with his own avuncular influence. Let us also consider a statistic: eleven letters is the largest number among Pliny's 247 letters addressed to one individual. And he just happens to be Tacitus, who clearly stands in Pliny for the guaranteed immortality through writing that is safely within the reach of a monumental, grand, historian. (Pliny's epistolary mosaic is more precarious.[4]) Pliny's relationship with Tacitus is pretty obviously not that of

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2 "Kaleidoscope" makes a better—more elusive, reader-mobilized—image. See notes 19–20.
3 On 1.1, 1.24: Henderson 2002a.20–22, 24–30.
4 See Ash's paper in this volume.

"a genuine friend." It does not take long to see that Pliny's addressees are not a simple "mirror" of his total correspondence, the multiplicity of his social relationships. At least one distorting influence is the editorial concern to project Pliny's self-image into literature, to *literarize* the self-image.

"He never fails to give the impression that these are genuine letters, however carefully composed and presented" (Radice 1975.127); "Pliny has often taken letters that were originally genuine correspondence of the moment, and rewritten or edited them according to the rules of the literary genre" (Sherwin-White 1967.xvi). Pliny knew the institutions of the "open letter" (Seneca—whence all those maxims marked with the tell-tale exemplary *nam* or *enim*)—and of the "opened letter" (Cicero). But Pliny did not wait for time nor trust in an executor: he wrote letters that were not "open" but "to be opened"—already "opened" by himself. What is meant by this is that we cannot distinguish neatly between the "original," "genuine" *Letters* or bits of *Letters* or aspects of *Letters* in Pliny and "edited," "rewritten," "carefully composed" *Letters,* or bits of *Letters*, etc.[5] The "rhetoric of affirmation," as Aubrion 1975 has called the carefully edited version of Pliny and Pliny's view of his world, is not a simple supplementation of Pliny the correspondent's aggregated output, adding a cohesive and systematic exemplary vision from Pliny the editor. The process of self-editing goes deeper than that, begins at an earlier stage in the production of the vision. The first writings of the *Letters* were themselves already "edited," already "screened," already functioning in the production of an ideal identity for their writer. One of the problems about "the style is the man" is that "the man" is also "the style." Not simply in the sense that we know Pliny only through his rhetoric, but that we may find good reason to suppose that Pliny lived out his rhetoric, his *life* was already rhetoricized, "the man" was already a figure of "style." The prestige of rhetoric as the supreme cultural code, the paradigm for all systems of evaluation, would be hard to overemphasize in imperial High Society, even if it is hard to demonstrate rigorously. But it will be easy to show clear signs of this prestige from Pliny's rhetoric in dealing with himself and his world.

The ironic interpenetration of life and literature, together with the challenges which this offers to Pliny's readers, can be a source of literary pleasure, a pleasure based on uncertainty. Some of Pliny's self-idealization is sledgehammer obvious. For instance, the deflection of all doubt, fear, and

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5 Deconstructing this fallacy in epistolarity: de Pretis below, pp. 129–34.

hesitation away from the protagonist and onto his dependents (try 1.18 from this point of view) or onto safely ostracized "villains" (1.5 on Regulus is the paradigm case) gives us a rule which is interestingly confirmed by its exceptions:[6] precisely these "defects" of character in performance are allowed to characterize the correspondence with Trajan in Book 10, where they demonstrate, paradoxically, the correct deference to imperial wisdom and the humane recognition by the imperial administrator of the importance of his interventions for the long-term legal handling of tricky social problems of provincial tensions arising from beliefs. (In this sense, Pliny's dealings with the Christians take the autobiography into the immortality of Roman legal history: Trajan's decisions have a guaranteed monumental future. Hence Book 10 complements the assured triumphs of Pliny the advocate within the normal conditions of centumviral routine at Rome.[7]) Again, within Books 1–9, Pliny is allowed to ascribe to himself fear, doubt, and hesitation when they concern *his* concern for the upsets and perils faced by his family and friends. (Examples abound, e.g., 1.22.) More interesting, however, is the third "exception": fear, doubt, and hesitation are, in fact, the leading characteristics of Pliny's negotiations with friends—when it comes to their assistance in improving the quality of his publications. (1.8 establishes this pattern fully, though 1.2 already initiated the theme.[8]) We may associate with this complex of themes the "concern" with which Pliny wrote his *Letters* (1.1: "epistulas si quas curatius scripsissem . . ."), so long as we do not lose sight of the concern with which Pliny has both screened out of his life all traces of weakness and also screened out of his letters his editorial concern to shape them into a systematically organized, or at least carefully filtered, literary self-portrait. (As in 1.1's carefully "careless" equation of "publication" with (mere) "compilation": . . . *colligerem publicaremque* . . . ; "neque enim historiam *componebam*, sed ut quaeque in manus uenerat . . ."; "si quas *addidero* non supprimam.") Here we should appreciate, from the first, the pitch that the *Letters* are to build into their constant subject, namely their ironic status as a discussion of the possibilities of autobiography as a form of *historia*. There is something of a paradox, but a meaningful and

6 Hoffer 1999 reads Pliny's poetic (his "epistoliterarity") *as* "Anxiety," with fascinating results. Gibson (below) shows how carefully Pliny's drive for kudos is fenced around with apologetics.

7 I owed some of this last argument to Helen Elsom.

8 See Mayer below, p. 233.

ironic paradox, in Pliny's programmatic opposition of his work to grand, monumental, *historia* here, for Pliny's *Letters* offer an alternative route toward the same end as that *historia*.[9] The humble "addition" of mosaic to mosaic is an alternative strategy in the construction of a grand edifice of social-historical writing, with Book 10 complementing the metropolitan scenes of Books 1–9 as the historian's *res foras* complement his *res domi*. As (perhaps) Horace, especially in the *Odes*, both Callimachizes Pindar and Pindarizes Callimachus, so Pliny's *Letters* are built on the tension between (say) style or form and vision or content. For instance, we should read such prominent programmatic statements as 5.6.44, "non epistula quae describit, sed uilla quae describitur, magna est," both as definitive of the literary strategy of the corpus and also as an ironic self-deprecatory hint at the magnitude of Pliny's ambitions for his mosaic *monumentum*. A literary study of Pliny should, in my view, *begin* with this as its problematic.

What is more interesting than the crashingly obvious aspects of Pliny's idealizing "rhetoric of affirmation" is precisely the problem of interpretation which arises from the "mosaic," fragmented, epistolary form. To put the case figuratively: the design of the mosaic is produced by the interaction of "ground" with "design." (Just as the white paper allows the black letters to be constituted as letters.) As we try to piece together our portrait of Pliny from his *Letters*, we are bound to find ourselves caught up in the uncertainties of trying to make out the relationship between the obvious and the elusively indirect. We have already mentioned the thorough-going difficulties in the way of distinguishing between the "editorial" self-consciousness and the "living" raw material. But if we see the *Letters* as a kind of do-it-yourself kit from which we may create (e.g.) a sketch of a successful aristocrat or an informal "history" of Trajanic society, according to our own concerns, then there is literary pleasure—of a teasing kind—in the inevitable playing-out of our prejudices in the distinction we make between the *Letters*, or bits of *Letters*, or aspects of *Letters*, as belonging to the "ground" as opposed to the "figure," and vice versa.[10] (Here the analogy between paper and letters offers us a model of a notion of reading of a positivistic traditional kind, which an ironic text such as Pliny's exposes as a self-idealization!)

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9 Cf. Traub 1955, Ash's paper below.

10 Cf. de Pretis below, pp. 129–34: for letter writing as dyadic, cf. Pliny's "tussle" with Martial, 3.21: Henderson 2001. For the (Senecan) presupposition that reception always already conditions missive, cf. Henderson 2003.

II

There is a game—but "game" is open to evaluation, for some people, "games" are a respite from life, for others they are what life is (for), or try the psychoanalyst's view, or . . . —There is a "game" which went the rounds as an item of folklore at one level or another in the 70s. Play it! Ask yourself what your ideal house would be like. Is it large, cosy, modern, traditional . . . ? (But leading questions *are* leading.) How about windows? Lots? Large? Or what? You'll presumably have a garden (I hope). What will that be like? Will you have trees in it? Tall trees? In rows? Or . . . And so, too, for shrubs? Now you've moved into your ideal house, you're going down the garden path and . . . you come across a key half-hidden in the grass beside the path: what do you do? . . . Next, farther down the path, as you're walking along, there's suddenly a NOISE—a frightening noise, an eery noise, an unplaceable noise: what do you do? . . . You arrive at the bottom of your garden and . . . you find there's a wall, a large, solid wall that you can't see over: what do you do?

Now on the favourite Pompeii principle *pedicatur qui legit* ("You're buggered if you read this"), you HAVE to respond. (If you yawned or complained over the last paragraph you've told yourself a lot!) And the responses are all at once already screened versions of your self-portrait, whether or not the game was already known to you, whether or not it's all as clear to you as houses. Your answers are self-interpretations. And interpretations of them are similarly no more than interpretations. Here goes: the house is your self-image; the windows are how much you would wish to allow others to see into your self; the garden is your life; the trees are your friends, shrubs your acquaintances; your response to the key was your attitude to opportunity, the noise danger; what lies over that wall is your future . . . You will, of course, be able to "tell" as much about other people's ideas of you from their reactions to your answers as they will about you.

I'd suggest that this exercise is a useful preliminary to looking at two interestingly "monumental" letters of Pliny, 2.17 and 5.6, where he builds in words his two favourite villas in long and (self-)fascinated detail. Since these texts have traditionally served as the pre-texts for archaeological hunting and the social history of Roman architecture, I, of course, concentrate on my own "literary" prejudices.[11] Read these letters through with the

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11 On the two "villa letters": Riggsby below, pp. 167–78, Leach below, pp. 154–56. For the tale of architectural-archaeological re-imag(in)ing of the villas: see the brilliant account of Bergmann 1995.

"game" in mind, and I think you will find your reading of Pliny: you'll find yourself finding your answers to all the problems which I spoke of earlier. And more interesting, you'll find your "answers" constitute a self-portrait of *your* self.

So here's one Pliny: from 5.6, I take a few "telling" remarks. "There are lots of elderly people in the area because it's healthy—grand- and great-grandfathers of grown-up children tell their stories . . . A visit here is like a return to another age." Pliny as pre-faded vestige of the grand tradition of aristocratic lineage. The *nouus homo* takes care to have an "old-fashioned type of entrance hall" to his house. "The villa is at the bottom of the slope but has a view as if on top, because the ground rises so gradually that you're up before you realise you've climbed." Pliny the *nouus homo* sliding his way to the top of the social/career ladder. "A bedroom which no daylight, voice, or sound can penetrate . . . The villa is a place for deep peace and quiet." It is "a place for the soul to study, a place for the body to go a-hunting, a variety of game and plenty of opportunities": the frozen life of repetition and retirement which is the quest of Pliny the writer of all these varied and plentiful letters, which celebrate in self-perpetuation the studious self-analysis of the activities of the monitored body. The place is a work of art, "set in a natural amphitheatre," but "from the mountain top it looks like a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape, and the harmony (*descriptio*) to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns." Pliny turns his home into the image of his writings, the *Letters*; he validates his life by reference to artistic cultural coding. The hedges are "shaped like animals," a fresco shows "birds in the branches"; other shrubs are "clipped (*descripta*) into the shapes of the LETTERS which spell now the name of their master, now the name of their artistic creator." P.L.I.N.Y.'s *Letters*, the letters of an *artifex*. In the middle of this "urbanest of works" (*opus*) is "what looks like a piece of rural country planted there." Running water is piped, canalised, played around with, and turned into a display of further artistry in Pliny's garden. In the game's questions, you should have noticed as post-twentieth-century interpreters of the human psyche that SEX didn't raise its ugly/lovely head. Anyone who made sure a patch of water of some description featured in their garden can now preen/blush. The size and nature of this water? Stagnant pond, swimming pool, babbling brook, filthy swamp . . . Lake Como? Pliny's sexual self-image is accurately pictured, perhaps, in this anxious display of de-naturalization, as we shall see. One last excerpt: "I love the things that, for the most part, I myself started, or else perfected when they were already started before me." Again, equally telling as a description of Pliny's life and of his *Letters*? Or, rather, as the equation

of the two. For the loving (self-) description is justified in all its detail by the following argument (5.6.42–44):

> Writers should stick to their subject. Virgil is like Homer in having long "descriptive" passages on the arms of Aeneas and Achilles respectively, but neither counts as culpable digression because both authors are in fact carrying out what they have undertaken; Aratus as well takes it upon himself to tabulate and pursue even the tiniest stars in his astronomical poem, but just because this *is* his overall subject, none of his descriptions count as digressions. The same goes for Pliny's *Letter*(s), *ut parua magnis* (44). Pliny avoids excess (*seruat modum*) because his description is not an *excursus . . . sed opus ipsum est* (43).

Pliny's *Letters* are modest descriptive observations which seem to wander into digressive sidelights, but those sidelights are, in fact, the substance of *his* eternal cosmos, his literary cosmos—a pattern which the imperfections, ephemeral uncertainties of an unedited life, could not hope to achieve. And for Pliny, "avoiding excess"—which sounds so like a philosophical watchword—is constantly figured as the very editorial operation which has produced the *Letters* as the actualisation of a "philosophy." "Good" people in Pliny are "filed down" (*limatus*), "polished up" (*politus*, *ornatus*), and "emended" (*emendatus*), on the model of good writings. (See especially 1.10 where the philosopher Euphrates is presented as an *artifex* of character who "emends" people: Pliny's friend should "illi te expoliendum limandumque permittas," 1.10.12, just as his literary friend is to be entrusted with a book of Pliny to "emend" before publication, "quo magis intendam limam tuam . . ." 1.2.5).[12]

I turn finally to 2.17, the famous description of Pliny's Laurentine villa ("Laurentinum uel (si ita mauis) Laurens": in either case *meum* and, in

12 Perhaps the phrase *ingenium limatius*, 1.20.21, is the best possible self-summary. 1.8 is another splendid confrontation between Pliny's timid *cunctatio* and his literary friend's *emendatio* and *lima*, see esp. 1.8.3–5, 18; cf. Henderson 2002a.10–11. In the political sphere, post-assassination "amnesty" was the social contract which infused consensual solidarity into the third dynasty of Caesars; selective erasure of memory made the new start feasible: Beutel 2000.

either case, "miraris cur . . . me tantopere delectet"). Again I would like to keep in mind both the "game" and the remarks made so far. This time, however, the emphasis is on pathos: tissues at the ready.

I notice here a cumulative emphasis on usefulness without extravagance, spruce decency with never a stain in sight, nice elegance without monumental enormousness; careful planning without systematic symmetry or obvious composition.[13] The positioning of the villa above the shoreline brings it great and far-flung vistas (makes it visible, in a word): this house is, in fact, built (shall we say, "fixated"?) on the objective of hiding away as many rooms as possible behind shutters: defences and protective barriers against exposure to winds, to storms, and the incessant noise of the sea. The sea prospect has drawn Pliny to it—to where all the grand Romans cluster—but offers the fluctuations of the inviting and open, but chaotic and uncontrolled, world at large—dangerous and threatening unless it can be safely locked out from consciousness. The obsession with catching sunlight, at each and every hour and season, by whatever means conceivable, tells of Pliny's love of conventional approval, imperial benevolence, glory, and honour. The emphasis on enclosed spaces, safely buried away out of reach of the elements, meshes with the ambition of preserving silence at all costs—the silence, that is, for study: Pliny shapes his ideal as a frozen, timeless, self-contained, self-sufficient privacy, where he can concern himself with the writings which may give him immortality. Pliny had no children—only the tax-exemptions named for those who had (the *ius trium liberorum*); his wife has no rooms here—or, if she does, they are edited out; the work going on in and around the villa is eliminated from view as Pliny cultivates peace and quiet—and comfort. ("Excellent sole and prawns," if not "precious fish" abound . . .) And at the heart of this ideal home, in Pliny's sanctuary: "diaeta est amores mei, re uera amores: ipse posui" (2.17.20, "there's a living-space, my darling—truly my darling: I put it there"). Here I think we see Pliny "ultimately" as he wanted to be seen—in an alcove with a couch and two chairs, soundproofed from the business which makes his dream a reality and from the noises of life, its tempests and lightning-flashes, even from the light of day; *buried* away, alone, with his books at Christmas (2.17.24):

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13 Cf. Riggsby below, pp. 169–78.

> in hanc ego diaetam cum me recepi, abesse mihi etiam a uilla mea uideor, magnamque eius uoluptatem praecipue Saturnalibus capio, cum reliqua pars tecti licentia dierum festisque clamoribus personat: nam nec ipse meorum lusibus nec illi studiis meis obstrepunt.
>
> When I've retired into this nook, I seem to myself to be right away from my home, and I get enormous pleasure out of it, especially at the Saturnalia, when the rest of the place is ringing with the traditional holiday racket. You see, I don't get in the way of my people's fun, and they don't get in the way of my studies.

Perhaps this is a sad picture, or perhaps it's always the case that ambition for self-immortalisation engenders idealization of death?

We know many other Plinies from the *Letters*, of course. But if we are to put together the mosaics into a design from a literary point of view, these "monumental" letters (2.17 and 5.6) offer us what I would take to be the figure which Pliny is constructing in an especially paradigmatic form.[14] Perhaps we may say that the production of the *Letters* was a double-sided process by which Pliny edited himself into and edited himself out of life, edited himself into and edited himself out of literature. Or, more simply, the autobiograph is a "figure of style"?

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In contemporary reception, Pliny's modelling of the self has moved toward the centre of interest in the *Letters*. His epistolary performance of self-promotion in the social economy of relations between people and relationship to self dramatizes a juggle between conformism and individualism. Pliny opens to inspection his world of social prestige and power conducted in polite idioms of affect and diplomacy in order to show us energy fine-tuned appropriately across the range of élite duties and occupa-

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14 Pliny has made the *Laurentinum* symbolic well before we meet it: 1.22.11: "Laurentinum meum, hoc est libellos et pugillares, studiosumque otium": 1.9.4–7: "postquam in Laurentino meo aut lego aliquid aut scribo . . . nulla spe nullo timore sollicitor, nullis rumoribus inquietor: mecum tantum et cum libellis loquor. O rectam sinceramque uitam! O dulce otium . . . O mare, O litus, uerum secretumque μουσεῖον."

tions.[15] Today, Pliny is viewed as an adept verbalizer of the social environment. He piles up kudos by exercising patronal and familial responsibilities, as his letters *change* lives, and relationships.[16] All adds up to implicit theorizing of Roman culture, calibrating political service against personal self-cultivation.[17] Pliny's voice is pitched into government and courtroom; his trajectory from the northern margin of provincial Italy to the engine room of empire, and, finally, on to his one-man mission to recover order in some troubled province out East, ties him to the *system* of the Roman career, from senator to consul to trusted commissioner. On the way, he is never above scrupulous all-round care for detail, but composes the self-portrait of a catalyst of pleasurable security.[18] Pliny's splice of self-respect with self-regard. Individual letters are carefully groomed; book units are styled with their own coloration.[19] All told, this writing fashions a functional but polynomial design for life: the self as its own work of art. The *Letters* assemble a vast mosaic where the component images re-align "kaleidoscopically" as they are read—and constantly re-imag(in)ed.[20]

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15 Gunderson 1997 shows how the presumption that letters invest care (so desire, want, affect, demand, self) unseals the energy neatly stowed away beneath Pliny's civilized manners: by playing at being Catullus *rediuiuus*, from Book 4, *consularis* Pliny suggests as much himself (cf. Roller 1998).

16 Cf. Mayer's paper in this volume; Henderson 2002b on 1.19. For the *Letters* as self-portrait: Radicke 1997.

17 The single most important debate in current Pliny scholarship is between Leach 1990, who finds elements of Foucauldian care of the self in Pliny's recuperative moments "in retreat," vs. Riggsby 1995, 1998, who locates Pliny's personal ideology in freshened-up stakes of cut-and-thrust public glory. In Henderson 2002a.11–14, on 9.36, I suggest that they are both right: "Pliny does consecrate the 'inner turn' as the core *locus* of writerly being, but his project does dramatize the cultivation of social standing 'out there.' The nexus between writing the *Letters* and pressing the world into them is the way we get to Pliny, and he gets to us."

18 For the *Laurentinum* as site of wondrous pleasure vs. the *Tuscum* as therapeutic paradise: Henderson 2002a.15–20.

19 Thus Leach below, pp. 162–63, Mayer below, p. 233, and Morello below, p. 208 independently remark on aspects of continuity within Book 9; Ludolph 1997 reads together the opening "parade" of epistles in Book 1; Henderson 2002a.43–153 reads Book 3 as fractured narrative.

20 So Henderson 2002a.1–3. The *Letters,* in effect, "catalogue" Pliny's life-and-works: Morello below, pp. 196–209; cf. Henderson 2002c on 3.5.