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978-0-521-84292-1 - Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction

Roy K. Gibson and Ruth Morello

Excerpt

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Books 1–9 of Pliny's *Letters* contain 247 letters to various friends, acquaintances and family members, while Book 10 adds another 121 letters exchanged between Pliny and the emperor Trajan. It is conventional for critics – including the authors of this book – to refer to this vast assemblage of (mostly) short items as a 'mosaic'. The metaphor is useful, since it conveys the idea that an artist's assembly of small and variegated individual 'fragments' can create both discernible local patterns and – when viewed from a suitable perspective – a big picture. However, what the static 'mosaic' metaphor cannot convey is the sense of constant shifting movement inherent in the process of actually reading Pliny. To convey this aspect of the *Letters*, a new metaphor is needed: 'shake Pliny's kaleidoscope, and no second peek will ever exactly repeat the patterning'.¹ John Henderson's image of the kaleidoscope conveys well an aspect of reading Pliny, the sense that an almost infinite number of configurations and connections is available for the reader of the *Letters*. In the preface to his magisterial commentary on Pliny, A.N. Sherwin-White hints from a different direction at the same feature of the work, in a disarming confession that 'After sixteen years of study I still continue to discover links and parallels within the letters that had hitherto escaped me.'²

Some generators of the kaleidoscopic experience are easy to suggest, but hard to define precisely. Although Pliny, as has often been noted,³ tends to confine his letters to a single topic, the truth of this observation can be overplayed. In fact, Pliny often manages to cluster a large number of apparently 'minor' issues rather deftly around his main topic, with the result that a single epistle can display potentially significant connections – on a wide variety of subjects – with a good number of other letters elsewhere. Or, as Sherwin-White phrases the matter from the commentator's

¹ Henderson (2002a) xi, 195 n. 5. ² Sherwin-White (1966) v.³ E.g. by Sherwin-White (1966) 3–4, with a list of exceptions.

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perspective, 'the illuminating parallel [for a letter, group of letters or even paragraph] often lurks unnoticed in a letter about a different topic'.⁴ The word 'unnoticed' here is not without its own significance, since it says something about the fabric of Pliny's text and its tendency to treat certain topics in a manner that is best described as unemphatic.

At any rate, the letters are strongly interconnected, but the connections one detects – the picture glimpsed in the kaleidoscope – depends on the topic one chooses to emphasize at any given moment. Choose a different topic, and new configurations will appear. And, despite the impression of repetitiveness which a first reading of the *Letters* can leave,⁵ further readings will reveal – through fresh attentiveness to Pliny's unemphatic mode of presenting his material – that the collection manages to pack in an astonishing array of subject matter over its 368 individual items.

All of this, of course, presents a problem for a modern volume billed as an 'Introduction' to the *Letters* of Pliny. How can one hope to introduce a kaleidoscope? Or cover such a vast assemblage of topics? Setting aside – for the moment – a sense of despair, it can readily be admitted that the present book is very far from exhaustive even within its remit of 'introducing' the *Letters*. Instead we aim for representative coverage – and in two senses. First, we cover a range of methods of reading the *Letters*. Secondly, we tackle a selection of key themes and topics present within the corpus. It is the combination of these two approaches that gives this volume its title: *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction*.

There is no one method of reading the *Letters*. Readers may choose to read the entire collection in sequence from 1.1 to 10.121, or to concentrate on a single book of letters, or to select favourite letters for individual attention. Alternatively readers may focus on groups and cycles of letters connected by shared theme, addressee or recurring persons of note.⁶ Each of these reading methodologies is applied to Pliny's *Letters* in the course of this book. In Chapter 1 ('Reading a life: *Letters*, Book 1') we adopt the most popular approach of all for tackling letter collections, ancient or modern, and attempt to read Pliny for the story of his life; but with a particular focus on what this process brings to our understanding of Book 1. We follow up in Chapter 2 ('Reading a book: *Letters*, Book 6') with a detailed study of one of Pliny's individual books as an artistic entity in its own right, while in Chapter 3 ('Epistolary models: Cicero and Seneca') we pause to review Pliny's acknowledgement of his literary models. Next we study

⁴ Sherwin-White (1966) v.⁵ On the repetitiveness of letter collections as a genre, see Chapter 6.⁶ On this variety of ways of reading Pliny, see Marchesi (2008) 16–27.

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letters connected by repeated appearances of the same individuals, whether as prominent characters within the letters (Chapter 4 ‘Pliny’s elders and betters’) or as addressees of the letters (Chapter 5 ‘Pliny’s peers: Reading for the addressee’). In Chapter 6 (*‘Otium: How to manage leisure’*) we tackle letters connected by one of the key themes of the correspondence, while in Chapter 7 (*‘Reading the villa letters’*) we adopt the habits of the anthologist and pick out a handful of Pliny’s most famous letters for study.

In the book as a whole we maintain an emphasis on the value of reading Pliny in sequential order – particularly at the level of the individual book or the collection as a whole – over the more common method of creating an anthology of some of the more famous letters. We believe that we do a disservice to Pliny by stripping his most attractive letters from their original context, namely as part of a deliberately sequenced and artistically constructed book or cycle of letters. Nevertheless, in Chapter 7 and elsewhere we recognize the openness of the *Letters* even to the piecemeal approach represented by the anthology.⁷ Finally, in the closing chapter (*‘The grand design: How to read the collection’*), we raise our sights to the entire ten-book collection and look at Pliny’s designs for *re-reading* his *Letters* as a single literary unit.

Alongside tackling various approaches to reading the *Letters*, this volume, as promised earlier, aims to introduce some important subjects and themes present in the correspondence. Chapters 4–7 form a loose quartet of two pairs, where the first pair joins a study of Pliny’s relationships in regard to the older (and eventually younger) generations (Chapter 4) to a study of Pliny and his peers (Chapter 5). The second pair joins a study of one of Pliny’s greatest obsessions – the proper use of *otium* (Chapter 6) – to an in-depth study of one of the contexts for Pliny’s *otium*, namely his famous country villas (Chapter 7). As ‘topic’ chapters, these studies must be understood as representative rather than exhaustive of the possibilities for criticism offered by Pliny’s correspondence. We might as easily have chosen – or, had space allowed, included – other equally potent areas to focus on, such as Pliny’s relations with women, the Domitianic ‘Stoic’ opposition or slaves, or his theories on oratory and rhetorical style, etc.⁸ Nevertheless the four areas chosen for detailed study are notable for their ability to draw in major portions of the correspondence effectively.

⁷ See e.g. pp. 36–7, 45–7, 66–7, 201–2, 234–6, 244–7, where the anthologizing habit is discussed.

⁸ The first two are well covered by Carlon (2009), and appear as subjects also in Chapters 1 and 2 of this volume; for aspects of slavery in Pliny, see e.g. de Neeve (1992), Hoffer (1999) 50–4, Gonzalès (2003). For Pliny on oratory and rhetorical style, see e.g. Gamberini (1983) 12–57, Cova (2003), Cugusi (2003), Marchesi (2008) 97–143.

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Pliny's relations with the 'Stoic' opposition, or with women, and his theories on rhetorical style – and several other 'popular' topics – receive occasional comment over the course of the book. Readers who wish to know more on these and other subjects in Pliny's correspondence should consult Appendix 3. Here we provide bibliographical help (and lists of relevant letters) on a select number of favourite aspects and topics, ranging from the eruption of Vesuvius and the *Panegyricus* (both touched on briefly in this volume), to the Latinity and style of the *Letters*, Christians, dolphins, and provincial government (each allotted incidental mention only in the course of the volume). In this way we hope to balance detailed treatment of selected 'representative' topics with a briefer indication of the wider array of subjects associated with the detailed study of Pliny.

Nevertheless, one topic listed in Appendix 3 – given only very indirect treatment within this volume – calls for some further (brief) comment. This is the hoary topic of 'revision and authenticity' in the *Letters*. In the succinct formulation of Ilaria Marchesi, Pliny's epistles 'are what we are accustomed to call private letters: however stylistically (re-)elaborated, they display all the features we expect of a real correspondence' (2008, 12). Beyond further amplification of this point (not attempted here), little of genuine critical value can be added to the issue (which indeed gives all the appearance of being, for the moment at least, a critical dead end). Given the prominence which Pliny allots within the correspondence to the revision of his many speeches and poems before publication, it would be surprising if he did not also revise his letters prior to publishing them. But at the extent of that revision we can only guess, with little prospect of critical consensus on the issue. It should be added that in the chapters which follow, we have found it possible to treat Pliny's individual books and even the entire ten-book collection as contrived artistic entities. However, this does not imply or require a belief that Pliny composed the *Letters* as a separate literary work without reference to actual letters sent to actual addressees. Relevant here are the comments of Alessandro Barchiesi on old controversies about poetry books, where 'people would even deny that the *Odes* were a legitimate book because Horace presumably did not write his poems *after* designing the book. *But this is to exorcize the amount of bricolage, improvisation, and workmanship that goes into literary practice*' (emphasis added).⁹

A volume of 'Introduction' to Pliny's *Letters* needs, we trust, little in the way of justification. Pliny has, since the 1960s, possessed all the modern

⁹ Barchiesi (2005) 338.

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markers of a canonical classical author: an authoritative Oxford Classical Text (R.A.B. Mynors, 1963) and a full commentary (A.N. Sherwin-White, 1966). Discussion of the author in journals and book chapters has maintained a respectable rate since that time, without (so far) quite achieving positive critical momentum. The reasons for this are not hard to find. Like, for example, Herodotus, Pliny has tended to attract a strikingly diverse set of scholarly communities: prosopographers, social historians, political historians, legal historians, economic historians, architects, garden designers, archaeologists, and – of course – literary critics of all hues.¹⁰ Each sub-group has tended to concentrate on a particular set of letters or concerns, and few scholars have felt it incumbent upon them to read the Plinian literature either entire or even much beyond their particular specialism. One result is that, as a rule, the journal literature is – unlike that written, for example, on republican and imperial poetry – far from cumulative: the scholarly landscape here more resembles a collection of isolated communities than some great urban centre dominated by competing superstructures of various kinds. This is a tendency no single book can hope to reverse; but in Chapter 7 in particular we seek to demonstrate the value of integrating archaeological and historical approaches with the literary.

Nevertheless, if the journal literature has not yet achieved positive critical momentum, the reverse is true of the literary-historical study of Pliny in monograph form. Since 1997 we have witnessed the publication of no less than ten important monographs on the epistolographer, including works in German (Ludolph 1997, Beutel 2000, Lefèvre 2009), French (Gonzalès 2003, Wolff 2003, Méthy 2007) and English (Hoffer 1999, Henderson 2002a, Marchesi 2008, Carlon 2009), not to mention edited collections.¹¹ From these works taken as a whole there is gradually emerging the conviction that Pliny is an extremely sophisticated writer of considerable stature, whose work handsomely repays close reading. Taken individually, each of these works examines various – sometimes specialist – literary or literary-historical aspects of the author, such as (to take a few examples) Pliny's presentation of his own image, the workings of literary allusion in the text, or the moral and philosophical principles implicit in the author's practice and assertions.¹² A work of more general literary-historical introduction

¹⁰ For a demonstration, see Appendix 3.

¹¹ Castagna and Lefèvre (2003) and Morello and Gibson (2003).

¹² For a useful summary of the main emphases of these contributions, esp. Ludolph (1997), Hoffer (1999) and Henderson (2002a) – plus the edited collections of Castagna and Lefèvre (2003) and Morello and Gibson (2003) – see Marchesi (2008) 1–11.

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has an obvious role to play in this landscape.¹³ Not least because Pliny, despite his reputation for ‘easy’ and clear Latin – and hence his frequent (and ultimately somewhat misleading) employment in the intermediate stages of learning Latin – is hardly an author who is self-explanatory. His ‘difficulty’ as an author becomes especially clear, in fact, when his *Letters* are read in their original book format from Book 1 through to Book 10, rather than in the bite-size chunks characteristically offered in an anthology. If he is to be studied seriously, he requires readers equipped with a surprisingly large amount of basic information about his life and career, his addressees and about the design and workings of the collection in its literary context and tradition. The hope is that the present volume will provide, under one cover, access to this kind of information, otherwise liberally scattered amongst more specialist publications.

The appendices at the end of this book – of which one has already been mentioned – have a special role to play in the provision of some of this basic information, and readers new to Pliny might begin here. Appendix 1 provides a timeline of major events in Pliny’s life and in the lives of his friends and in society at large, along with a transcription and brief discussion of the great *Comum* inscription (source for so much of our knowledge of Pliny’s official career and testamentary benefactions). A thorough familiarity with this timeline is assumed for the reader of this book, so that references to, for example, Pliny’s praetorship assume the knowledge that this post was held under Domitian in the early 90s AD, etc. Many incidental references made in the course of the book will lack immediate comprehensibility without basic knowledge of the kind imparted in the timeline. In Appendix 2 we provide a book-by-book catalogue of the addressees and contents of *Letters* 1–9. (Space forbids a catalogue for the 121 letters of Book 10.) An explanation of the purpose – and the limitations – of the catalogue or index is in order. As with the study of many letter collections (or indeed miscellaneous poets such as Martial), the generation of critical momentum usually requires that frequent reference be made to a very wide range of individual letters (or poems). We do not assume close familiarity in the reader with each of Pliny’s 247 letters in Books 1–9; on the other hand, it would be both tedious and repetitive for the reader if we paused to indicate the addressee – and to summarize the contents – of each letter to which we

¹³ Marchesi (2008) 1–4 acutely notes that much of this recent Plinian criticism has been concerned with the author and his strategies for self-promotion and censorship, and characterizes her own work as text- rather than author-centred, where the *Letters* themselves are the final object of interpretation, rather than any service that these texts may have performed for their author in the context of his society (2008, 5). The present volume employs both of these approaches.

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make reference. The catalogue in Appendix 2 is offered as a partial solution to this problem: consultation of its contents will provide a brief indication of the addressee and main theme(s) of each letter (or act as a mnemonic for readers already familiar with the text). The key feature here is quick access to the requisite information, and is of course not designed to substitute for (knowledge of) the text itself.

Conversely, readers may use the catalogue in Appendix 2 as a way of familiarizing themselves with the contents of individual books, or indeed of identifying individual letters (and locating their position). Here we return in a little more detail to the issue of Pliny's 'unemphatic' mode of presentation. As already suggested above, a good number of Pliny's letters often initially appear rather similar to one another, and distinguishing features – such as specificities of fact, figure and date – often seem to be avoided in the letters. Furthermore, Pliny strives for a consistency of tone and a moderation of language. The total effect is quite deliberate on Pliny's part, but from a modern reader's point of view one result is that individual letters – the anthologists' favourites aside – may lack strong distinctiveness. In this context, our catalogue is in part designed to aid readers' memories. (The ancient 'indices' to Pliny, discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 and in Appendix 2, may well have performed similar services in antiquity.) Nevertheless, there are some obvious limitations. As noted above, Pliny's letters contrive to smuggle in an astonishing variety of subject matter, despite their apparent commitment to the discussion of a single subject. Our brief summaries cannot do justice to this aspect of the *Letters*, and consequently some features of individual letters will be invisible. Nor can a summary of a letter be fully objective, and we have repeatedly crossed the line between report and interpretation. In addition, our catalogue cannot indicate the relative size of individual letters and thus indicate those which Pliny marks out as especially important through their sheer length.

Appendix 4 provides extremely brief information – for orientation purposes only – on a very select number of correspondents or figures named by Pliny in the *Letters*. For more information, including their full nomenclature and a list of letters where each is either named or receives a letter, see the 'Biographical Index' at the end of the second volume of Radice's Loeb edition of Pliny (1969) or – preferably – the onomasticon of Birley (2000a).¹⁴ The provision of such information is necessary in view of the

¹⁴ Radice (1969) 2.557–86 and Birley (2000a) are gratefully acknowledged as the source of the information condensed in Appendix 4.

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fact that over 100 persons receive letters from Pliny – and this without mentioning the relatively large number of other characters living or dead named in the text of the letters.¹⁵ The result – from the reader's perspective – is a not inconsiderable cast of characters.

¹⁵ However, it can be surprising to learn that more than half of the *Letters* in Books 1–9 – slightly less in Book 10 – are free of names other than those of the correspondent and of Greek or Latin authors; see Birley (2000a) 22.

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CHAPTER I

Reading a life
Letters, *Book 1*

As noted in the Introduction to this volume, Pliny's *Letters* can be approached in a variety of ways, ranging from reading all ten books of the collection in strict sequence to picking out individual favourites for special attention. In this opening chapter, however, we try out the most popular methodology of all for approaching letter collections, of whatever era, and read the correspondence for the story of the author's life. We endeavour to help readers make sense of how Pliny shapes his 'autobiography'. Much will be learnt about the structure and workings of Pliny's collection, including the fact that the *Letters* – despite initial appearances – are relatively hospitable, by *ancient* standards, to readers interested in a narrative of Pliny's life. Nevertheless, they are most welcoming to the returning reader who has read all ten books of letters and now starts the collection again from the beginning. For much key information is withheld till the closing books of the *Letters* – in such a way that a dynamic of re-reading becomes crucial to grasping the full potential of the collection.¹ It is the job of this chapter in due course to perform this act of re-reading for our own audience.

However, we do not tackle Pliny's life in isolation from his times. We read the *Letters* against the wider historical record and ask what Pliny puts in, what he leaves out, and what he delays for later revelation. The result will be a deeper appreciation of the images which Pliny wishes to create both of himself and his era. It will also emerge that, for all their careful crafting, the *Letters* are not necessarily a coherent piece of self-justifying propaganda. Pliny's own later autobiographical revelations may be turned against his earlier self-images.

For reasons to do with the structure of Pliny's *Letters* (on which more below), our reading of Pliny's life will concentrate largely on a single book

¹ For this as a persistent feature of the collection – where later books (esp. 9 and 10) belatedly reveal important information or invite a re-reading of earlier books – see above all Chapter 8; cf. Murgia (1985) 198–200, Leach (2003) 162–3, Marchesi (2008) 239–40.

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(Book 1). We begin, however, with an investigation of the relationship between letters and autobiography, since that relationship is not entirely straightforward, particularly in the case of ancient letter collections.

LETTERS AS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Why do we read letter collections for the story of the life?² Modern audiences, it is often claimed, experience impulses to discover some form of unity within texts they read, above all a kind of broadly conceived ‘narrative’ unity.³ This is a credible claim, since even ancient texts which offer no formal narratives to their readers – such as satire, love elegy and didactic – continue to attract attempts to examine or trace the stories which apparently lie at their base.⁴ In the case of collections of letters the rich supply of personal information found in individual letters offers the possibility of a narrative unity based around a complete story of the letter-writer’s life. Readers may interpret and rearrange the personal data so as to produce a satisfactory ‘life’ in chronological order, while biographical information ‘lost’ between letters beckons alluringly with a siren call, inviting readers to fill the gaps.⁵

Certainly, as regards modern letter collections, the marketing techniques of contemporary booksellers evince an expectation that we will want to read letters for the life-story which they apparently contain. Published correspondence is frequently found within the ‘Biography’ sections of the stock, while editors repeatedly adopt the playful title ‘A Life in Letters’ for the epistolary collections of prominent figures from the worlds of literature and the arts. In this limited but powerful sense letter collections are viewed in a relatively uncomplicated way as a form of autobiography.⁶ And it can hardly be doubted that Pliny’s *Letters* offer rich material for what is – by ancient standards – a relatively detailed life-story, from his birth seventeen or eighteen years prior to the eruption in AD 79 of Vesuvius (6.20.5) to

² For a more detailed investigation of the autobiographical potential of ancient letter collections (and modern attempts to realize that potential), see Gibson (2012).

³ See e.g. Sharrock (2000), esp. 16–17, 32–3.

⁴ See e.g. Gowers (2003) on Horace *Satires* 1, Breed (2009) on Propertius, Lee (2008) on Tibullus, Sharrock (2006) on Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria* and Tola (2008) on Ovid’s *Tristia*.

⁵ Cf. Trapp (2007) 342 on the Ciceronian letter collections, also Morello and Morrison (2007) xii. Nevertheless, for criticism of the idea that we inevitably construct narratives out of lives, see Strawson (2004).

⁶ For the importance of autobiography as an organizing concept in modern thought, see Marcus (1994). The modern literature on autobiography is vast; for two classic investigations, see Lejeune (1989), Sturrock (1993).