

INTRODUCTION

1 EPISTLES IN BRIEF

The early second century AD saw publication of the *Epistles*, a nine-book collection of 247 letters. Together with the *Panegyricus* (an address to Trajan) and 124 letters to and from Trajan known as *Epistles* 10,¹ this collection comprises the surviving literary legacy of Pliny the Younger.

The second book is a typical medley of twenty pieces addressed to a range of elite personal acquaintances. Their status as letters is self-evident from the formulaic trappings of heading (e.g. C. PLINIVS ROMANO SVO S.) and sign-off (VALE) and from the invocation of epistolary topoi – brevity, intimacy, humility – marking them as specific, personal and occasional.² Yet these conventions are not uniformly invoked: nothing about 2.7, for instance, beyond heading and sign-off marks it as a letter, while explicit signs of epistolarity are confined to the opening and close of the long, elaborate 2.11 (Priscus) and 2.17 (villa). Editing is obvious: details, dates and names have been smoothed away, the particular is turned to the general, and the sheer complexity of structure and literary texture strains against ephemerality. As a scripted collection (this commentary will argue), *Epistles* 1–9 constitutes an open, public and monumental work of very grand design.

Not all readers have seen it that way. In recent generations Pliny has served primarily as historical source-book and as fodder for beginner Latinists. Sherwin-White did great service to both industries with his landmark *Historical and Social Commentary* of 1966 and the little *Fifty Letters of Pliny* (1967) that followed. The latter typifies the anthologising urge that persisted through the twentieth century, sorting and selecting letters for palatable consumption, showing students the Pliny they might be assumed to like, and eradicating in the process such meaning as may reside in sequence and interplay within and between books. The former, for all its many virtues, is unwelcoming to the novice, parsimonious – as the title warns – on linguistic and literary comment, and scarcely available outside libraries. That leaves a significant hole given the lack of alternative: no other English commentary has been addressed to even a single complete book of the *Epistles* in over a century.³ Little wonder that most students (and many scholars)

¹ *Epistles* 10 has letters conventionally numbered 1–121 but including 3B, 17B and 86B. Probably published posthumously and added to *Epp.* 1–9 in late antiquity (see however Stadter 2006, Woolf 2006, Noreña 2007), it might best be called a semi-detached adjunct to *Epistles* 1–9; together with *Pan.*, it plays a subordinate role in this volume.

² For these and other topoi see Trapp 2003, especially 1–46. Other helpful introductions to ancient epistolography are Rosenmeyer 2001: 1–12, Edwards 2005, Gibson–Morrison 2007, Ebbeler 2010.

³ Mayor (1880) on book 3 is the only substantial commentary on a book; there are student editions of books 1–2 by Cowan (1889, the last on book 2 in any language) and

experience Pliny through the distorting lens of a translation, and very few engage with complete books, let alone the collection. More recently, however, the *Epistles* has undergone its literary turn: a series of books and articles have begun to demonstrate the rewards that follow from approaching it as a crafted literary work and one in which the books, and the whole, make meaningful units.⁴ Not that selective reading is 'wrong' as such: as in many poetic books, the fragments offer themselves as easy prey to excerptors, while ancient indexes facilitated browsing (§8); above all it is the tension between the autonomy of the letter and its subordination to larger structures that is fundamental. A commentary seems a useful format with which to give voice to this equivocation, open as it is to selective reading while gesturing towards interpretation of the whole. For – Pliny's mastery of prose apart (§§4–6) – it is in the interstice between ephemerality and eternity, between the fragment and the masterpiece, that the *Epistles* finds its essence.

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A collection of purportedly private letters from a consular orator directs the reader first and foremost to Cicero, the salient peak in the Roman epistolary landscape: we have over 900 letters, and Pliny may have known twice as many.⁵ Prized for their historical and literary interest, they offer apparently unmediated access to the inner life of one of Rome's great icons. Pliny's *Epistles* names Cicero ten times, makes several prominent allusions to his letters, and integrates abundant smaller motifs and phrases.⁶ Emulation goes far beyond the literary: as a provincial 'new man' and beacon of oratorical, political and cultural prestige, Cicero provides Pliny with a model for life as well as letters – or at least for life within letters.⁷ For all that – indeed, not least because he serves as far more than a model letter-writer – it is clear that Pliny's *Epistles* is a very different creature from the letters of Cicero. Cicero's correspondence is collected in books, of varying length, according to addressee (*Ad Atticum*, *Ad Quintum fratrem*, etc.), and includes around a hundred letters written by others;⁸ Pliny's books are remarkably consistent in length, give no voice to others, and show no obvious organisation by

book 6 by Duff (1906). History repeats itself: 'Pliny's Letters have hitherto been known to schoolboys chiefly by selections . . .' (Cowan v).

⁴ See Ludolph 1997 and Hoffer 1999 (book 1), Henderson 2002a (book 3); also G–M 36–73 (book 6), Bernstein 2008 and Whitton 2010 (book 8), Gibson forthcoming (book 9); and Beard 2002 (Cicero), Cancik 1967 and Richardson-Hay 2006 (Seneca), Gibson 2013c (Sidonius). For readings of *Epp.* 1–9 (or 1–10) as a whole, see Marchesi 2008 and G–M.

⁵ White 2010: 171–5, in an essential study of Cicero's letters; see also Hutchinson 1998, Beard 2002, Hall 2009.

⁶ See pp. 32 and 41 and index s.v. Likewise, *Pan.* looks often (but not only) to Cicero's foundational panegyric, *Pro Marcello* (Durry 1938: 28–33).

⁷ Weische 1989, Riggsby 1995, Lefèvre 1996 (= id. 2009: 111–22), Marchesi 2008: 207–40, Gibson–Steel 2010, G–M 74–103.

⁸ Beard 2002, White 2010: 31–61. The sixteen books of what we call *Ad familiares* were probably known singly to Pliny as *Ad Lentulum*, *Ad Tironem*, etc. (Peter 1901: 54–7, Beard 2002: 117–18, White 2010: 171).

correspondent. Cicero's vary in their headings and sign-offs, routinely address multiple topics, and include abundant unexplained names, obscure references and in-jokes – all the paraphernalia whose absence makes Pliny's letters so accessible to a remote readership. Most importantly, Cicero's letters were edited and published posthumously: whatever plans he may have had for wider circulation, his extant epistles were intended for single or select readers; those of Pliny (at least books 1–9, our concern here) are self-published.⁹ To a later reader (such as Pliny) Cicero's letters offer incidental fragments of a biography. Pliny's *Epistles*, by contrast, comprises the planned fragments of an autobiography (§2).

'It is a great jump from the letters of Cicero to those of Pliny. The gap is not bridged by the metrical Epistles of Horace or by the letters in prose of Seneca to Lucilius' (S-W 2). We might be less dogmatic (and add Ovid). In prose, Seneca's *Epistulae morales* offer the primary and radical alternative to Cicero. One hundred and twenty-four letters in twenty books,¹⁰ all addressed to his friend Lucilius, add up to a correspondence course in Stoic self-scrutiny. Since Sherwin-White wrote, the epistolarity of what used to be called essays in disguise has been explored and emphasised,¹¹ and it is no surprise to find Seneca as a second significant influence on Pliny's *Epistles*. He is named only once (5.3.5) but is a recurrent if often hazy intertextual presence,¹² offering in particular a primary paradigm for the epistolary villa-portrait (2.17.intro.).¹³ There, as elsewhere, resemblances also point contrasts: unlike the severe sexagenarian who confides in Lucilius alone, forty-something Pliny is in the prime of life, scripting buoyant epistolary interactions with a hundred-odd addressees,¹⁴ and too jovial to don the iron mantle of asceticism. Seneca does not bridge a gap from Cicero to Pliny: he provides a different, and very pertinent, model for epistolary self-exposure.

Yet prose is only part of the story. Horace's two books of hexameter *Epistles* and Ovid's *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto* (elegiac letters of lament from exile) harnessed epistolarity for ethical self-representation and crafted letters into poetic books.¹⁵ Their intertextual presence in Pliny seems slight, but the precedent in

⁹ On *Epp.* 10 see n.1 above. The details regarding Cicero are much debated: White 2010: 31–61.

¹⁰ Pliny knew more: Gell. *NA* 12.2 quotes from 'book 22', and there may have been losses within our 124 letters too (Inwood 2007a: xiii).

¹¹ Signal contributions are Wilson 2001, Henderson 2004a, Inwood 2007b. The 'real' vs 'literary' debate that formerly dominated had been as unproductive for Seneca as it is for Pliny (below).

¹² E.g. 2.5.13n. *ne*, 2.6.5n. *si gulae*, 2.8.2n. *numquamne*, 2.10.3n. *claustra*, 2.10.4n. *a*, 2.15.1n. *nihil*. On Seneca and Pliny see Lausberg 1991: 91–100, Cova 1997, Griffin 2007 and indexes to Henderson 2002a, Marchesi 2008, G–M s.v.

¹³ As well as for the format (2.1n. C. PLINIVS, 2.1.12n. VALE) and for highly clausulated letters (n.172). For a possible allusion to Sen. *Ep.* 1.1 see 2.1.1n. *post*.

¹⁴ The precise number is elusive, given doubts over identification (Birley 2000a: 17–21).

¹⁵ On Horatian epistolarity see de Pretis 2002; for Ovid see Williams–Walker 1997, Gaertner 2005: 6–9 and his index s.v. 'epistolography'; also Kennedy 2002 on *Heroides*. Single verse epistles are found already in Catullus (e.g. 65, 68A).

structure and composition significant.¹⁶ Certainly they exemplify the epistolary conceit central to Pliny's (and Seneca's) letters, that we readers are eavesdropping on private conversations.¹⁷ So too the equivocation – also familiar from Catullus, or Horace's *Odes* – between the ephemeral (a poem for a specific reader and occasion) and the eternal (poetry for all readers and all time). That same equivocation was shared by two recent poetic collections: Martial's *Epigrams* (AD 80s–100s) and Statius' *Silvae* (AD 90s). Both have been proposed as models for Pliny, Martial for his lively miniatures of Roman society and epigrammatic wit, Statius for his 'occasional' poetry and sustained ephrastic description.¹⁸ Pliny no doubt knew both; he makes Martial's death a significant point of closure in his *Epistles* (3.21) and may hint at Martialesque closure in *Epistles* 2;¹⁹ certainly Statius' verbalised villa (*Silvae* 2.2) is in view as we tour that of Pliny (2.17.intro.). None of these poets is so pervasive a point of reference as Cicero, but together they serve as a reminder that Pliny's generic frame of reference extends more widely than prose, and more widely too than self-proclaimed letters.

Scholarly debate over these different antecedents has been heavily coloured by the question of 'authenticity': those committed to finding 'real' letters in Pliny's collection are likely to emphasise Cicero, dismissing Seneca and poets, while at another extreme Martial and Statius have bolstered the arguments of the minority who see the *Epistles* as a wholly 'literary' work, each letter invented for publication.²⁰ The argument has been persistent, and sterile. Several letters deal with demonstrably historical persons and events (though it is rash to put faith in reality markers such as 'yesterday');²¹ we have no reason to doubt that Pliny wrote off a debt for Calvina (2.4) or canvassed for Clarus (2.9), or for that matter that he reported the Priscus trial to Arrianus (2.11–12) or told Gallus why he was so fond of his Laurentine villa (2.17): letters played a large part in elite life, and he might have written several thousand each year.²² Yet the simple fact of publication opens an interpretative chasm no different – if we set aside prejudices about an assumed prose/verse divide – from that faced by the reader of a Horatian ode

¹⁶ Possible hints of Hor. *Epp.* at 2.17.29n. *maxima*, 2.18.5n. *tam* (see also 2.2.1n. *quod*, 2.2.2n. *nascitur*, 2.10.4n. *monimento*). On structure (and Ov. *Ex P.*) see below, §3.

¹⁷ Spectacularly pricked by Hor. *Ep.* 1.20, addressing the book itself. Ov. *Ex P.* 3.9.51–2 offers a disingenuous closing denial: *nec liber ut fieret . . . propositum curaue nostra fuit*.

¹⁸ Guillemin 1929: 147 (Martial), Peter 1901: 114–18 (Statius); also Syme 1991: 646. Both collections include prefatory prose epistles (Pagán 2010).

¹⁹ 2.20.intro. See also 2.6.2n. *nam sibi*, 2.10.3n. *ut*, 2.20.8n. *Regulo*. On 3.21 see Henderson 2001a, id. 2002a: 44–58.

²⁰ The extreme poles are occupied by Lilja 1969 (also Bell 1989) and Guillemin 1 xxix–xxx respectively. For a review of the debate see Gamberini 1983: 122–36. The historian Sherwin-White, while granting editing its place, staunchly defended the letters' 'historicity' (S-W 11–20).

²¹ 2.7.1n. *here*; also 2.14.6 *here*.

²² Cf. Hall 2009: 16 on Cicero.

or an Ovidian epistle: who could say whether Gallus received two lines or two hundred, or any at all, in some earlier version? The archaeological search for a substratum of putative 'originals' has limited rewards, and this commentary joins other recent studies in preferring to read and respond to these pieces in the edited collection in which they are presented to us: not so much 'Pliny's letters' (plural) as 'Pliny's *Epistles*' (singular).²³

Not that epistolarity is unimportant: on the contrary, the very intransigence of the 'authenticity' debate is telling. Poised on the boundaries of real and literary, of private and public, of occasional and eternal, the *Epistles* is defined by indeterminacy. Its range of addressees situates Pliny in a (Ciceronian) milieu of senators and equestrians, with a heavy bias towards his native Transpadana (Italy north of the Po), and this milieu forms part of his identity.²⁴ But what we see is an idealised version of that society, just as each letter is an idealised transcript of any original communication. Indeed, we learn remarkably little about his addressees, who thus serve above all as mirrors reflecting Pliny's own image. The ambitions and self-awareness of the *Epistles* suggest that he is not writing first and foremost for his 'primary' reader, nor even for the 'secondary' readership of intimate *litterati* – a subset of the address-book on display – who share and savour each other's elegant epistolary efforts,²⁵ but for an external, one might say 'tertiary', readership of eavesdroppers such as us.²⁶ That Pliny never, after the prefatory 1.1, refers to the circulation of letters beyond his private circle and says nothing of the hours he spent writing them (up)²⁷ is part and parcel of the epistolary conceit, flattering us with fantasy membership of that inner sanctum and superiority even to the readers of his speeches.²⁸ The repeated intimations of immortality through literature (as in 2.10), quickening in the final book, dwell on poetry, history, oratory – anything but letters. Yet it is the *Epistles* – along with *Panegyricus* – that has lived on, proving itself, for all its

²³ Or, if you prefer, *Letters* (sg.). On the origins of the shifting but deep-rooted dichotomy 'epistle' (distant, literary, canonical) vs 'letter' (approachable, 'real', casual) see Rosenmeyer 2001: 5–12.

²⁴ Transpadanes comprise around a quarter of Pliny's addressees and receive towards a third of his letters (Syme 1968, Birley 2000a: 17–21, Bradley 2010: 415); as for social editing, meanwhile, 'no letter to a doctor, a philosopher, a free[d]man' (Syme 1985a: 343). On Cicero's social mix see White 2010: 59.

²⁵ 2.2.intro., 2.13.7n. *epistulas*. The constructedness of Pliny's literary community is well analysed by Johnson 2010: 32–73. Gurd 2012: 105–26 (developing a slightly different argument) distinguishes this 'genetic' public from Pliny's 'general' public.

²⁶ Particular signs of consideration towards such readers are noted in 2.11.10n. *erat*, 2.20.7n. *quia*.

²⁷ In 9.19.1 Ruso has read a letter to Albinus (6.10), proof only of personal circulation (Murgia 1985: 200–1; cf. Cic. *Att.* 4.6.4). Some see signs of publication in 9.11.1 *libris* and 9.23.2–3 *studiis*, but neither clearly concerns letters. Hours of writing: G–M 118.

²⁸ 2.5.4n. *ad*, 2.19.9n. *eruditissimum*. The *Epistles*' equivocal status is subtly explored by Fitzgerald 2007a (especially 193).

professedly humble, ephemeral and peripheral status, to be a very serious bet on posterity.

2 PLINY'S WORLD

The man we call Pliny the Younger was born C. or L. (Gaius or Lucius) Caecilius Secundus in AD 61 or 62. The name is deduced from epigraphical evidence, the date from the *Epistles* – two attempts at self-immortalisation which have succeeded in leaving us an unusually full biography.²⁹ His father, L. Caecilius Secundus, was an equestrian of Comum (modern Como, near Milan); his mother Plinia was sister of the prominent equestrian C. Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder), now best known for his *Natural History*. When the father died, the boy became the ward of a senior senator, Verginius Rufus (2.1.8n. *tutor*); in 79 he was adopted by the elder Pliny in his will (5.8.5) and accordingly became C. Plinius (Caecilius) Secundus.³⁰ Within a year or two he was practising as an advocate in Rome and, as *decemuir stlitibus iudicandis* in c. 80/81, presiding over the centumviral court, the primary civil tribunal (2.14.1n. *centumviralibus*); soon afterwards he served as military tribune in Syria, and by the late 80s he had entered the senate as *quaestor Caesaris* (one of the emperor's personal officials: 2.9.1n. *quam*). He pursued a swift *cursum*: tribune of the plebs, praetor, prefect of the military treasury and prefect of the treasury of Saturn (2.8.2n. *angor*). Pliny was suffect consul for September and October 100, an augur from 103 or 104 (2.1.8n. *illo*) and curator of the Tiber c. 104–6; around this time he also served in the *consilium principis*, the emperor's informal cabinet. In c. 110 he was posted as governor to Bithynia-Pontus, where he stayed for somewhat less than two years (Williams 1990: 13). He is widely assumed, *ex silentio*, to have died in that office at the age of around fifty.

Rightly or not, we tend to define imperial history almost wholly by reigning *principes*. In those terms, Pliny was born under Nero (ruled 54–68) and adopted by a man somewhat intimate with Vespasian (69–79) and his son Titus (79–81);³¹ he owed his senatorial status and career thereafter to Titus' brother Domitian (81–96). That debt became awkward when Domitian was assassinated in September 96 and condemned as a vicious and bloodthirsty tyrant, but the embarrassment was not unique to Pliny, whose career shows no sign of retardation during the sixteen-month principate of the elderly Nerva (96–8) or under his adopted successor Trajan (98–117).³² Five to ten years Pliny's senior, Trajan too had fared

²⁹ The following account skims over controversies: for detail see Birley 2000a: 1–17, superseding S-W 69–82; also Syme 1991: 551–67, G-M 108–10, 265–73.

³⁰ See Salway 1994: 132 for the name, Champlin 1991: 144–6 on testamentary adoption. Pliny seems not to have used 'Caecilius', distinguishing him from his uncle, except in the most formal contexts (Birley 2000a: 1), how early it featured in the title of his *Epistles* (cf. Stout 1954: 16) is unclear.

³¹ Working intimacy with Vespasian is advertised in 3.5.9, with Titus in the preface to his *Natural History*.

³² For the historical context see e.g. Griffin 2000, Bennett 2001, Grainger 2003.

well enough under Domitian, as had one and all of the men promoted in the years following his accession: this was less a revolution than a coup within the governing class. Nevertheless, 96 is enshrined in historians' minds as a watershed, thanks not least to the rhetoric of Pliny and Tacitus.³³ The *Panegyricus* tirelessly works a dichotomy between *pessimus* Domitian and *optimus* Trajan; *Epistles* 1–9 features the same dichotomy, but more discreetly.³⁴ Pliny is rarely seen intersecting directly with emperors, and the *Epistles* has its centre of gravity away from the Palatine. Nevertheless, in its understated way, it is emphatic in distancing its author from Domitian and in associating him with Nerva and Trajan.

Like Tacitus (*Agricola* 1–3, *Histories* 1.1–3) but less explicitly, Pliny makes Domitian's death the enabling force for an entire (literary) career. It features early (1.5.1 *post Domitiani mortem*) and plays a central role in the suicide of old Corellius Rufus (1.12.8), while upbeat signs of revived intellectual life conjure up a restoration mood for book 1 as a whole.³⁵ Those two letters typify Pliny's epistolary construction and negotiation of the watershed: contrasts are strong, but the focus is less on emperors than on subjects. In 1.5 Pliny introduces Regulus as a Domitianic creature and polar opposite of himself, while 1.12 presents Corellius, family friend and mentor, as Domitian's bitter enemy; both letters thus – with typical obliquity – set Pliny on the (new) side of right.³⁶ In book 2 this pair is reversed and varied: 2.1 commemorates the death of another 'good' elder statesman, Verginius Rufus, who is tied to both Nerva and Pliny, while 2.20 returns to the 'bad' senator Regulus. Meanwhile the short 2.18 incidentally parades intimacy with Junius Mauricus and Arulenus Rusticus, so contributing to a running project of associating Pliny with senatorial victims of Domitian.³⁷ His own Domitianic past, though not erased (2.9.1n. *quam*), receives scant mention.³⁸

No emperor is named in book 2: a *princeps* or *Caesar* is sighted now and then, largely in passing, but Pliny never specifies which (2.1.3n. *reliquit*). Trajan's adoption (Oct. 97), accession (Jan. 98) and entry to Rome (late 99, glimpsed in 3.7.6–7), all of which (could) fall within the time-frame of the book,³⁹ pass unnoticed. The result, besides keeping modern historians exercised, is a flawless transition from Nerva (book 1) to Trajan (book 3), constructing a single reign, as it were, of Nerva–Trajan and so underlining the gulf between this new regime

³³ On this violent rhetoric of periodisation see first Ramage 1989. How far it reflects changed reality is debatable (Waters 1969, Coleman 2000, Saller 2000b, Wilson 2003).

³⁴ Hoffer 1999, especially 61–6, Beutel 2000: 129–270; also Hoffer 2006 on 10.2. Reference to Domitian in the Bithynia correspondence, by contrast, is businesslike (10.58, 10.60, 10.65.3, 10.66.2, 10.72).

³⁵ Notably 1.10, 1.13: Hoffer 1999 *passim*, G–M 24–5.

³⁶ So too 1.18.3 (Pliny recalls former fears of opposing *Caesaris amicos* in court).

³⁷ 2.18.intro. The theme perhaps makes 2.18–20 a triptych (2.19n. CERIAI).

³⁸ For speculation on it see Giovannini 1987, Soverini 1989, Strobel 2003.

³⁹ Namely 97–100 (below, §3), though Oct. 97 precedes its earliest datable event (Verginius' funeral in Nov./Dec. 97).

and that of Domitian.⁴⁰ The lack of triumphal apparatus also quietly emphasises the *ciuitas* of Trajan, who benignly presides over the central parade of senatorial (and Plinian) vigour, the Priscus trial, and to whom one may credit – though Pliny does not do so directly – the *otium* on display in 2.17 and elsewhere (pp. 10–11). Contrast with the cowed senate of Domitianic days, laboured in *Pan.* 76.1–4 (describing the same occasion), is delicately drawn (2.11.10n. *erat*): after *Epistles* 1, and the reminder at the start of this book (2.1.3n. *Caesares quibus*, 4n. *in*), it can be taken as read that the happy present is played out in implicit comparison with a gloomy past.⁴¹ Like the *Panegyricus*, the Priscus letter binds Pliny to Trajan, but here in miniature and with Pliny, not Trajan, centre-stage (2.11.intro.):⁴² imperial politics are refracted rather than projected in these professedly private letters.

This (quiet) celebration of Nerva/Trajanic present over Domitianic past is complicated, however, by a contrasting strain of nostalgia and dissatisfaction with modernity. Perverse hospitality (2.6), debased oratorical practice in the courts (2.14) and 'legacy hunting' (2.20) all prompt satirical attacks on contemporary society; generals are not what they used to be (2.7.1) and even the senate cannot be trusted to vote wisely (2.12).⁴³ Pliny's response ranges from constructive (2.6, 2.7) to resigned, with especially gloomy prognosis ending 2.14 and 2.20. Is the Trajanic future not so bright after all? The narrative of decline was a constant in Roman literature: *hoc maiores nostri questi sunt, hoc nos querimus, hoc posteri nostri querentur* (Sen. *Ben.* 1.10.1).⁴⁴ Things were always better in a hazy, distant past, when men were real men and virtue was real virtue. But such pessimism over the *longue durée* should not be mistaken for criticism of a ruling emperor: Seneca, for instance, could refer to a Rome *in qua ciuitate numquam deest patronus peioribus* in one of his most panegyric works (*De clementia* 1.15.2). Indeed, the weaknesses of society and the senate can be marshalled as justification precisely for a *princeps*, a man (or more) to save Rome from itself.⁴⁵ All the same, a striking negativity imbues the close of book 2. Especially given Regulus' association with Domitian, this gives the impression that all is not (yet) well with the world: Rome wasn't rebuilt in a day.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Hoffer 1999: 142–3, G–M 24. Later books tell a different story of Nerva (G–M 27–35; already 4.22.4–6 reveals him dining with *delatores*), as does *Pan.*, where his weakness is a source of Trajan's legitimacy (Kienast 1968, Méthy 2006).

⁴¹ Pliny returns to attack Domitian explicitly in 4.11 and 8.14; see also 3.9.31 and 33, 4.9.2, 4.22, 7.27.12–14, 9.13.

⁴² Not that readers of *Pan.* should miss Pliny's self-projection there (Henderson 2002a: 151, id. 2011).

⁴³ See intro. to each letter and 2.18.2n. *sperare*, 2.20.12 *in*; see also Lefèvre 2009, Strunk 2012.

⁴⁴ E.g. Cat. 64.397–408, Sall. *Jug.* 3–4, Hor. *C.* 3.6.46–8, Livy *praef.* 9, Vell. 2.92.5, Tac. *H.* 1.18.3.

⁴⁵ 3.20.12 and 4.25.5, each with heavenly allusion (2.4.3n. *decurrit*); Trajan comes to the senate's rescue again in 5.13.7–8.

⁴⁶ On this 'narrative of decline', and its modification by later books, see pp. 16–17, 19–20.

The failings of modernity serve not least, however, to sharpen the contrast with the exemplary individuals in Pliny's circle. In contrast to the usual Roman search for exemplars in the distant past, the *Epistles* is notable for its celebration of contemporary *exempla*,⁴⁷ first among them four 'elders and betters' (G–M 104–35): Verginius Rufus (2.1), Vestricius Spurinna (2.7, 3.1), Corellius Rufus (1.12) and the elder Pliny (3.5). Not that Pliny elevates modernity over antiquity: what makes these men great is their comparability with men of an earlier age.⁴⁸ Celebrating them has a pay-off for Pliny, who basks in reflected glory whenever he praises the good (1.17.4 *scias ipsum plurimis uirtutibus abundare qui alienas sic amat*; cf. 4.27.6, Krasser 1993a), and, in the case of these father-figures, in quasi-inherited glory too (2.1.8n. *tutor*). Others earn admiration as well: the rhetor Isaeus (2.3), though he represents an entirely different walk of life, and younger men like Erucius Clarus (2.9), Voconius Romanus (2.13) and the dead Cottius (2.7); fellow senators also merit passing compliments in 2.11, above all Tacitus (cf. also 2.1.6n. *laudator*, pp. 33–4 below). Conversely, counter-exemplary figures demonstrate how not to behave: the inhospitable host of 2.6, the corrupt senators Priscus and Firminus (2.11–12) and above all Pliny's *bête noire* Regulus (2.11.22, 2.20).

Celebrating the *exempla* of others, however, is only part of the story: Pliny also provides one himself. The bad host of 2.6 makes a counter-example for Avitus, but the letter is centred on Pliny's contrasting model etiquette (2.6.3–5). 2.14 dissociates him from the common crowd of advocates, 2.12 even from the senate herd (and by 9.13 he will be in a virtuous minority of one: 2.11.intro.). From *protégé* of Verginius Rufus (2.1) Pliny rapidly becomes a father-figure (2.4, 2.18) and patron (2.5.3, 2.9, 2.13), in a miniaturised version of his development through the *Epistles*.⁴⁹ He is thus revealed, within his epistolary society, as a crucial link in the chain of exemplarity, passing on to the next generation what he learnt from the last;⁵⁰ but he also serves, of course, as teacher and exemplar for his wider readership. Not only does Pliny provide us with a repository of model letters⁵¹ – how to handle a tricky will (2.4, 2.16), recommend a friend (2.9, 2.13), tease but persuade (2.10), help with a favour (2.18) – he presents at every turn a model life in the fragmentary self-portrait that is the *Epistles*.⁵² This may be

⁴⁷ See Gazich 2003, and for the few past *exempla*, Méthy 2003 (cf. Gowing 2005: 123–30 and Henderson 2011 on *Pan.*). More broadly on exemplarity see e.g. Mayer 1991, Chaplin 2000, Morgan 2007: 122–59.

⁴⁸ See 2.1.7n. *exemplar aevi prioris*, 2.7.1n. *assequebantur*, 2.9.4n. *antiquus*, 6.21.1; Döpp 1989.

⁴⁹ G–M 62–3, 131–5; 2.6n. AVITO, 2.18.intro.

⁵⁰ And restoring a virtuous cycle almost lost in Domitian's principate (8.14.2–10 with Gazich 2003: 127–31).

⁵¹ A real 'etiquette book' of model letters survives from antiquity (2.4.intro.).

⁵² The staging of the self in *Epistles* has been a major theme of recent study: see especially Ludolph 1997 and Henderson 2002a and 2003; also Radicke 1997, Hoffer 1999, Gibson–Morello 2003 and G–M *passim*. Syme 1958: 98 already saw the *Epistles* for 'the closest that was decent or permissible to the autobiography of an orator and a statesman' (also

no Senecan course in Stoicism; but as an exemplary guide to ethics, a practical demonstration of life lived, these letters too could aspire to the title *Epistulae morales*.⁵³ Whether it is an example we could ever hope to follow – where, that is, to draw the line between didaxis and egotistical display – is another question.⁵⁴

Pliny's life, as distilled in the *Epistles*, is marked by social success, happy relations, jovial generosity, buoyant optimism, a strong sense of duty to society and state, but also space for *otium* and so devotion to literature. Faced with such a picture of perfection, *quis credet? nemo, hercule, nemo* . . .⁵⁵ Certainly it does not win universal admiration from modern readers, whether (in part) because we derive our entertainment from human weakness, or because of a profound expectation that life under autocracy should not be cheerful.⁵⁶ Pliny's unfashionable aura of self-satisfaction does little to help: few are fooled by his false modesty (2.4.intro.) or willing to play along with the conceit that we are accidental, not intended, readers. At the same time, the rare intimacy (purportedly) on offer in this behind-the-scenes *exposé*, as with Cicero's letters, has perhaps inevitably damning effect: *maior e longinquo reuerentia* (Tac. *An.* 1.47.2). Worse still, he has seemed to some an intellectual lightweight.⁵⁷ Such value-judgments belong best with the individual reader, but it is worth underlining that Pliny's portrait is perfect not least in its imperfection. Through the stage-curtain he invites us to glimpse not just triumphs but also foibles: here is a man who is not ashamed to enjoy a little laziness (2.2.2n. *desidia*) and who yearns for respite from his duties (2.8.2n. *angor*, 2.14.14n. *ratio*). The humanising *captatio beneuolentiae*, cajoling the reader and sugaring the didactic pill (or smoothing the egotism) with confessed weakness – staking a paradoxical claim to exemplarity in and through being normal – at least aims to take the edge off Pliny's self-advertisement. It also directs us to the spiritual core of the *Epistles*, the world of *otium*.

For all the celebration of statesmanship and social grace, the private, leisured sphere has a special place in this portrait of Pliny's 'private' self. *Otium* is the prerequisite not just for relaxation but for the *studia* (literary activities) that are the life-blood of the *Epistles* and the route to eternity: 3.7.14 [*uitam*] *si non datur factis, certe studiis proferamus* 'if we may not extend our life with deeds, let us at least do so with our efforts on the page'.⁵⁸ Late in book 2 we reach the sanctum that is the Laurentine villa, site of and metonym for literary devotion (2.17.intro.); late

p. 664 and id. 1985a: 350). Another branch of scholarship has preferred to take Pliny at his word: Büttler 1970, Trisoglio 1972, Méthy 2007, Lefèvre 2009.

⁵³ On Pliny's pragmatic philosophy see André 1975, Griffin 2007.

⁵⁴ One tied up with the question of readership – senators? provincial elite? posterity? (I privilege the last: pp. 1–6 above).

⁵⁵ Fielding *Tom Jones* VIII 1 (after Persius).

⁵⁶ Two reasons for Tacitus' generally greater appeal. Hoffer 1999 is the signal attempt at locating 'anxieties' in the cracks of Pliny's smooth façade.

⁵⁷ An epitome of mediocrity for Norden 1898: 318; Pausch 2004: 51–3 collects more recent gems. Prose artistry, for this reader, is Pliny's highest claim on posterity.

⁵⁸ 2.2.2nn. *partim, studiis, otio*, Büttler 1970: 28–40, Méthy 2007: 378–413.