

ÁGNES DARAB

“WHY SHOULD I NOT STATE MY OPINION,
RIGHT OR WRONG?”¹

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LITERARY CRITICISM
IN THE *LETTERS* OF PLINY THE YOUNGER

Summary: Literary self is an essential component of Pliny’s self-representation. Pliny’s literary self-portrait is shaped the way he wants it to be by a diverse set of literary techniques utilized in the letters. My paper explores the questions formulated in the letters that thematize the selection and composition of text, and the answers given to them (not necessarily in the form of assertive sentences). This interpretation is not independent from the self-representative character of the letters, yet, it exceeds it on the premise that another dimension may be opened to the understanding of the letters, which points towards the development of the literary and artistic taste of the first century, and its directions.

Key words: Pliny the Younger, epistle, digression, *ekphrasis*, description, aesthetics in the Flavian age

For the past twenty-five years, the philology of Pliny’s letters has been defined by a paradigm shift that views the letters² as the revelation of the self entering public space: it emphasizes the constructedness of the letter writer’s figure, and the consciously composed self-representative nature of the letters, and highlights the literary techniques they use.³ Creating his literary self is an essential component of Pliny’s self-representation, which is also apparent from the fact that the first letter in the collection is built on the motif of writing and publishing:

* Manuscript received: September 29, 2020, accepted: November 18, 2020.

¹ Plin. *Ep.* 5. 6. 42. I quote the letters and their English translation from Pliny, *Letters and Panegyricus* I–II. Translated by BETTY RADICE. London 1989 and 1992.

² I follow Georg Luck’s terminology, who clearly distinguishes between the letter as a literarily unrefined, private document and the epistle as a literary text that expects to gain publicity: LUCK, G.: Brief und Epistel in der Antike. *Altertum* 7.2 (1961) 78. When I use the word *letter* – to avoid the repetition of words –, it is always in reference to the literary letter.

³ LEACH, E. W.: The Politics of Self-Presentation: Pliny’s “Letters” and Roman Portrait Sculpture. *Classical Antiquity* 9.1 (1990) 14–39; HENDERSON, J.: *Pliny’s Statue: The Letters, Self-Portraiture and Classical Art*. Exeter 2002; HENDERSON, J.: Portrait of the Artist as a Figure of Style: P.L.I.N.Y.’s Letters. *Arethusa* 36.2 (2003) 115–125; GIBSON, R. K. – MORELLO, R.: *Reading the Letters of Pliny the Younger: An Introduction*. Cambridge – New York 2012.

Frequenter hortatus es, ut epistulas, si quas paulo cura maiore scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. (1. 1. 1)

You have often urged me to collect and publish any letters of mine which were composed with some care.

Pliny does not leave the thought of publishing behind, but proceeds to discuss it in various contexts, such as the choice of topic and genre, the structural arrangement of the text, the elaboration of smaller parts and details, and the social status of writing as an occupation. Meanwhile, Pliny's literary self-portrait is shaped the way he wants it to be by a diverse set of literary techniques utilized in the letters, and the writer's statements that revisit the said techniques.

Doubt and incertitude are part of the writer's self-fashioning. These moments in Pliny's literary self-fashioning can be glimpsed in the questions that are raised during and reflect on the process of writing itself. My paper explores the questions formulated in the letters that thematize the selection and composition of text, and the answers given to them (not necessarily in the form of assertive sentences). This interpretation is not independent from the self-representative character of the letters, yet, it exceeds it on the premise that another dimension may be opened to the understanding of the letters, which points towards the development of the literary and artistic taste of the first century, and its directions.

The direct literary precedent to Pliny's letters can be found in Cicero's collection of letters entitled *Ad familiares*,⁴ and as such, it documents the appearance of the literary letter that presupposes publicity as a genre. It is no surprise that the collection repeatedly positions the letter, this newly emerged genre as compared to the dominant prosaic genres, rhetoric and historiography. The letter is measured up against history – and the generic demarcation is proclaimed – already in the opening letter, in the continuation of the above quote:

Collegi non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus venerat. (1. 1. 1)

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.

The expectation to write history is entertained as a crucial topic, while letter 5. 8, which is overall a *recusatio*, highlights the connections between following in the predecessors' footsteps and writing history. At some point, Pliny is being apologetic over procrastinating a historical narrative:

Me vero ad hoc studium impellit domesticum quoque exemplum. Avunculus meus idemque per adoptionem pater historias et quidem religiosissime scripsit. Invenio autem apud sapientis honestissimum esse maiorum

⁴ On the relationship of Pliny's letters to the Ciceronian model, see SHERWIN-WHITE, A. N.: *The Letters of Pliny. A Historical and Social Commentary*. Oxford 1966, 1–3; GIBSON–MORELLO (n. 3) 83–103.

vestigia sequi, si modo recto itinere praecesserint. Cur ego cunctor?
(5. 8. 5–6)

In my case family precedent is an additional incentive to work of this kind. My uncle, who was also my father by adoption, was a historian of scrupulous accuracy, and I find in the philosophers that it is an excellent thing to follow in the footsteps of one’s forbears, provided that they trod an honest path. Why then do I delay?

The answer given is made up from the *topoi* of the *recusatio*: writing history calls for a polished and elevated work, but the amount of time necessary to complete such a text is not at the writer’s disposal at the moment, for he is occupied with revising and finalizing his earlier dialogues. Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello, notable co-authors of the contemporary research on Pliny’s letters, claim that a comprehensive interpretation of individual letters is only possible if they are read in the context constructed for them by the author.⁵ The key words of the quoted part from 5. 8 (*avunculus – pater – exemplum – historias – scripsit – sequi*) lay out the context, in which one may see how the letter writer Pliny could fit one of the paradigms of Roman prose literature, writing history: my uncle and father in one person, is my ideal, who also wrote historical narratives, and who I shall follow in this respect, too. The context is created by the allusion to Pliny the Elder, whose work as a writer, as well as his schedule for reading, taking notes and writing, that is, *studium*, is summarized in Pliny the Younger’s letter 3. 5, which can also be read as the portrait of a *vir illustris*, as a kind of *historia*. Letter 3. 5, which eulogizes Pliny the Elder, the historian, entrains the continuation of this portrait, letter 6. 16 into the interpretation of letter 5. 8, and 6. 16 does the same with 6. 20,⁶ the so-called Vesuvius letters, which describe the same event – the day of the natural disaster – at the request of the same historian, Tacitus. Letter 6. 16 has become the canonized narrative of the Elder Pliny’s death that ensued after his departure from Misenum in an attempt to save the citizens. Letter 6. 20 describes how Pliny the Younger, having stayed behind in Misenum, experienced the days of eruption. Recipients at all times are tempted to read the two letters in relation to one another⁷ because of their content, what is more, they are invited to do so by

⁵ GIBSON–MORELLO (n. 3) 37.

⁶ Most recently it was Tom Keeline, who emphasized that the letters belong together and should be interpreted as such. He calls the three letters (3. 5, 6. 16, 6. 20) a triptych or a drama in three acts created by Pliny the Younger about his uncle: KEELINE, T.: Model or Anti-Model? Pliny on Uncle Pliny. *TAPA* 148 (2018) 173 and 193.

⁷ To my knowledge, six articles have read letters 6. 16 and 6. 20 in each other’s context so far. All these approaches are different – from each other and from my own put forward in the present paper. Otto Schönberger examines whether the two correspond regarding facts and details and finds generic, ethical and speech level analogies: SCHÖNBERGER, O.: Die Vesuv-Briefe des Jüngeren Plinius (VI 16 und 20). *Gymnasium* 97.6 (1990) 526–548. Reading the letters, Nicholas F. Jones sees Pliny the Elder’s figure functioning as a monumental parable: JONES, N. F.: Pliny the Younger’s Vesuvius “Letters” (6.16 and 6.20). *Classical World* 95.1 (2001) 31–48. Rhiannon Ash fits her interpretation in the context of the Younger Pliny referring to writing history: ASH, R.: *Aliud est epistulam, aliud historiam ... scribere* (Epistles 6. 16. 22): Pliny the Historian? *Arethusa* 36 (2003) 211–225. Antony Augoustakis points out the Tacitean = historiographic traits of the narrative style of the two letters: AUGOUSTAKIS, A.: *Nequaquam historia digna?*

the letter writer himself, who constructs and maintains a cross-referential system between the letters. Also, it is not Pliny the Elder's figure alone, who invites us to compare letter 5. 8 with the Vesuvius letters, but the topic raised – writing history – and the syntactic concordance of this proposition at the beginning of the three letters: *Suades, ut historiam scribam* (5. 8. 1) — *Petis, ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam* (6. 16. 1) — *Ais te ... cupere cognoscere* (6. 20. 1).

The Vesuvius letters are framed by a beginning that tells the reasons for the choice of topic and recording it, and an ending that evaluates the execution. The substantive and syntactic analogies of the letters – along with the recurring *petis-ais* opening – only make an impression that these letters belong together, but the explicit reference in 6. 20 to 6. 16 creates a conspicuous bond between them:

Petis, ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris possis. (6. 16. 1)

Thank you for asking me to send you a description of my uncle's death so that you can leave an accurate account of it for posterity.

Ais te adductum litteris quas exigenti tibi de morte avunculi mei scripsi, cupere cognoscere, quos ego Miseni relictus (id enim ingressus abruperam) non solum metus verum etiam casus pertulerim. (6. 20. 1)

So the letter which you asked me to write on my uncle's death has made you eager to hear about the terrors and also the hazards I had to face when left at Misenum, for I broke off at the beginning of this part of my story.

The beginning of letter 6. 20 echoes not only that of 6. 16, but also its ending:

Interim Miseni ego et mater – sed nihil ad historiam, nec tu aliud quam de exitu eius scire voluisti. [...] Tu potissima excerpes; aliud est enim epistulam aliud historiam, aliud amico aliud omnibus scribere. (6. 16. 21–22)

Meanwhile my mother and I were at Misenum, but this is not of any historic interest, and you only wanted to hear about my uncle's death. [...]

It is for you to select what best suits your purpose, for there is a great difference between a letter to a friend and history written for all to read.

The mention of Misenum is the fixed point, where the narrative of 6. 16 suddenly breaks off (6. 16. 21: *Miseni eram*), and where 6. 20 picks up the thread (6. 20. 1: *Miseni relictus*), but the letter writer proceeds to weave the story as his own. The

Plinian Style in Ep. 6. 20. *Classical Journal* 100.3 (2005) 265–273. Tom Keeline's article compares the two letters focusing on the issue of following in the steps of the forbears: KEELINE (n. 6) 193–195. My comparative reading, parts of which were incorporated into this paper, interprets the letters in respect of identity and self-representation: DARAB, Á.: Performativity and Self-Fashioning in Pliny the Younger's *Epistles* (Plin. Ep. 6.16, 6.20). In TÓTH, O. (ed.): *Biográfia és identitás* [Biography and Identity]. Debrecen 2020, 181–195 (in Hungarian).

verbal formulation of continuity (6. 20. 1: *id enim ingressus abruperam*) pertains to the thematic unity of the letters. The narrative gesture of interweaving, however, exceeds that and opens up a new dimension to reading the letter. It reflects on the prior assessment of the topic of 6. 20, articulated at the end of 6. 16: *sed nihil ad historiam* (6. 16. 21) – this is not of any historic interest, a comment, which is repeated almost word by word in the last lines of 6. 20: *Haec nequaquam historia digna* (6. 20. 20). Of course, these details are not important enough for history. At the same time, it indicates how the beginning of 6. 16 continues, which goes into details about who and what is fit for a historical work:

nam video morti eius si celebretur a te immortalem gloriam esse propositam. Quamvis enim pulcherrimarum clade terrarum, ut populi, ut urbes memorabili casu, quasi semper victurus occiderit, quamvis ipse plurima opera et mansura condiderit, multum tamen perpetuitati eius scriptorum tuorum aeternitas addet. Equidem beatos puto, quibus deorum munere datum est aut facere scribenda aut scribere legenda, beatissimos vero quibus utrumque. Horum in numero avunculus meus et suis libris et tuis erit. (6. 16. 1–3)

I know that immortal fame awaits him if his death is recorded by you. It is true that he perished in a catastrophe which destroyed the loveliest regions of the earth, a fate shared by whole cities and their people, and one so memorable that it is likely to make his name live for ever: and he himself wrote a number of books of lasting value: but you write for all time and can still do much to perpetuate his memory. 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. Such a man was my uncle, as his own books and yours will prove.

Facere scribenda and *scribere legenda* – this, on the one hand, is a concise summary of the subject matter and function of history writing: to record exemplary deeds and carve them in memory. On the other, it is also a synopsis of Pliny the Elder’s life, which was so rich in remarkable acts and events that its memory was eternalized in Tacitus’ historical work. Additionally, Pliny the Elder, the main character of letter 6. 16, also ensured that the memory of his deeds would live on through his own historical works (*plurima opera et mansura*). At the same time, these two phrases imply what the self-reflexive conclusion of the letter explicitly states: the letter writer’s own life story, along with its epistolary disclosure are of no interest to posterity or literature. Pliny the Elder departs from Misenum to save the citizens in peril, and to examine the unknown natural phenomenon at the same time. Pliny the Younger stays in Misenum with his mother, to study Livy’s historical work (6. 20. 5: *posco librum Titi Livi*). The Elder’s life is a *historia scribenda*, while his works and everything written about them are *historia legenda*. The Younger’s, in both respects, are *nihil ad historiam*, or *nequaquam historia digna*.

Pliny, however, sent letter 6. 16 as a contribution to a historical narrative. It was requested by the historian Tacitus, who also asked him to record the contents of letter 6. 20, which was fundamentally influenced by the Tacitean narrative technique, as Antony Augoustakis points out.⁸ Furthermore, the *facere scribenda* and *scribere legenda* comparison obviously alludes to Sallust's introductory thoughts to his history, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*, on the relationship between the deeds and the recording of deeds.⁹ Invoking a third historian, Livy, besides Tacitus and the Sallust-allusion reveals Pliny's ambition: to create a component of his literary self-image that places the letters recording the natural disaster and the death of Pliny the Elder, together with the letter writer himself among the highest ranks of Roman history writing. At the same time, the abrupt interruption of the narrative of letter 6. 16, and then, after three letters of narrative *mora*, the seamless continuation of 6. 16 in 6. 20 is a narrative technique very well-known from history writing. Using this technique in a letter is the narrative manifestation of Pliny's literary self, showcasing his talents as a historian.¹⁰

The autodiegetic narrative written at Tacitus' instigation starts with a quote from the *Aeneid* of Vergil (2. 12): *'quamquam animus meminisse horret ..., incipiam!'*. The description of fleeing and returning, which amounts to the second half of letter 6. 20 (6. 20. 11–20), also alludes to the *Aeneid* (2. 638–720), when Pliny's mother is begging his son to flee without her, for she is too old and would be but a burden, endangering her son's survival (6. 20. 12: *Tum mater orare hortari iubere, quoquo modo fugerem; posse enim iuvenem, se et annis et corpore gravem bene morituram, si mihi causa mortis non fuisset*). The son gives his mother the same reply as Aeneas did to his father: he does not wish to survive without him/her, and taking him/her by the hand, the child forces his parent to follow (6. 20. 12: *Ego contra salvum me nisi una non futurum; dein manum eius amplexus addere gradum cogo*). Eventually, Pliny – similarly to Aeneas – starts giving orders with regards to the modes of escape (6. 20. 13: *"Deflectamus" inquam "dum videmus, ne in via strati comitantium turba in tenebris obteramur."*).

The allusions to the *Aeneid* in 6. 20 enlarge the epical aspect of the narrative. At the same time, they also put an equation mark between the two topics – fleeing from Troy and Misenum –, and the two narratives: Aeneas' account told to Dido, and that of Pliny addressed to Tacitus. Everything that follows (6. 20. 14–20) is a description of the wailing and panicking crowd, recorded in a tone that invokes Tacitus. The letter writer, as one may see, is perfectly aware of attributing the letter with such potential that would allow it to be a part of a larger historical narrative.¹¹ In 5. 8, Pliny turns away from writing a monumental history, but instead he carries out, to use Rhiannon Ash's term, a miniature exercise in historical writing within the generic framework of the epistle.¹² This is what happens in 6. 16 and 6. 20, where the Tacitean

⁸ AUGOUSTAKIS (n. 7) 267ff.

⁹ Sall. *Cat.* 3. 1. 2.

¹⁰ ASH (n. 7) 215–216.

¹¹ AUGOUSTAKIS (n. 7) 271.

¹² ASH (n. 7) 224.

narrative technique of historiography is combined with the Virgilian pathos of epic poetry.

Pliny’s literary monument is not characterized by following in the footsteps of others, or writing expansive, programmatic books, but by the often praised variety, thematic and stylistic diversity, easiness and playfulness found in his letters. Letter 1.16 praises the contemporary Pompeius Saturninus’ versatility as a writer. The generic complexity of his works is highlighted: pleading, oratory, history writing, poems evoking the easiness of Catullus and Calvus, and, as the epistle accentuates, letters comprise his literary output. Pliny claims to spend his time reading Saturninus’ works, whenever he has a few minutes to spare (1. 16. 1: *nunc vero totum me tenet habet possidet*), because he is fascinated by the stylistic diversity and playfulness of the texts (1. 16. 1: *quam varium quam flexibile quam multiplex esset*). He also speaks in defense of Saturninus as a contemporary author, and not as a great figure of the past (1. 16. 8: *neque enim debet operibus eius obesse, quod vivit. [...] eiusdem nunc honor praesentis et gratia quasi satietate languescit?*)

Letter 7. 4 could very well be the pair of 1. 16, because there we find another example of Pliny praising authorial versatility, and this time, his own. When asked how a serious person can turn to writing hendecasyllables, he offers a summary of his activity as a poet that apparently stretches back to his childhood, and during which period he has written a tragedy, an epic and mostly elegies before publishing his hendecasyllables in a separate volume following the example of others.¹³ Reading 7. 4 with the matter of following literary models and the related expectations in mind, one may notice that a part of the letter recalls an undoubtedly serious person, Pliny the Elder once again. When the letter writer confesses that in his free time, especially on the way, he experiments with various verses (7. 4. 8: *inde plura metra, si quid otii, ac maxime in itinere, temptavi*), it is not hard to make an association with letter 3.5, in which he describes his uncle’s detailed schedule, who devoted his *otium* to his studies in every life situation, especially during his travels, when he never occupied himself with anything else but taking notes and dictation (3. 5. 15: *in itinere quasi solutus ceteris curis huic uni (sc. studiis) vacabat*). In 6. 20, Pliny the Elder’s way of life and daily routine virtually superscribe Pliny the Younger’s self-made portrait as an *exemplum*,¹⁴ including the Elder’s principle to spend every minute of his life engaged in useful activities. Letter 7. 4 alludes to the same concept of following literary models,

¹³ Tzounakas interprets the letter as Pliny’s playfully ironic self-representation as a poet. TZOUNAKAS, S.: Pliny and His Elegies in Icaria. *Classical Quarterly* 62.1 (2012) 301–306.

¹⁴ Of course, it has long been noted that Pliny holds up a person’s way and conduct of life from the older generation as a model in his letters, with special emphasis on Pliny the Elder (in 3. 5, 6. 16 and 6. 20 besides references found in other letters). Researchers are, so to say, adamant about reading these references and the three letters as documents recording Pliny the Younger’s unquestionable admiration for his uncle (for a comprehensive study of the research history, see KEELINE (n. 6) 173–175). My observations coincide with Keeline’s thesis, and also with the conclusions of comparative analyses reading letters 3. 5, 6. 16 and 6. 20 from the perspective of following in the footsteps of ancestors. Accordingly, the image Pliny the Younger paints of his uncle is not only ambivalent, but conveys some subtle criticism to the attentive reader, with the help of which the Younger Pliny rejects the Elder’s life model, while he simultaneously constructs his own literary monument: KEELINE (n. 6) 173–203.

but does so in a self-denouncing way. Experimenting with poetic meters while traveling is an instance of embracing the predecessors as models, which is unmasked straightaway: it is not a worthy, proper text in the making, just a means of passing the time. With that in mind, one might read the following condition inserted in the already quoted sentence of letter 5. 8 as a self-denouncing disclaimer of writing history and following others: “that it is an excellent thing to follow in the footsteps of one’s forbears, provided that they trod an honest path”. A part of the Vesuvius letter, which tells the story when Pliny the Younger and his mother are awakened at night by strong tremors, go outside to sit in front of their house, and then, the eighteen-year-old Pliny takes Titus Livius’ book and starts reading it and making an excerpt *quasi per otium* from where he left off (6. 20. 5: *posco librum Titi Livi, et quasi per otium lego atque etiam ut coeperam excerpo*), reads more like the parody of the model paradigm.

In contrast with the ironically self-denouncing narrative of following in the predecessors’ footsteps, Pliny’s letters have a prominently apologetic tone, when he is writing about his own literary activities, taste and his unusual craftsmanship in writing. An important document for the latter would be 5. 6, which gives a detailed description of the villa in Etruria. Pliny creates a framework for the letter, which establishes its rhetorical function. According to its beginning, the writer is induced to pen the letter to the addressee in order to convince him of its groundlessness, and with it, the soundness of his decision – his long stay in Etruria. The end of the letter recalls these first few remarks, now aware that his persuasion was successful. The aim is, thus, persuasion, through the medium of the epistle, which could be defined as an *oratio* constructed by thoroughly following the rules of rhetoric. *Narratio*, the main part of *oratio*, offers an exhaustive description of the estate and the villa, that is, the natural and the constructed environment. Pliny contemplates the text taking form all the while, its unusual, what is more, irregular solutions, his own method of constructing a text. He inserts a four-chapter-long digression¹⁵ on the matter of digression (*excursus*)¹⁶ before the concluding paragraphs, which is in fact the villa’s description, and indeed, it is ultimately the letter itself. Digression is a structural element of oratory speech, rendering it richer and ornate, but only when naturally connected to what had been said earlier.¹⁷ Pliny’s description only fits the latter requirement with reservations. The description of the villa flows naturally from the introduction and it is logically connected to the major points at the core of the argument, but all the rules of rhetoric are overwritten by the *excursus* that outgrows its permitted framework and on top of that becomes the artistic product, the text itself. This procedure goes against rhetorical norms, and expands upon the semantic domain of *descriptio*, which functions as a digression. *Descriptio* in itself means the graphic or verbal illustration, an orderly and proportionate portrayal or description of some-

¹⁵ 5. 6. 41–44. Chinn interprets this theoretical part of the letter as Pliny’s own *ekphrasis* theory, and as such, he emphasizes its significance in literary criticism. CHINN, C. M.: Before Your Very Eyes: Pliny *Epistulae* 5. 6. and the Ancient Theory of Ekphrasis. *Classical Philology* 102.3 (2007) 274–278.

¹⁶ Quintilian calls this rhetorical digression *excursus*, and also *parekbasis/egressus/egressio*, but only when he provides the official term for this phenomenon (*Inst.* 4. 3. 12).

¹⁷ Quint. *Inst.* 4. 3. 4.

thing;¹⁸ yet here, this orderliness and proportion appear to be cast back to what is represented, the landscape and view of Etruria as described by Pliny, which are made perceivable as a fair landscape exactly by *descriptio*:

Neque enim terras tibi sed formam aliquam ad eximiam pulchritudinem pictam videberis cernere: ea varietate, ea descriptione, quocumque inciderint oculi, reficientur. (5. 6. 13)

For the view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape, and a harmony [*descriptio*] to be found in this variety refreshes the eye wherever it turns.

At the beginning and at the end of his digression on literary theory, Pliny lays out his own ambitions as a writer in the construction of spectacle. It was his intention to lead the letter – and its addressee – through all nooks and crannies of the villa (5. 6. 40: *nisi proposuissem omnes angulos tecum epistula circumire*). This virtual tour, however, ended up rather long:

cum totam villam oculis tuis subicere conamur, si nihil inductum et quasi devium loquimur, non epistula quae describit sed villa quae describitur magna est. (5. 6. 44)

I am trying to set my entire house before your eyes, so, if I introduce nothing irrelevant, it is the house I describe which is extensive, not the letter describing it.

Extending the semantic domain of “description” in 5. 6 – from the *excursus* of a literary work to the point where it becomes one with the text, with its function being no more and no less than making a literary spectacle – seems to be a remarkable moment in literary history. Quintilian writes as follows about the rhetorical ambition behind trying to set the whole villa before the reader’s eyes (in Pliny: *cum totam villam oculis tuis subicere conamur*):

Illa vero, ut ait Cicero, sub oculos subiectio tum fieri solet, cum res non gesta indicatur, sed ut sit gesta ostenditur, nec universa, sed per partis: quem locum proximo libro subiecimus evidentiae. Celsus hoc nomen isti figurae dedit. Ab aliis hypotyposis dicitur, proposita quaedam forma rerum ita expressa verbis, ut cerni potius videantur quam audiri. [...] Nec solum quae facta sint aut fiant, sed etiam quae futura sint aut futura fuerint, imaginamur. [...] Habet haec figura manifestius aliquid: non enim narrare res, sed agi videtur. Locorum quoque dilucida et significans descriptio eidem virtuti adsignatur a quibusdam, alii topographian dicunt (*Inst.* 9. 2. 40–44)

¹⁸ s.v. “descriptio”: *OCD* (1992) 524.

Quintilian's description leaves no doubt that *oculis subicere* or *evidentia*¹⁹ or *hypotyposis* are rhetorical figures,²⁰ which make actions and events visible. He also makes it clear that classifying a distinct and orderly topographical description (*locorum dilucida descriptio*), such as Pliny's description of the villa, into this rhetorical figure was far from evident. And the fact that *evidentia* had come to be used in rhetoric not too long before, is revealed in the same passage of *Institutio* (9. 2. 41–42). Quintilian writes about the ancestors (*priores*) here, who used this trope with caution and care, even being afraid sometimes, and about the successors (*novi*), who had a penchant for the figure; the former is illustrated with a quote from Cicero and the latter with one from Seneca. Pliny's apology becomes truly understandable in this context. The *descriptio* that functions as an *excursus* does not make an act or an event visible, but a villa and the surrounding landscape. The description becomes too long not only because the villa is too big, but also because Pliny turns the description of the villa into the rhetorical figure of *oculis subicere*, and does so in the Ciceronian sense: he does not portray it in a general, roundly way, but in detail, constructing a spectacle instead of providing factual information.

The writer's ambition to create a spectacle thus overwrites the rule of rhetoric, that is, aesthetic quality overwrites the traditionally rhetorical convention of Roman composition,²¹ the paradigm that firmly stood above everything else as a cultural code in Roman society.²² *Cur enim non aperiam tibi vel iudicium meum vel errorem?* (5. 6. 42). Pliny raises the rhetorical question "Why should I not state my opinion, right or wrong?", he then turns to the greatest predecessors and takes Homer's and Vergil's descriptions of the shields as examples, which are long, yet brief (5. 6. 43: *quot versibus Homerus, quot Vergilius arma hic Aeneae Achillis ille describat, brevis tamen uterque est*), as they stick to their subject all along. He also mentions Aratus' didactic poem, which searches the sky for the tiniest stars but manages to stay moderate (*modum tamen servat*). Consequently, what he does is not a digression, but the artistic work itself: *Non enim excursus hic eius, sed opus ipsum est*. (5. 6. 43–44). Pliny followed the same procedure: *Similiter nos ut 'parva magnis'* (5. 6. 44: "It is the same with me, if I may 'compare small things with great'."). Aside from legitimizing the unconventional narrative with this statement, he also places it in the unquestionable literary tradition of Homer, Vergil and Aratus.

Moreover, liberating the text from a rhetorical constraint by overwriting the set proportions of its parts²³ and choosing digression as the main direction and as an ac-

¹⁹ On *evidentia*, also see Quint. *Inst.* 6. 2. 32; 8. 3. 68.

²⁰ On *enargeia/evidentia* as the rhetorical figure that distinguishes *ekphrasis* from *diegesis/narratio*, see WEBB, R.: *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice*. FARNHAM 2009, 87–106.

²¹ Of course, I do not claim that rhetoric lacked an aesthetic quality. The wording aims to emphasize that the proportions laid out in rhetoric were overwritten.

²² On the prominent position and significance of rhetorical training in the first century, in Pliny the Younger's age, Ruth Webb writes: "... in the period we are dealing with, rhetoric enjoyed great prestige; it was an active practice studied by a large proportion of male members of the elite and was the focus of much of their intellectual energy" (WEBB [n. 20] 4).

²³ In the context of composing oratory speech, Pliny touches upon the wordage and proportion of the parts, e.g. 1. 20. 21.

tual subject matter are implementations that create a separate tradition by themselves: “I would rather not fumble with methodology much longer – though the Younger Pliny’s claim also applies here, which could be the motto for almost every so-called modern or postmodern text: For this is not a digression from it, but the work itself.”, says Péter Esterházy, reflecting upon his own narrative strategy.²⁴

Whether this is a simple gesture or part of a shift in literary taste could be inferred from Pliny’s self-assumed explanations, but also from letter 2. 5, which chooses the writer’s own diction for its subject, along with a part of the speech sent for review. In his dialogue with the addressee, Pliny is, once again, pleading for the loosening of rhetorical norms in favor of poetics (2. 5. 5): *nam descriptiones locorum, quae in hoc libro frequentiores erunt, non historice tantum, sed prope poetice prosequi fas est* (“for example, descriptions of places [which are fairly frequent in this speech] may surely introduce a touch of poetry into narrative prose”). In this case, he does not refer to the great forbears, probably because topographical poetry was a new phenomenon in the rhetoric at the time, but to the taste of a younger generation (2. 5. 5): *sunt enim quaedam adulescentium auribus danda, praesertim si materia non refragetur* (“some concessions must be made to a youthful audience, especially if the subject-matter permits”).

In letters 5. 6 and 2. 5 alike, there is an emphasis on the tradition of normative rhetoric, and the concern with leaving it behind. The background of this issue is constituted by the appearance of a new taste, and its ambition is fueled by the desire to live up to the expectations, both old and new. Letter 2. 5 names two types of description: *historice* and *poetice*. The former is the criterion for credibility, *verum*, which serves as the ambition to writing history, as it is made clear by the introduction of 6. 16 written for Tacitus’ historical work: “Thank you for asking me to send you a description of my uncle’s death so that you can leave an accurate account of it for posterity” (*quo verius tradere posteris possis*). The driving ambition behind poetic recording – based on the villa letter – is the creation of a spectacle, which overwrites the expectations of accuracy and truthfulness.²⁵ The *descriptio* exceeds the length and function laid out by rhetoric, moreover, it steps outside and becomes the work itself. This means that conviction is primarily achieved through linguistic means, and not through the conveyance of messages. What is made visible in the description of the Etrurian villa is not the villa itself, but its image, a picture. The panorama-like long shot of the Etrurian villa, the surrounding nature into which architecture smoothly blends, the marked presence of neighboring properties; objects and indoor decorations, the absence of other human beings and the total lack of movement, with the dominance of colors and lights instead, ruled by visuality that overwrites everything else

²⁴ ESTERHÁZY, P.: *From the Miraculous Life of Words*. Budapest 2003, 8.

²⁵ It is not by chance that all attempts at reconstructing the layout of the Etrurian and Laurentine villas based on Pliny’s descriptions have failed, as the texts resist this kind of approach: TANZER, H. H.: *The Villas of Pliny the Younger*. New York 1924; BUREN, A. W. VAN: Pliny’s Laurentine Villa. *Journal of Roman Studies* 38 (1948) 35–36. The most recent summary of the history of the attempts at reconstruction can be read in DUPREY, P. DE LA RUFFINIÈRE: *The Villas of Pliny from Antiquity to Posterity*. Chicago 1994.

and some sort of a dreamlike, almost surreal effect – these characterize the description of the villa, that is, the villa, which is in fact a marvelous painting,²⁶ an *imitatio*,²⁷ art mimicking reality or reality that is mimicking art, and its natural elements are no less spectacular and worth seeing than its constructed components.²⁸

The letter as the form of rhetorical argumentation and refutation, the description of the villa as the method in which this rhetorical intention can be realized, in truth serve authorial self-fashioning.²⁹ The detailed, and at the same time, indecisive description of the grandiose villa complex is a conscious formation of the letter writer's self-image, the molding of the author's figure, which, however, was not simply meant to present the narrator's social status.³⁰ This imaginary villa description cannot be viewed independently from the *otium* discourse that Pliny introduces as early as letters 1. 3 and 1. 9, and elaborates on in the body of the text through scrutinizing multiple aspects of the problem.³¹ The villa is an important element of self-representation in the literary discourse of the Roman elite in the Roman Empire in the first century A.D., as it is well-illustrated by Statius' villa descriptions and the richness depicted in these works.³² Pliny's villa descriptions differ from those of Statius exactly in not providing the concrete physical manifestation of the villa, and not showing us the richness found in the decoration and furnishing of the building.³³ In Pliny's letters, the villa is the place of *otium*,³⁴ which is not just the opposite of *negotium*.

The use of the word *otium* can be traced through Roman literary letters.³⁵ In all occurrences, its use is motivated by the polarity of *negotium–otium*, the opposition of public and private time, spent attending to one's responsibilities or taking rest, respectively, but this is at times amended with specific interpretations. In Cicero's letters, private sphere is the name for personal peace and tranquility, while for Seneca it is to be understood as part of the philosopher's life model, which he needs to prepare for because of his involvement in community affairs.³⁶ In Pliny the Younger's usage,

²⁶ 5. 6. 13: *Neque enim terras tibi sed formam aliquam ad eximiam pulchritudinem pictam videberis cernere.* ("For a view seems to be a painted scene of unusual beauty rather than a real landscape.")

²⁷ 5. 6. 35: *et in opere urbanissimo subita velut inlati ruris imitatio* ("and then suddenly in the midst of this ornamental scene is what looks like a piece of rural country planted here").

²⁸ 5. 6. 18: *Pratum inde non minus natura quam superiora illa arte visendum.* ("Outside is a meadow, as well worth seeing for its natural beauty as the formal garden I have described.")

²⁹ HENDERSON (n. 3) 115: "the *Letters* are creative self-dramatization, a literary stab at self-immortalization."

³⁰ Eleanor Winsor Leach calls attention to the fact that the excavations differentiate four phases of construction from the period before Pliny gained the ownership of the villa and opted for its extension, but even during the Plinian phase, the villa was significantly smaller and more modest than one would expect based on the letter: LEACH, E. W.: *Otium as Luxuria: Economy of Status in the Younger Pliny's Letters. Arethusa* 36.2 (2003) 154, n. 11ff.

³¹ HINDERMANN, J.: *Locus amoenus et locus horribilis – zur Ortsgebundenheit von otium in den Epistulae von Plinius dem Jüngeren und Seneca.* In EICKHOFF, F. C. (Hrsg.): *Muße und Rekursivität in der antiken Briefliteratur.* Tübingen 2016, 113.

³² For more details, see LEACH (n. 30) 151–155.

³³ LEACH (n. 30) 149.

³⁴ LEACH (n. 30) 156.

³⁵ For more details, see WIEGANDT, D.: *Otium als Mittel der literarischen Selbstinszenierung römischer Aristokraten in Republik und Früher Kaiserzeit.* In EICKHOFF (n. 31) 43–57.

³⁶ WIEGANDT (n. 35) 49–51.

otium stands for the short breaks that take place during administration (7. 4. 8: *si quid otii*) – like experimenting with verses *in itinere* –, but it is also used in reference to the intellectual sphere, the sphere of his own literary activities understood as *studium*.³⁷ There is a place for focusing on literature in Pliny’s letters, namely the villa, which is the physical space for intellectual inspiration.³⁸ This inspiring sphere, *otium* itself becomes visible and can be experienced in the space of the Etrurian villa that features no man and is only populated by lights, colors and the sounds of nature, and can be seen in its ekphrastic-poetic description.

At the same time, a parallel is apparent between the description and the new theme in contemporary painting and its visual world. A new genre, villa paintings, emerged in Roman landscape painting near the end of the period of the so-called third Pompeian style, around the middle of the first century AD.³⁹ In these pictures – based on the rather plentiful records⁴⁰ – the villa stands alone. Facades with portico complexes are typical, which are often glimpsed through a garden. Parks and some distant buildings appear behind the villas.⁴¹ Pliny’s description is like capturing the villa landscape with words.⁴² The analogy between text and picture becomes especially salient, when one looks at the Pompeian painting⁴³ for which Pliny’s description could very well be an illustration. The picture shows a panorama view of a villa with *porticus*, some other buildings visible behind the forefront and the side wings, and there is a *tholos* between them to the left, and a small tower to the right, just like the one mentioned in the letter. The architectural composition found in 5. 6 blends into nature, and unfolds in parallel with the colorful spectacle and the picturesque villa landscapes, the complementary harmony of constructed and natural environment. Viewing the analogy in the Plinian *otium* discourse, the enhanced visuality that characterizes villa landscapes and villa descriptions alike reveals not merely the dominant aesthetic quality of the period in art, but it also becomes evident that there is a separate space for creating a text – the letter – with a purely literary claim, the space of literalism itself.

The narrative quality that would fit the new taste is defined with remarkable exactitude by letter 2. 5 in terms of rhetoric and 5. 8 in the context of history writing. In 2. 5. 6 we read: *Quod tamen si quis exstiterit, qui putet nos laetius fecisse quam orationis severitas exigat* (“But, if anyone thinks I have handled this subject too lightly for serious oratory,”), in letter 5. 8 on history writing: *Sunt enim homines natura curiosi et quamlibet nuda rerum cognitione capiuntur, ut qui sermunculis etiam fabellisque ducantur*. (“Humanity is naturally inquisitive, and so factual information, plain and unadorned, has its attraction for anyone who can enjoy small talk and anecdotal

³⁷ *Studium* carried out in the time of *otium* is a collective term for all intellectual activities, with the help of which Pliny prepares the completion of any further *negotium*: LEACH (n. 30) 162; HINDERMANN (n. 31) 113.

³⁸ WIEGANDT (n. 35) 53.

³⁹ LING, R.: *Roman Painting*. Cambridge 1991, 143.

⁴⁰ BRAGANTINI, I. – SAMPAOLO, V. (a cura di): *La pittura Pompeiana*. Napoli 2009, 408, 438–439, 454–455, 458–468.

⁴¹ LING (n. 39) 146–147.

⁴² BAL, M.: *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto 1999, 37: “The description is the reproduction of what the character sees.”

⁴³ LING (n. 39) 147; BRAGANTINI–SAMPAOLO (n. 40) 408.

dote.” [5. 8. 4]). *Severitas* and *laetitia* both in theme and mode of speech – the textual world of Pliny’s letters could be placed in this duality, which – in light of the prose poetic questions formulated in these texts – derives from the writer’s dual ambition to measure up. The letter writer was constructing the text under the simultaneous influence of tradition and the ambition to surpass it: the expectation to befit the essentially rhetorical tradition of composition, and the personal attitude that views the prosaic text not as a field of rhetoric and *historia*, but as the source of aesthetic pleasure and joy for him as writer and reader. One may read the musing over literary theory in the introduction of 9. 33 as the extract of the whole matter, and the vocalization of the choice. The introduction contemplates the relationship between reality and fiction, credibility and vivid poetic imagination, *historia* and *poesis*, and is supplemented with a new topic mentioned in 5. 8, a *sermunculus* or a *fabella* on a dolphin in love:

C. Plinius Caninio Suo S. Incidi in materiam veram sed simillimam fictae, dignamque isto laetissimo altissimo planeque poetico ingenio; incidi autem, dum super cenam varia miracula hinc inde referuntur. Magna auctori fides: tametsi quid poetae cum fide? Is tamen auctor, cui bene vel historiam scripturus credidisses. (9. 33. 1–2)

“To Caninius Rufus. I have come across a true story which sounds very like fable, and so ought to be a suitable subject for your abundant talent to raise to the heights of poetry. I heard it over the dinner table when various marvellous tales were being circulated, and I had it on good authority—though I know that doesn’t really interest poets. However, it was one which even a historian might well have trusted.”

Cur enim non aperiam tibi vel iudicium meum vel errorem? (5. 6. 42) – “Why should I not state my opinion, right or wrong?”, asks Pliny in defense of his lengthy *descriptio*, referring to the literary tradition of digression. The most effective answers, however, are found beyond these remarks reflecting on the issues of composing a text: in the materialization of these notes, in the letters themselves. In Pliny’s usage, the epistle leaves a lot of room for thematic, generic and aesthetic diversity. He appears as a poet in 9. 33, when he offers the story of a dolphin in love to Caninius for recording, but he uses a poetic language so magnificent that in fact he delivers the finished literary work itself.⁴⁴ In the description of his Etrurian villa (5. 6), he emerges as a virtuoso of rhetorical argument and ekphrastic description.⁴⁵ Although in 5.8 he rejects the idea of writing a monumental historical work, he creates his own miniature historiography within the generic framework of the epistle instead (6. 16; 6. 20).

⁴⁴ For further details, see MILLER, C. L.: The Younger Pliny’s Dolphin Story (*Epistulae* IX 33): An Analysis. *The Classical World* 60.1 (1966) 6–8; STEVENS, B.: Pliny and the Dolphin—Or a Story about Storytelling. *Arethusa* 42.2 (2009) 161–179.

⁴⁵ For a rhetorical and narratological analysis of the villa letters (on the Tuscan and Laurentine properties), see DARAB, Á.: “I am trying to set the whole villa before your eyes.” Pliny the Younger’s Villa Descriptions (Plin. *Ep.* 2. 17; 5. 6). In HAJDU, P. – KÁLMÁN, C. GY. – MEKIS, D. J. – VARGA, Z. (eds): *Leírás: Elmélet, irodalom, kép* [Description: Theory, Literature, Image]. Budapest, 2019, 127–140 (in Hungarian).

Pliny's literary character is defined not by an obsession with writing or working on *opus*es, but by the often praised generic diversity, thematic and stylistic variance, easiness, playfulness and felicity, which do not necessarily lead to everlasting fame, but can meet with contemporary recognition and popularity, which is more than enough: *Verum fatebor, capio magnum laboris mei fructum*. ("I confess I feel well rewarded for my labours." [9. 23. 5]), then he raises the apologetic question again: *Ego celebritate nominis mei gaudere non debeo?* ("I may surely be glad when my name is well known."). In 7. 4, which reviews his works as a poet, he is content to say that his writings are immensely popular; the following statement displays the same splendidly, just as much as the question quoted in the title of this paper: *Qui sive iudicant, sive errant, me delectat*. ("which pleases me whether right or wrong" [7. 4. 10]).

This is the pleasure of creation that takes form in the genre of the epistle and in the narrative diversity that characterizes Pliny's collection of letters. By opening up and transgressing generic boundaries, the letters of Pliny the Younger give way to the new literary taste in narrative prose, which is represented in poetry by Martial's epigrams and Statius' *Silvae* in its entirety. This new literary taste has a narrative mode that is still fundamentally reliant on rhetoric and incorporates various literary genres, together with generic norms and *topoi* that allude to a most diverse range of narratives, and which do not postulate programmatic works or those on a large scale, but thematic and discursive diversity. The literary critical questions and self-reflexive remarks formulated in the letters certify that this kind of prose was in need of defense, or at least vindication – which is, at all times, a reflex of the borderline-position between "still" and "already", that is, the period when the unavoidable paradigm of a great tradition is still present, but signs of surpassing it and the method of doing so are already starting to show. The field of force in which the nine books of the *Letters* were written and entered the public space is characterized by this duality. The self-reflexive questions of the texts imply that the writer had arrived at a crossroads. The essence of choosing, or rather, what is at stake at making a choice as well as its validity to be experienced from time to time, are accurately illustrated by, once again, Péter Esterházy's words in *From the Miraculous Life of Words*: "Some would like literature to give clear answers to clear questions [...] As a matter of fact, to show its true color. Literature, however, tends to blur colors."⁴⁶

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⁴⁶ ESTERHÁZY (n. 24) 8.