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PLINY AND THE DOLPHIN— OR A STORY ABOUT STORYTELLING

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I. INTRODUCTION: *EPISTLE 9.33 AS PROSE “POETRY”*

In his *Epistle* 9.33, Pliny the younger tells an “amazing” dolphin story that, he seems to suggest, would well serve his addressee, the poet Caninius Rufus, as raw material (*materiam*, 1) for a poem.¹ As has long been noticed, Pliny does not mention that his uncle, Pliny the elder, had recorded the story before him (*Nat.* 9.8.26). I argue that these two writerly moments—the ostensible suggestion to one fellow writer, the demonstrable suppression of another—combine to encourage a literary reading of the letter as a sort of experiment in prose “poetry.” Like others of Pliny’s letters, *Epistle* 9.33 is not a straightforwardly factual account—whether of the dolphin story or of the framing claims of Pliny’s authorship and intent—but a work of verbal art, exemplifying its author’s attunement to the dissonance in Latin literature between deference or station and competitive imitation (*aemulatio*). This interpretation of the letter supports the modern reading of Pliny as not

1 The fullest commentary on the letters is Sherwin-White 1966, focusing on “social and historical” points. 9.33 seems infrequently discussed: Sherwin-White 1967 selects it for translation and some comment, while dedicated study may be limited to Miller 1966; some mention is made by Higham 1960, Montgomery 1966, and Hooker 1989. For my own engagement with the letter, and for a year of illuminating conversations about it and other topics pertaining to literature in the early empire, I am grateful to Benjamin Dexter (B.A. Bard College 2008). An earlier version of this essay was presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Pacific Northwest (CAPN), and it would not have reached its final form without helpful comments from *Arethusa*’s anonymous readers. All translations are my own.

an unadorned source for social history but as a literary artist interested in self-presentation and in the theory and practice of storytelling.²

What I hope to show about *Epistle* 9.33 has been well described by Umberto Eco in an illuminating essay on Pliny's narrative strategies in *Epistle* 6.16 (Eco 1990b).³ Like 9.33, 6.16 claims only to be offering raw material for another author's more polished composition: in that famous case, the story of Pliny the elder's investigation into and expiration due to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 c.e., submitted to the historian Tacitus at his request so that, as Pliny puts it, he "is able to preserve it more truthfully for posterity" ("petis ut tibi auunculi mei exitum scribam, quo uerius tradere posteris possis"). But, as Eco rightly has it: "In fact, as we well know, the letter was already written for posterity, but to become effective (as it did) it had to conceal its purpose from its Model Readers" (1990b.136).⁴

Such concealment is a central feature of Pliny's literary artistry as, I believe, of Roman literary art and even language use generally. To quote Eco (1990b.124–25):

It looks as if the Younger were saying, "I provide you with the facts, and they will speak for themselves—all the rest is up to you." On the other hand, the Younger is providing facts and comments, or fact wrapped with comments. Only he is not so naive as to put forth comments as comments. He follows a different persuasive strategy.⁵

2 For Pliny and social history, see Sherwin-White 1966 and 1969. Emblematic of the outmoded view is Conte 1994.529: "Nowadays [the letters] remain of interest primarily for ancient historians studying Roman administration and social life of the late first century." For Pliny as more than a source for social history, see the articles in the special issue of *Arethusa* (Morello and Gibson 2003), including an especially helpful conceptualization by J. Henderson describing recent reading of "the *Letters* [as] a creative self-dramatization, a literary stab at self-immortalization" (2003.115) in which Pliny attempts to "litterarize the self-image" (117) and so imagines "the self as its own work of art" (125). For Pliny as literary artist, see also Den Hengst 1991 (Pliny works "to turn his letters into modest works of art"), with Aricò 1995, Hershkowitz 1995 (a helpful survey of Pliny's own evidence and other testimonia, arguing that "Pliny's poetry, far from serving overtly political aims, functions rather as a depoliticized leisure activity," 179), Jal 1993, Roller 1991, and Armisen-Marchetti 1990.

3 On 6.16 and 6.20, see recently Ash 2003.

4 On Model Readers and Authors, see Eco 1990c and 1979.

5 On "concealment" and other modes of "figured language" in Greek and Roman literature, see, seminally, Ahl 1984.

As in 6.16, so in 9.33 does Pliny want it both ways and, importantly, expect appreciation of this artful literary duplicity from his reader. He refuses to name his uncle as his source, but alludes to him via close verbal parallels, such that the competent reader is invited to compare and, especially, contrast the younger's version with the elder's: the younger's is more artistic.⁶ Likewise, Pliny claims to be offering the story to Caninius for recompilation as a poem, but his expectations for that poem are met surprisingly precisely by his own version of the “amazing” dolphin story, such that the letter is, again, intended to be read as a sort of prose “poetry.”

The letter invites this unstraightforward reading from its very beginning, where Pliny describes his discovery of the story as follows (1):

I have happened upon raw material that is true but very like a fiction and deserving of that most luxuriant, most elevated and, to put a fine point on it, poetic spirit [of yours?]. I happened upon it, moreover, when, over dinner, various amazing tales were being told on all sides.

incidi in materiam ueram, sed simillimam fictae dignamque isto laetissimo, altissimo planeque poetico ingenio. incidi autem dum super cenam uaria miracula hinc inde referuntur.

This opening makes two important claims: first, that Pliny did in fact discover the story at dinner, so that neither he nor his uncle, the elder Pliny (unnamed here and at first glance ignored), is its original author; second, that he is telling the story only in order to provide the raw material (*materiam*) for a poem to be composed by his addressee Caninius—Pliny is not the story's eventual or ultimate author. The first claim is complicated by Pliny's allusions, via close verbal parallels, to his uncle's version of the dolphin story, in comparison with which his own version is made to seem more artistic. The second claim must be read in light of critical terms shared with an earlier letter to Caninius, 8.4, according to which Pliny's story is

6 For the younger as self-consciously more artful than the elder, see Henderson 2002, arguing that 3.5: “Shoehorns two Plinies into the space of one, and allows the fortyish-years-young nephew to try out writing up an obituary of his own” . . . “juxtaposed with the most waywardly *unstylistic* writer of Latin prose” (264).

not just vaguely artistic but precisely “poetic.” After a brief summary of the story, I take each of these complications, and their implied writerly relationships, in turn.

II. THE “AMAZING” DOLPHIN STORY

The story may be summarized as follows. There is a small coastal African town, Hippo, that features a lake or tidal basin connected to the sea where the locals enjoy leisurely fishing, swimming, and sailing. One day, a group of boys competing at swimming was joined by a dolphin, which took the most daring swimmer on its back far out to sea before returning him safely to his fellows. As this behavior continued, the mutual affection between boy and dolphin grew, and, as the story spread, the dolphin became a kind of tourist attraction. At one point, the dolphin was anointed in oil by a visiting magistrate. Over time the demands placed on the town by increased tourism proved expensive and seemed a threat to its leisurely life. In response, the townspeople decided to have the dolphin quietly killed.

III. PLINY THE ELDER (*NATURALIS HISTORIA* 9.8.26)

First, it is hard to believe that, of all the “various amazing stories” that were reportedly related at the dinner, the only story whose topic Pliny even mentions just “happens” (*incidi*) to be a story already related by his uncle. Beyond not believing the coincidence, we can suspect that the letter does not ask us to believe it in the first place. Ancient readers expected language almost always to be figured and, so, straightforward next to never; ancient authors wrote to these expectations (Ahl 1984). We would do Pliny a disservice as author, and reveal our own lack of sophistication as readers, in thinking that to read the letter seriously means to take its author simply at his word. His own words, plural, encourage the opposite. The claim that Pliny merely “happened upon” the story is made not once but twice in the same sentence, the letter’s first, with the result that “happened upon,” *incidi*, is emphasized as the letter’s first word. I take it that this insistence on coincidence is meant to seem exaggerated and to make the reader question the letter’s “honesty” as a first step towards acknowledging its artistry.

The letter thus hints at its source by way of inviting the reader to compare the younger’s version of the story favorably with the elder’s. Between the two versions there are four close verbal parallels (“amazing,” “playing,” “offering itself to be rubbed,” and the dolphin’s being “oiled”

and reacting to the “novelty” of the oiling and its “odor”); in each case, the younger may be read as writing his version to surpass the elder’s.

First Parallel: “Amazing”

Both Plinies describe the story or parts of it as “amazing” (root *mir-*). The elder writes (*Nat.* 9.8.26) that the dolphin, once it had recovered from being oiled by an African official (“the proconsul of Africa, Flavianus,” “a Flauiano proconsule Africæ”), “soon was back to the same *amazing*” behavior (“mox reuersus in eodem *miraculo* fuit”). That “behavior” included not only “offering itself to be touched and playing with swimmers, carrying those [boys?] put on it” (“praebensque se tractandum et adludens nantibus, impositos portans”), discussed as the second and third parallels below, but also “eating out of human hands” (“ex hominum manu uescens”). Although “amazing,” for the elder, all of this is also “similar” (*simili modo*) to the behavior of at least six other dolphins, “and there is no limit to the examples” (*nec modus exemplorum*, 28): the dolphin’s behavior is only one example of the kind of thing that dolphins reportedly do. In this context of collection and comparison of similar examples, stories become data, and behavior that is, at first glance and as the elder admits, amazing is rendered more ordinary or natural.⁷

By contrast, the younger Pliny seems to emphasize the amazing aspects of the dolphin and its story both by not mentioning other versions of the story or spending much time on other dolphins (see below for a second dolphin in this story), and through, as it were, less “scientific” and more evaluative or even metapoetic editorializing. The younger presents the dolphin story as one of the amazing stories told over the alleged dinner (*uaria miracula . . . referuntur*, 1): it is thus itself amazing first by implication.⁸ The implication is made more explicit at two points: when

7 The elder Pliny calls “amazing” another observation about dolphins in general: “In an amazing way, they all recognize the name ‘Snubnose’ and prefer to be called by it” (“nomen simonis omnes miro modo agnoscunt maluntque ita appellari,” 9.8.23).

8 The reader is left to imagine the other sorts of stories that were told. Pliny uses the root *mir-* frequently in his first nine books but not at all in his tenth: evidently *miracula* are the sorts of stories shared with friends, not with the emperor; see further below, n. 18. *Mir-* is used in Book 1: 6.2, 9.1, 10.3, 12.10, 16.2 and 16.9, 17.3, 20.3, 22.1 and 22.7; Book 2: 1.7, 3.10, 10.7, 13.6 (twice), 14.10, 17.1 (twice with 17.11 and 17.25), 19.3; Book 3: 1.7 (thrice), 4.2, 5.7 (twice), 7.12, 9.5, 11.5, 15.1, 16.2, 18.8; Book 4: 2.4, 3.1, 5.2, 7.1, 7.5,

the townspeople are described as “all running together to look at the boy himself, as if he were *the amazing thing*, to ask him questions, to listen, to tell the story” (“concurrere omnes, ipsum puerum tamquam *miraculum* adspicere, interrogare, audire, narrare,” 5), and when a “second dolphin” is described as accompanying the first and watching its behavior: “this too is *amazing*” (“ibat una—id quoque *mirum*—delphinus alias tantum spectator et comes,” 7).

Second and Third Parallels: “Playing” and “Offering Itself to be Rubbed”

If “amazing” is slender evidence (there are not many other ways of saying “amazing” than *mirum* and its derivatives), three other parallels are more definitive of the younger Pliny’s use of the elder.⁹ Both Plinies describe how the dolphin “played” with swimmers and “allowed itself to be touched or rubbed or petted.” The elder describes the dolphin as “offering itself to be rubbed and playing with swimmers” (“*praebensque se tractandum et adludens nantibus*,” *Nat.* 9.8.26). The syntax is compressed, in line with the brevity of the passage and of the work as a whole. In line, moreover, with the immediate context of interest in dolphin behavior in general, the description is focused on the dolphin itself; its behavior might thus be read as determining the involvement of the “swimmers” (*nantibus*, in the dative after *adludens*) who otherwise go unspecified.

The younger’s version uses close verbal parallels to emphasize its thematic and artistic innovations. Despite similar phrasing, it is more expansive and, more importantly, continues what may be shown to be the letter’s focus on town and townspeople, with the place itself thematized

8.6, 9.15, 9.21, 12.6, 13.10, 17.4 (twice), 18.1, 21.5, 27.1, 30.2, 30.11; Book 5: 3.3, 6.5 and 6.41, 16.9, 17.6; Book 6: 11.2, 13.3, 15.1, 16.5, 17.5, 20.8, 21.1, 23.2, 25.5 (twice), 33.5; Book 7: 9.13, 11.1, 17.2, 19.7, 22.1, 24.6 (twice with 24.7), 26.2, 27.4, 29.5; Book 8: 12.2, 14.15, 18.1 and 18.6 (twice), 20.2; Book 9: 6.2, 13.18, 16.1, 19.2 (twice), 20.1, 26.4 (twice), 36.1, and 33 as discussed in this article. If *mir-* is thus general (“amazing” or, often, negated to “not amazing”), *miraculum* is more specific: outside of 9.33, it appears three times, once to describe an inexplicable spring (4.30.11), a second time in reference to riches all around (8.20.3), and a third time, significantly, to describe the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius as witnessed by Pliny the elder (6.16.5: *miraculum illud*; cf. 6.20.8: *multa ibi miranda*).

9 In addition to the verbal parallels, the two versions also of course show thematic and narrative parallels and differences, some discussed further below.

as an important element or, as it were, “character” in its own right.¹⁰ The younger thus writes that the locals “approached [the dolphin] and *played with* it and called to it, even touching it and *rubbing it all over as it offered itself*” (“*accedunt et adludunt et appellant, tangunt etiam pertrectantque praebentem*,” 6).¹¹

With the elder’s version thus recalled, the younger’s version is obviously longer and arguably more vivid, replacing the elder’s participles (*tractandum, adludens*) with finite verbs (*pertrectant, adludunt*) and describing additional actions (*accedunt, appellant, tangunt*). The description makes use of an artful sound pattern, even morphological pattern, with a rhythmic overlay to underscore the importance for the narrative of the townspeople over the dolphin. *Tangunt*, “they touch,” is emphasized by being bracketed by two alliterations: first, *a-a-a* (since the final consonant of each first syllable in question results from phonotactic constraints, really this is *ad-ad-ad*, perhaps suggesting “incrementally closer and closer”); second and less clearly, *per-prae*. The first alliteration is overlaid by the rhythm spondee-trochee-spondee-trochee-spondee, after which we find not trochee, as would perhaps be expected to continue the pattern, but the spondee *tangunt*. This sort of slowed spondaic rhythm is echoed by a sort of limping stress, with only one unstressed syllable between stressed *-pel-* and *-tan-*, as opposed to the two unstressed syllables between stressed *-ce-* and *-lu-* and between stressed *-lu-* and *-pel-*; and there is a final echo, with assonance, of stressed *tan-(gunt)* in stressed (*pertrec-*)*tant*-(*que*). All of this emphasizes *tangunt*, the touching, and the townspeople who touch, while only at the end of the sentence is the dolphin and its involvement specified: the townspeople are able to approach and touch the dolphin because it is “offering itself” (*praebentem*).

10 For place as character and/or symbol in Pliny, see Saylor 1982, describing Pliny’s “use of topography to express ideas” (139): “instead of telling the reader in so many words, Pliny lets the details of the description speak for him” (140). See further below pp. 170–73.

11 The townspeople’s reactions and emotions are the focus: they touch the dolphin only after “they were filled with shame for being afraid” (“*donec . . . subiret timendi pudor*”). They are also evocatively described as “people nourished by the sea” (*homines innutritos mari*).

Fourth Parallel: “Oiled,” “Novelty,” “Odor”

The artistic and thematic emphases achieved by the sentence just discussed are only one example of the letter’s generally contrastive relationship to the work of the elder, and indeed are furthered in the fourth and final close verbal parallel.¹² Both Plinies describe an episode in which the dolphin is “oiled” by a magistrate, reacting badly to the “novelty” of the oiling generally and/or to the “odor” of the oil in particular and, as a result, withdrawing for a time from its association with the humans.

The elder writes that the dolphin, “thoroughly anointed *by oil* by Flavianus, *proconsul of Africa*, made sleepy, as it seemed, *by the novelty of the odor*, floating about as if it were lifeless, avoided interaction with humans as if *caused to flee* by injury for some months” (“*unguento perunctus a Flauiano proconsule Africæ et sopitus, ut apparuit, odoris nouitate fluctuatusque similis exanimi caruit hominum conuersatione ut iniuria fugatus per aliquot menses*”). This may be read as compressed if not cramped. The abundance of participles, including what is arguably the principle “action” of the episode, the oiling (*perunctus*), results in some uncertainty about or distance from the action: the dolphin itself is mostly passive, only “acting,” via the lone main verb, in “lacking” (*caruit*), i.e., in ceasing to do something. That uncertainty or distance is emphasized by the density of terms for similarity or appearance, terms implicitly opposed to reality: “as it seemed” (*ut apparuit*), “as if it were lifeless” (more literally, “similar to a lifeless or half-dead or unconscious [creature]”; *similis exanimi*), and, less clearly uncertain or similetic, “as if caused to flee by injury” or, perhaps, “as is natural in flight from injury” (*ut iniuria fugatus*). The elder’s version of the episode thus seems to emphasize, within its limits, uncertainty, if not disinterest, or, simply, an encyclopedist’s skepticism.

By contrast, although the younger describes the episode somewhat similarly, in line with the discussion above, the close verbal parallels may

12 Other artful sentences include the poetic, even fairly Virgilian: “serpit per coloniam fama; concurrere omnes ipsum puerum tamquam miraculum adspicere, interrogare, audire, narrare,” “Rumor snakes through the colony; everyone runs together to the boy himself—as if he were something amazing—to look at him, ask him questions, to listen, and tell the story” (with a pseudo-hexameter from *concurrere* through *puerum*, 5); and “maxime puer, qui primus expertus est, admurat nanti, insilit tergo, fertur referturque, agnosci se, amari putat, amat ipse,” “Especially the boy who first experienced it swims alongside the swimming dolphin, jumps up on its back, is carried back and forth, thinks that he is recognized and loved, and feels love himself” (6).

be read as drawing attention to general stylistic and tonal differences, as well as to particular differences in diction and detail between the two versions (9; close verbal parallels are in italics).

It is agreed that Octavius Avitus, *a proconsular legate*, having drawn the dolphin onto the shore out of misguided religiosity poured *oil* on it, *the novelty and odor* of which *it fled* into the sea; and only after many days was it seen, languid and gloomy . . .

constat Octauium Auitum, *legatum proconsulis* in litus educto religione praua superfudisse *unguentum*, cuius illum *nouitatem odoremque* in altum *refugisse* nec nisi post multos dies uisum languidum et maestum . . .

As with the other parallels, so here the younger's account is more vivid: the elder's participles are replaced by active verbs, and, in particular, more action is given to the dolphin, which "flees" (*refugisse*) instead of being "caused to flee" (*fugatus*). Further, both the oiling and its consequences are described in greater detail, with the younger specifying that the dolphin is "drawn onto the shore" (*in litus educto*, as against no location described by the elder) because of "misguided religiosity" (*religione praua*, as against no reason given) and, once oiled, is not "sleepy" but "languid and gloomy" (*languidum et maestum*). Likewise, the elder's proconsular Flavianus is changed to proconsular legate Octavius Avitus, while the dolphin's "months" of absence become merely "many days" (*multos dies*).

All of these differences in detail, in the fourth parallel as in the others, suggest a pattern of deliberate allusion and artistic difference, not to say "correction," in the younger's letter. This is emphasized in the fourth parallel by the oiling episode opening pointedly with the assertion that everything that follows "is agreed upon" (*constat*): since, as I argue, the younger intends for his reader to recognize in the close verbal parallels and in the letter generally the alluded presence of the elder, and since the elder, as shown, does *not* in fact agree with many of the details, the reader is invited to engage in an extended literary comparison. In general, the younger's version may be read as using its clear allusions to the elder's to emphasize how it is longer, more ornately constructed (including, as shown, patterns of sounds and rhythms as well as generally periodic and expansive phrasing), more vivid (with active verbs replacing the elder's participles), with better

developed thematic interests (including place and way of life), and more room for editorial asides. By suppressing its source—either completely or, I think, by inviting the obliging reader to pretend along with it—the letter aims at a sort of narrative suspension—its telling juxtaposed with the original—and the pleasure of a surprising resolution: a reader obligingly unfamiliar with the uncle’s version stands to be surprised by the dolphin’s death, elevated by the younger to a kind of sublimity.

From Parallel to Perpendicular: The Dolphin’s End (But Not the Story’s)

Although both Plinies mention the dolphin’s death, the younger makes of it a much more artistic and dramatic moment. The elder writes that “the injuries done to the hosts of the powerful men who came to see [sc. the dolphin] drove the people of Hippo to put it to death” (“iniuriae potestatum in hospitales ad uisendum uenientium Hippo[nenses] in necem eius compulerunt”). His description is terse, even telegraphic, and seems matter-of-fact; this is in line with the context and with his prose generally. If judged artistically, it might be thought crabbed, with a fairly awkward beginning—as if aiming for concision above all—finally yielding to a more straightforwardly periodic ending. There may thus be some force in *compulerunt*, “drove” or “constrained,” concluding the account and being one of only three finite verbs in the passage (alongside the subordinate aside *ut apparuit* and the weak *caruit*). There is some lack of specificity to the “injuries”: the elder may imply that they are fairly easily imagined—as they seem to be interpreted by the younger—as the sorts of burdens imposed on communities when billeting powerful visitors.

By contrast, the younger Pliny writes at greater length and in more detail, with added pathos from a deeper interest in narrative drama and tone (10):

All of the magistrates were gathering there for the spectacle; the community, of moderate means, was being worn down by the new expenses of their arrival and stay. In the end, the place itself was losing its quiet and seclusion. It was decided to secretly kill the thing people were coming for.

confluebant ad spectaculum omnes magistratus, quorum aduentu et mora modica res publica nouis sumptibus atterebatur. postremo locus ipse quietem suam secretumque perdebat. placuit occulte interfici ad quod coibatur.

Each of the points made by the elder (visitors, injuries done by them, decision to kill) is given its own sentence or clause by the younger. The first sentence quoted is ostensibly about the sightseeing magistrates but gives more space and details to their impact on the community; when compared with the elder (*iniuriae in hospitales*), the younger also describes that impact more fully (*nouis sumptibus* due to *aduentu et mora*, straining the community's *modus*). The second sentence is then devoted entirely to the community, taking what was already thematically central and making it grammatically primary: where the elder, in his naturalist manner, describes one amazing dolphin among many, the younger is interested in the effects of the dolphin, however amazing, on a singular place and its people.

With this interest established, the younger's version of the story comes full circle around a center of great emotional depth or pathos. It begins by naming the place ("est in Africa Hipponeensis colonia") and then describing its geography ("mari proxima. adiacet nauigabile stagnum," 2) and related leisure activities in terms that are loving if not covetous: "Here every age is devoted to fishing, sailing, and even swimming, *especially the boys*, tempted by leisure and play" ("omnis hic aetas piscandi, nauigandi, atque etiam natandi studio tenetur, *maxime pueri*, quos otium ludusque sollicitat," 3).¹³ It goes without saying that no place not physically attached to the sea could have attracted a dolphin, but Pliny emphasizes how it was the place's metaphorical attachment to the sea, the townspeople's leisure activities, that drew the dolphin in the first place: the dolphin joined, as it were, the boys' informal swimming competition ("the winner was the one who swam farthest from shore and fellow swimmers," "uictor ille, qui longissime ut litus ita simul natantes reliquit," 3).

Indeed, the dolphin developed a special relationship with the most daring swimmer (*audentior ceteris*, 4),¹⁴ whose initial ride resulted in him being considered "something *amazing* himself" ("ipsum puerum tamquam

13 For Pliny and "leisure," *otium*, see Méthy 2007 and Leach 2003.

14 The letter may thus imagine the main dolphin, more daring than the dolphin that eventually accompanies it, and the "most daring" boy as kindred spirits.

miraculum,” 5). The boy likewise felt a deep affection for the dolphin: “He thought that he was recognized by it, even loved by it, and he loved it in turn; neither was fearful, neither was frightful” (“agnosci se, amari putat, amat ipse; neuter timet, neuter timetur,” 6). In emphasizing this mutual affection, Pliny may be read as doing his uncle an additional one better by combining the plot of the amazing dolphin story with elements from another kind of story, also reported by the elder, that describes great affection between dolphins and humans, especially boys.¹⁵ This combination or fusion of kinds of dolphin stories is in line with the letter’s more general combination of stories—one ostensible about the dolphin, one more subtle about Pliny as author—and its related interest in storytelling (see below, section IV).

In context, the combination serves to heighten the pathos of the central dolphin story while drawing additional attention to the letter’s verbal art through a sort of embedded ring structure or frame. The inmost and most overtly emotional story—of dolphin and boy—is marked by repetition of “especially the boy(s).” At the beginning of that central story, *maxime pueri* denotes the swimmers as a particular example of the town’s general leisure (3); while at the end of that story, *maxime puer* denotes the dolphin’s playmate (6), shown to be the most daring swimmer and of a type common in dolphin stories. This inmost story is contained by the larger, less common story of dolphin and town that is marked by its own ring structure: it begins, as discussed above, by establishing a thematic interest in place and draws to its conclusion in the penultimate sentence with the explicit keyword *locus*, “place.” *Locus* may thus be read as following, at great distance and despite having its own verb (*perdebat*), the evocative *est* that starts the story (2): with *locus* filling in for *est*’s actual subject (*Hipponensis colonia*), the result over the letter as a whole is a story of the traditional type *est*

15 The elder tells or describes six such stories: at the Lucrine lake (on the authority of “Mae-
cenas, Fabianus, Flavius Alfius, and many others,” “Maecenatis et Fabiani et Flaui Alfi
multorumque . . . litteris,” 9.8.25), at Hippo (26), at Iasus (27; two stories: one whose
boy, unnamed, is made a priest of Poseidon by Alexander the Great; another whose boy,
Hermias, is drowned by a wave and whose dolphin, “admitting itself the cause of his death
. . . breathes its last on dry land” [“causam se leti fatentem . . . in secco expirasse”]), at
Naupactus (27; citing Theophrastus); and one involving Arion (as in Herodotus 1.23–24,
here unnamed; see Hooker 1989). The elder notes that “there is no limit to examples”
(*nec modus exemplorum*) and that “the people of Amphirochus and Tarentum tell the same
stories about boys and dolphins” (“eadem Amphirochi et Tarentini de pueris delphinisque
narrant,” 28). For a brief survey of such stories, see Montgomery 1966.

... *locus*: “There is a special place . . .” An additional result is emphasis, again, on the *storyteller*, the letter writer, clearly doing more than merely offering raw material by turning his uncle’s dull *discourse* into a polished and affective *fabula*; this is discussed further below (section IV).

In this fabulous context, the “amazing” dolphin loses its appeal to the townspeople, and the younger’s final phrase, “placuit occulte interfici ad quod coibatur,” assumes its proper force. Where the elder sees compulsion (*compulerunt*) to put to death (*necem*, connoting violence) the dolphin (*eius*) as a direct result of the unspecified injuries done by powerful visitors, the younger describes an impersonal decision (*placuit*, as if by committee), not the direct result of expense but mainly of fear for loss of quiet, seclusion, and leisure: a decision that “the thing people were coming for” (*ad quod coibatur*) be secretly killed (*occulte interfici*, with both verb and adverb much colder than *necare*). At this point, “the thing” is *not* “the dolphin” in so many words (previously it had been called “dolphin,” *delphinus*, several times). The dolphin is no longer admired for its amazing behavior, much less as the beloved playmate of the daring boy swimmer (who goes unmentioned, his status as *miraculum* tacitly voided). At this point it is merely something—a thing—drawing the crowds that threaten the place’s way of life. As such, it is secretly killed. For the obliging reader, again, the dolphin’s death is told so as to be pathetic. All of this is in parallel and some contrast—as it were, in perpendicular—with the elder, inviting the reader to read the younger as the far more artful storyteller.

IV. CANINIUS (WITH *EPISTLE 8.4*)

Since the dolphin’s death does not conclude the letter, just as the dolphin story does not begin the letter, there is more to the story or, more precisely, there is another story more importantly at stake: that of the younger Pliny as artistic storyteller. His treatment of the dolphin’s death not only surpasses the elder’s treatment in generally “artistic” terms but also exemplifies how the younger’s version seems to meet, in a surprisingly precise way, Pliny’s expectations for Caninius’s imagined poem about the dolphin. Thus the letter complicates Pliny’s second writerly claim, that he is offering only raw material to Caninius (*materiam*, 1),¹⁶ not only by rendering

16 *OLD* 7a: “The subject-matter, material, topic (of a speech, book, conversation, etc.)” and 7b: “(rhet.) a theme for declamation.”

pre-existing material artistically, but by doing so in terms figured as particularly “poetic.” The reader is invited to wonder about the imagined relationship between Pliny’s actual epistle and Caninius’s mooted poem, and in light of the letter’s suppression of source (and invention of dinner?), could be forgiven for thinking that Caninius has been invoked or even invented by Pliny as part of—and, as it were, to justify—his experiment in artful prose. Since the reality of Caninius is, of course, not really in doubt (cf. *Ep.* 1.3, 2.8, 3.7, 6.21, 7.18, and 8.4, the last discussed below), the letter’s gentle marginalization of its addressee, like its respectful suppression of its source, invites the reader to focus on Pliny as storyteller.

Pliny’s expectations for Caninius’s imagined poem are described in the conclusion, where Pliny fairly gushes about the job his friend will do: “With what a sense of pity, with what a flood will you weep these things, ornament them, exalt them!” (“haec tu qua miseratione, qua copia deflebis, ornabis, attolles!” 11). This generous prediction cannot be tested, for so far as we know, Caninius never wrote a poem about the amazing dolphin. For that matter, however, no one did, and the absence is important. For Pliny’s terms apply very well to Pliny’s own version, marked as I have shown by verbal ornamentation, pathos, and sublimity of tone. At least in comparison with the version related by Pliny’s uncle, the younger’s version is obviously longer (a sort of *copia*), verbally ornate (*ornata*), and, in its combination of two kinds of dolphin stories, it achieves something of the emotional and artistic heights (*miseratione, deflebis, attolles*) expected of Caninius’s poem.

In light of this “poetic” achievement, we may well wonder about the letter’s conclusion, where Pliny suggests to Caninius that “there is no need for you to make up anything or to add anything; it is enough not to diminish those things that are true” (“non est opus adfigas aliquid aut adstruas; sufficit ne ea quae sunt uera minuantur,” 11). If Caninius is expected neither to add to Pliny’s account nor to subtract from it, is he allowed even to change Pliny’s prose into verse? As with the artful “coincidence” of Pliny merely “happening upon” a story already told by his uncle, so I think we are expected to understand that Caninius is not really being asked to write anything at all. In that case, Pliny’s version, the only version, would stand as the most poetic both by default, as it were, and by its artful suppressions, false suggestions, and style.

The possibility that Pliny’s version is the poetic version is strengthened by an ambiguity paralleled in a second letter. First, when Pliny writes in 9.33’s introduction that “the story deserves . . . that poetic spirit” (quoted

above p. 163), he leaves, I think, deliberately ambiguous *whose* poetic spirit he has in mind. The demonstrative adjective *isto* may associate the spirit with the second person (*OLD* 1, 2, 5a—as in court cases of a sort familiar to Pliny, but here without the common pejorative connotations [5b]), but not as clearly as would have, for example, the possessive adjective *tuo*: *isto* is also able to mean “well-known” (3) or simply “this,” with “little or no reference to the second person” (4, a usage that seems post-classical, like Pliny).

The ambiguity is strengthened by contrast with a precise parallel from an earlier letter to Caninius, *Epistle* 8.4, that is also about a mooted poem. In that letter, Pliny perceives in Caninius’s decision to compose a poem on the Dacian War “one very great difficulty, namely that equaling these things [sc. Trajan’s military and engineering activities] in speech is arduous, an immense task even *for your spirit*” (“una, sed maxima difficultas, quod haec aequare dicendo arduum, immensum etiam *tuo ingenio*,” 3). Pliny is thus clearly able to write “your spirit” in so many words, unambiguously. Although this cannot be definitive (elsewhere Pliny uses *ista* fairly unambiguously for “your,” e.g., 4.30.1, quoted in n. 18, below), by not writing *tuo* in 9.33 like in its partial model 8.4, he leaves open the possibility that the appropriate spirit is his, and that his letter is, paradoxically, both an invitation to poetry and an acceptance of that invitation, perhaps the only acceptance truly desired.

This reading seems confirmed, finally, by further comparison of 9.33’s frame with the opening portions of *Epistle* 8.4 that lead to that letter’s reference to Caninius’s spirit (1):

You couldn’t do better than preparing, as you are, to write a “Dacian War.” For what raw material is there so fresh, so full, so wide-ranging, what material indeed so poetic and, although absolutely true, so fabulous?

optime facis, quod bellum Dacicum scribere paras. nam quae tam recens, tam copiosa, tam lata, quae denique tam poetica et quamquam in uerissimis rebus tam fabulosa materia?

In light of this passage, 9.33 may be read as rewriting 8.4, substituting the dolphin story for the Dacian War and Pliny for Caninius. Where 8.4 praises the Dacian War as raw material that is “so poetic and, although

absolutely true, so fabulous,” 9.33 describes the dolphin story in its introduction similarly, as “raw material that is true but very like a fiction” (“materiam ueram, sed simillimam fictae,” 1), and its conclusion emphasizes that the story is simply “true” (*quae sunt uera*, 11). As the subjects are compared, so are the poets or poetic spirits. Where 8.4 describes a spirit, clearly Caninius’s (*tuo*), as “tending to rise as high as possible and to grow from the most expansive undertakings” (“tuo ingenio, quamquam altissime adsurgat et amplissimis operibus increscat,” 3), 9.33 refers, in its introduction, to a spirit, only possibly Caninius’s (*isto*), that is “poetic” because “most luxuriant” and “most elevated” (“laetissimo, altissimo planeque poetico ingenio,” 1); and its conclusion emphasizes the “elevation” while also recalling 8.4’s reference to a “full” or copious subject (“qua copia deflebis, ornabis, attolles!” 9.33.11).

The rewriting of 8.4 by 9.33 strengthens the later letter’s invitation to read the younger Pliny’s dolphin story as not only *rewriting* his uncle’s earlier version but also, and more importantly, as it were *pre-writing* Caninius’s imagined future version. We may thus read 9.33, finally, as “answering” a rhetorical question posed by 8.4. In that earlier letter, Pliny allows himself something of a poetic turn to metaphor for which he apologizes quickly but, in light of his allusive and metapoetic mode throughout the letter, perhaps disingenuously: “Loosen your rigging, spread your sails and, if you ever have, let yourself be carried by your spirit entire. For why should I, too, not be poetic with a poet?” (“immitte rudentes, pande uela ac, si quando alias, toto ingenio uehere. cur enim non ego quoque poetice cum poeta?” 5).

The concluding question is rhetorical but, for Pliny the prose poet, not unmeaningful: Pliny asserts via the very fact of the preceding sentence that he is *not* required to avoid the poetic. Pliny, not identified as a poet, writes to Caninius, identified thus, not in order truly to offer to his friend raw material but to try his own hand at an especially poetic prose.¹⁷ The fact that the story of his discovery is thus fiction or, more precisely, pretense, and, so strictly untrustworthy, should concern us no more than it would have its addressee.¹⁸ After all, as Pliny writes in 9.33—with deliberate allu-

17 On Pliny as poet, see Hershkowitz 1995.

18 Any such “concern” vanishes completely if the letter is read as an artful gift to a good friend. As suggested by Murphy 2004.60, “stories about wonderful things, or *mirabilia*, were in themselves collectible entities” such that “[t]he gift of this particular story . . . serves to mark the friendship between the two literary men.” For this notion and citation, I

sion to 8.4's rhetorical question—the story's “author is quite trustworthy, but what does a poet have to do with trustworthiness anyway?” (“*magna auctori fides; tametsi quid poeta cum fide?*” 1).¹⁹

V. CONCLUSIONS

I hope to have shown how *Epistle* 9.33 is best read not straightforwardly but literarily as an allusive response to Pliny the elder's version of the “amazing” dolphin story in a “poetic spirit” licensed by the invocation of Caninius. The letter is not intended simply to share with Caninius a story suitable for his poetry, nor even really to let him know how Pliny discovered that story in the first place, nor, for that matter, to teach the reader—whether Caninius or another—about the amazing dolphin of Hippo. What the letter does is rather to tell a story about Pliny claiming to share a story with Caninius and, only within that first or surface story, to let the reader know how Pliny really discovered the “amazing dolphin story.” We are asked, in other words, to pay attention to the younger Pliny's stories

am grateful to one of *Arethusa*'s anonymous readers, who writes further that, if Murphy's reading is accepted, “9.33's artistry may also be seen as Pliny's means of ensuring the quality of his gift,” citing as a possible parallel *Ep.* 4.30.1 to Licinius Sura: “I have brought for you from my homeland, in place of a gift, a question *most deserving of that most elevated learning of yours*,” “*attuli tibi ex patria mea pro munusculo quaestionem altissima ista eruditione dignissimam*”; the emphasized material is indeed strikingly parallel to the similar material in 9.33 discussed above. Along similar lines, a participant in the 2008 annual meeting of CAPN (where an earlier version of this paper was presented), wondered whether Pliny's implied claim to poetic superiority is a friendly joke at his and/or Caninius's expense: does 9.33 refer so clearly to 8.4 to suggest that Caninius may have met his match in the Dacian Wars, to poke fun at a Dacian War poem already written, or, subtly, to signal Pliny's poetic inferiority by sticking resolutely to prose? Whatever the specific reading—artful gift, arch joke, devoted literary exercise, or a combination—I agree with the underlying sense that Pliny writes to Caninius as a friend.

19 Pliny goes on to specify that the story's “author is the sort whom you would trust even if you were intending to write history” (“*is tamen auctor, cui bene uel historiam scripturus credidisse*”). In light of the parallels discussed above, this may recall the younger's description of the elder in *Ep.* 6.16 as both an utterly trustworthy source for historical material, in that case the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, and himself a worthy subject of historical inquiry. Indeed, those two aspects of the elder's character are closely linked, such that what could have been a story of scientific mystery (what is the cause of the phenomena attracting attention?) becomes instead, through selection and omission in focalization, a hagiography of the uncle as hero (how did this “amazing” Roman meet his end?); see Eco 1990b. No matter how 6.16 is read, 9.33 would seem to recall this historiographical emphasis.

and storytelling, as opposed to those of and by others—the elder’s earlier version, now surpassed; Caninius’s future version, already scooped—and so to pay attention to the younger Pliny himself as an especially artistic storyteller. As told by the younger Pliny, the “amazing dolphin story” is, it seems, a story about storytelling.

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