

## XV. Pliny's Treatment of History in Epistolary Form

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In a number of his epistles Pliny deals with historical incidents that took place under the Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> Many of these letters contain merely brief allusions to or brief discussions of past events. Others are in themselves complete narrations of historical episodes. It is only with some of the letters of this latter class that we are here concerned. It is the object of this paper to investigate the content of these letters, to discover their reason for being, and especially to discern their literary nature. Certain comparisons are made between these epistles and passages from the historical works of Tacitus. This is done in order to bring out more clearly the character of the Plinian letters, and not to prove as an essential part of this study any indebtedness of Tacitus to Pliny, or of Pliny to Tacitus.<sup>2</sup> In general this study is concerned with illustrating in a particular way the literary dexterity and feeling for form so characteristic of Pliny in his letters.

We shall begin our investigation by considering first the content and then the form of *Ep.* 4.11, a letter dealing with an incident which took place some fifteen years before the time of the publication of the letter.<sup>3</sup> Pliny narrates the circumstances under which the Vestal Virgin Cornelia was executed for unchastity during the

<sup>1</sup> A. M. Guillemin, *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps* (Paris 1929) 128-30, speaks of "les lettres historiques," by which she means: "toutes celles [lettres] dans lesquelles est raconté quelque événement intéressant l'histoire du monde, celle de l'empire ou même celle de quelque personnage." This paper is not concerned with what information we may gain about certain events in Roman history from a study of Pliny's letters. It rather deals with the literary qualities of those letters of Pliny which contain narrations of past events, and which are written in a manner worthy of a Roman historian.

<sup>2</sup> The passages quoted and cited from the works of Pliny and Tacitus in this article are based upon the following editions: *Plinius Minor*, ed. M. Schuster<sup>2</sup> (Leipzig 1952); Tacitus, *Germania, Agricola, Dialogus* (Leipzig 1949), *Historiae* (Leipzig 1950), *Annales* (Leipzig 1952), all ed. E. Köstermann.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The trial and death of Cornelia took place around 91 A.D. See *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 1481. We accept as generally correct Mommsen's chronology for the publication of Pliny's letters, in which case Bk. IV was brought out about 104/5 A.D. Cf. Th. Mommsen, "Zur Lebensgeschichte des jüngeren Plinius," *Hermes* 3 (1869) 43-47.

principate of the emperor Domitian. Pliny prefaces his account with an expression of strong doubt concerning the actual guilt of the Vestal. A certain senator and ex-praetor, Valerius Licinianus,<sup>4</sup> did indeed after the execution of the Vestal confess his own immoral relationship with the priestess "sed incertum, utrum quia verum erat, an quia graviora metuebat, si negasset" (4.11.5). Pliny continues to influence the reader's opinion towards the innocence of Cornelia by next stating as if it were a known or knowable fact that Domitian was enraged by the odium which he had recently incurred at the death of the Vestal. We are led to believe that Domitian by means of threats forced Licinianus to confess his guilt. We are told that the sole motive of Domitian in his punishment of Cornelia was to glorify his reign by a return to exemplary *severitas*, and that he acted by his right as Pontifex Maximus, "seu potius immanitate tyranni, licentia domini" (4.11.6). After having thus turned our minds against Domitian, Pliny begins his account of the case involving the Vestal and her paramours (4.11.6):

. . . reliquos pontifices non in Regiam, sed in Albanam villam convocavit. Nec minore scelere, quam quod ulcisci videbatur, absentem inauditamque damnavit incesti, cum ipse fratris filiam incesto non polluisset solum, verum etiam occidisset; nam vidua abortu periit.

At this point our author expands his narration into a vivid and highly dramatic account of the Vestal's death. The *pontifices* sent to carry out the punishment found Cornelia stretching her hands to the gods and exclaiming again and again: "'me Caesar incestam putat, qua sacra faciente vicit, triumphavit'"<sup>5</sup> (4.11.7). Pliny's comment is: "Blandiens haec an inridens, ex fiducia sui an ex contemptu principis dixerit, dubium est; dixit, donec ad supplicium, nescio an innocens, certe tamquam innocens, ducta est" (4.11.8). It is interesting to see that while Pliny tries hard to maintain the appearance of giving an objective account, the interpretations which he offers for the words of Cornelia are heavily weighted on the side of Cornelia's innocence. He is anxious to convict Domitian of unjust cruelty. There follows a scene fraught with pathos and dramatic details. When the Vestal was descending into her own grave (4.11.9-10):

<sup>4</sup> *PIR*<sup>1</sup> V 67.

<sup>5</sup> Hostile writers maintain that Domitian's great military victories were shams: cf. Plin. *Pan.* 12.2, 16.3; Tac. *Agr.* 39.

. . . haesissetque descendenti stola, vertit se ac recollegit, cumque ei manum carnifex daret, aversata est et resiliuit foedumque contactum quasi plane a casto puroque corpore novissima sanctitate reiecit, omnibusque numeris pudoris πολλήν πρόνοιαν ἔσχεν εὐσχημῶν πεσεῖν.<sup>6</sup>

Pliny now states that a Roman knight, Publius Celer,<sup>7</sup> had been found guilty of *incestum* with the Vestal, and that while he was being scourged to death in the forum, he kept shouting: " 'Quid feci? Nihil feci' " (4.11.10). Thereupon Pliny emphasizes once more that Domitian was burning with anger under an imputation of *crudelitas* and *iniquitas*. Licinianus was, therefore, approached by some henchmen of Domitian who warned the senator that if he wished to avoid the fate of Celer, he should openly confess his guilty relationship with the Vestal, Cornelia.<sup>8</sup> Licinianus did so. Pliny continues (4.11.13):

Gratum hoc Domitiano adeo quidem, ut gaudio proderetur diceretque: 'absolvit nos Licinianus'. Adiecit etiam non esse verecundiae eius instandum; ipsi vero permisit, si qua posset, ex rebus suis rapere, antequam bona publicarentur, exiliumque molle velut praemium dedit.

Pliny concludes the narrative by stating that by the clemency of Nerva Licinianus was transferred to Sicily, where he was presently teaching rhetoric.

We are here only so far concerned with the actual legality of Domitian's actions as to show more clearly the rhetorical manner with which Pliny has distorted and obscured the case. The editors of Pliny and the writers on Roman law and Roman political practice are agreed that Domitian acted on safe legal grounds in the punishment of Cornelia, that he followed traditional procedures in the execution of a Vestal.<sup>9</sup> We must, moreover, recognize the true guilt of the Vestal,<sup>10</sup> basing our decision on Suetonius' more sober and very factual account of the same case. The account of Suetonius is given in such a completely different manner and spirit from that of Pliny that it is well to present it in full below. As an example of

<sup>6</sup> The Greek is quoted from Eur. *Hec.* 569.

<sup>7</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> C 621.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Tac. *Agr.* 42, where there is a similarly described situation.

<sup>9</sup> See: E. T. Merrill's *Selected Letters of the Younger Pliny* (London 1908) 304; Th. Mommsen, *Röm. Strafr.* 1.18–20, 25–26; 2.683; 3.919, 929; *Röm. Staatsr.* 2.54–57.

<sup>10</sup> B. W. Henderson, *Five Roman Emperors* (Cambridge 1927) 15; G. W. Mooney's edition of Suetonius, Bks. VII–VIII (Dublin 1930) 547–50. Statius felt that Domitian's actions against the Vestal were justified: *Silvae* 1.1.35; 5.1.42. Dio Cass. to be sure sides with Pliny: *Hist.* 67.3.

Domitian's early care for justice Suetonius relates (Suet. *Dom.* 8.3-4):

Nam cum Oculatis sororibus, item Varronillae liberum mortis permisisset arbitrium corruptoresque earum relegasset, mox Corneliam maximam virginem, absolutam olim, dein longo intervallo repetitam atque convictam defodi imperavit, stupratoresque virgis in Comitio ad necem caedi, excepto praetorio viro, cui, dubia etiam tum causa et incertis quaestionibus atque tormentis de semet professo, exilium indulsit.

We see at once that Suetonius has given us only the relevant facts, and has left out the rhetorical *amplificatio*, *color*, and subjective interpretation of Pliny. The most interesting aspects of Suetonius' version are the fact that Cornelia was tried twice (an important detail omitted by Pliny), and the logical reason that Suetonius offers us for Licinianus' confession of guilt and yet the leniency of his punishment. Here we have an excellent example of the difference between an account purely factual and a narration mainly rhetorical or literary.

As Professor Rogers has pointed out in the case of Tacitus' narration of treason-trials,<sup>11</sup> so here also Pliny has obscured the legal procedure, and has minimized the actual accusation against Cornelia while giving the reader what he interprets as the real cause of Cornelia's death — the whim of Domitian to decorate his reign with old-fashioned severity. The rhetorical *color* of the whole account is partly the tyranny of Domitian, partly the innocence of the Vestal, each aiding in the establishment of the other. The most important means by which Pliny tries to establish the innocence of Cornelia is the death-scene itself. Pliny has much more to say about this aspect of the case than any other. There are two reasons for this: it offers the best opportunity for rhetorical development, and it is the best means by which Pliny can establish the innocence of the Vestal without having to deal with the pertinent facts. Our attention is turned away from the legal side of the case to the pathetic and dramatic details of the death-scene. Cornelia is disdainful of her "murderer" in the purity of her conscience, and at the same time we are led to admire her bravery and pity her fate. This is also a very common and important part of Tacitean narrations of cases involving death. In short, Pliny's narration of the trial and death of Cornelia is very similar to Tacitus' treatment of comparable

<sup>11</sup> R. S. Rogers, "A Tacitean Pattern in Narrating Treason-Trials," *TAPA* 83 (1952) 285, 297, 303-6, 308-9.

incidents. Listed below in the footnote are all the cases, found for the most part in the latter books of the *Annals*, where the rhetorical pattern and method of narration are the same as here in the account of Cornelia and her lovers.<sup>12</sup>

There can be little doubt, moreover, that Tacitus treated this very case in the lost books of the *Histories*. In the early chapters of that work Tacitus gives a kind of resumé of the exciting events to be narrated by him (*Hist.* 1.2–3). After having mentioned the disturbances of the civil wars which characterized the period anterior to the accession of Vespasian, Tacitus comes to the principate of Domitian.<sup>13</sup> Using brief phrases Tacitus mentions the important horrors of this reign. Among these items he couples together as a contrasting pair the particulars: *pollutae caerimoniae, magna adulteria*. W. A. Spooner in his edition of the *Histories* has rightly seen that Tacitus is undoubtedly referring to the misconduct of the Vestals mentioned by Suetonius and Pliny, and that *magna* probably means “in high places,” in which event Tacitus is alluding to the intrigues of Domitian with his niece Julia.<sup>14</sup> This is certainly correct since the succeeding phrases can only have reference to the period of so-called tyranny and bloodshed under Domitian. Moreover, we have already seen in the Plinian epistle that there also the same rhetorical contrast is made between punishment of the Vestal for *incestum* and Domitian's own incestuous relations. It seems clear, moreover, that Tacitus so arranged his material in the latter books of the *Histories* that he was able to treat in close proximity the deaths of Cornelia and Julia.<sup>15</sup> It is tempting to see in such a similar arrangement of two separate historical incidents in the works of two friends a literary borrowing. Such an antithesis, however, is one that easily presents itself to rhetorically mindful authors, such as Pliny and Tacitus were.

We see, therefore, and this is the important point, that Pliny has narrated an historical incident within what purports to be a letter

<sup>12</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 14.57–59, 60–64; 15.35, 68–69; 16.7–9, 10–11, 14–15, 18–19, 21–35.

<sup>13</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 1.2. See also: G. G. Ramsay, *The Histories of Tacitus* (London 1915) 4–7.

<sup>14</sup> *The Histories of Tacitus* (London 1891) 107.

<sup>15</sup> This would be quite possible since Julia died at about the same time as Cornelia: *PIR*<sup>3</sup> F 426. From Tacitus' phrase *pollutae caerimoniae* it would seem that the historian like Suetonius believed in the guilt of the Vestal. It is an attractive thought that Pliny, knowing his friend's opinion on the case, tried in this letter in friendly rivalry with Tacitus to establish the innocence of Cornelia and in so doing to use a rhetorical interpretation of facts which might outshine Tacitus' own brilliant use of that device.

sent to a friend. He has done so in the manner of a historian. This fact is of some significance for the proper understanding of Pliny's use of the epistolary form. In all the correspondence of Cicero we do not find any letter that narrates a past historical event.<sup>16</sup> There are indeed numerous letters which narrate, but only events or incidents that were in the *then immediate present*.<sup>17</sup> So Cicero gives a long account to Cato the Younger of his military campaign in Cilicia (*Fam.* 15.4), or his friend Servius Sulpicius narrates to Cicero the recent murder of M. Marcellus (*Fam.* 4.12). In short, all such narrations in Cicero's letters are actually what we should expect of a real correspondence; that is, they are news. Seneca the Younger does upon occasion in his moral epistles narrate very briefly some past historical event, but such accounts, in reality anecdotes, are always introduced as *exempla* to the main philosophical thesis of the letter.<sup>18</sup> In Pliny, however, as we have already seen and shall see, there are whole letters dedicated to the narration of past events, and composed in the highly literary manner of history for the delight of the readers and the fame of the author.

This use of the letter to narrate an artistically whole episode from past history is in accord with, and well adapted to, Pliny's treatment of the literary epistle.<sup>19</sup> All of Pliny's letters are to be valued each as a single whole, as a separate literary piece or unit with but one subject or topic involved. The subjects chosen for literary treatment are many and varied, reflecting as each letter does the author's own literary interests as well as the tastes of the time. The Plinian epistle, therefore, is perfectly adapted to specific and brief literary efforts, and these might be in the manner of the rhetorical *descriptio*, or the eulogistic encomium, or, as concerns us here, the historical episode. Indeed, it was a tendency of the times through the influence of the rhetorical schools to deal in a highly polished but abbreviated manner with specific literary genres as if they were literary exercises. Such a tendency can best be seen in the

<sup>16</sup> The closest approach in the correspondence of Cicero to a narration of a past historical event is Cicero's good-humoured letter to L. Papirius Paetus where he gives a list of the *patricii minorum gentium* in the *gens Papiria* (*Fam.* 9.21).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Cic. *Att.* 5.20, 13.52; *Fam.* 7.1.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 24.6-8, 9; 66.51; 70.10, 20, 22; 77.14; 82.12; 95.42; 120.7; 122.10-13, 15-16. In the poetic epistles of Horace we also meet with anecdotes used as *exempla*: *Ep.* 1.7.29-34, 46-95; 15.26-41; 17.13-26; 2.2.26-40, 128-40.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. H. Peter, *Der Brief in der römischen Literatur* (Leipzig 1901) 112-18; W. Kroll, *Studien zum Verständnis der römischen Literatur* (Stuttgart 1924) 225-46; M. Schuster, *RE* s.v. "Plinius d.j." 449-51; Guillemin (above, note 1) 124-34.

*Silvae* of Statius with which the epistles of Pliny have a great affinity in this regard.<sup>20</sup>

It is also true, however, that Pliny never forgets that he is using the epistolary form for his literary efforts, and thus, whatever the subject may be that he chooses for literary treatment, the topic is always made to conform at least outwardly to the usages of letter-writing.<sup>21</sup> We shall see that this is especially the case in those letters which narrate historical incidents. If we consider the manner in which Pliny composed the letter dealing with the death of Cornelia, it becomes evident that he was quite conscious of the fact that it was not a natural function of the "private" letter to treat of material proper to formal history, and, therefore, has taken unusual pains to make his narration appear as something proceeding from the spontaneous disposition of a friend writing to a friend.

Pliny begins his letter to Cornelius Minicianus in the following fashion: "Audistine Valerium Licinianum in Sicilia profiteri? Nondum te puto audisse: est enim recens nuntius" (4.11.1). Pliny would have us believe that this is a purely private, informal letter giving a friend some interesting contemporary news.<sup>22</sup> Again at the end of this letter Pliny makes a special point of explaining to his friend that since he was absent from Rome at the time when the events centering around Cornelia took place, he could not know them all, or only in an imperfect way (4.11.15).

Returning to the beginning of the letter we find that Pliny proceeds to expand his news about Licinianus. He briefly describes the circumstances under which this former orator now lives in exile. Pliny's next transition is at the same time natural and astute: "Dices tristia et miseranda, dignum tamen illum, qui haec ipsa studia incesti scelere macularit" (4.11.4). This is Pliny's excuse for his narration of the whole episode involving the deaths of Cornelia and Celer, and the exile of Licinianus. As we have already noted, he introduces the account by expressing his doubts as to the actual guilt of Licinianus, a matter which, of course, entails also the guilt or innocence of Cornelia. Thereupon, the whole case is narrated for us, ending with the transference of Licinianus by Nerva to

<sup>20</sup> Peter (above, note 19) 115-16; Guillemin (above, note 1) 82-83.

<sup>21</sup> Kroll (above, note 19) 238; Peter (above, note 19) 117-18.

<sup>22</sup> Cicero states that the first purpose of a private letter is that we inform our friends of news with which, through absence, they are not acquainted. Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 2.4.1; *Q. fr.* 1.1.37.

Sicily as his new place of exile (4.11.14). Thus Pliny reaches the very point where his letter opened, with its account of the manner in which Licinianus occupies himself in exile. The letter itself concludes with Pliny's insistence that since he has been so kind as to send such a long and newsy letter, he expects the same from his friend (4.11.15-16).

In such a careful manner is the narrative enclosed by a literary frame. Pliny begins and closes the letter by references to the fact that he is sending news about Licinianus. In reality, Licinianus, because he does play a part in the narrative of Cornelia, is the means by which transitions are made from contemporary news to history, and back again from history to Pliny's own time. The account has suffered somewhat in orderly presentation as a result of Pliny's desire to make his historical narrative appear natural to epistolary form. The particulars about Licinianus are rather dislocated. The latest actions of this gentleman appear at the beginning of the letter, those less recent at the end, and the earliest in the middle. In a history dealing with Domitian's reign we should be presented with the story of Cornelia and the subsequent fate of her two lovers in a straightforward fashion. Nevertheless, a complete and interesting unit of past history is related by Pliny, charmingly and gracefully adapted to the form of a supposedly private letter.

In such a fashion does it appear that Pliny at least partially satisfied his strongly expressed desire to compose a history. In one of his more famous letters<sup>23</sup> Pliny replies to the suggestion of Titinius Capito that he should write history.<sup>24</sup> Our author states at first that many others in the past have given him similar advice, and that the idea is a welcome one. It is a great thing to perpetuate the fame of great men, and at the same time to extend one's own reputation.<sup>25</sup> Pliny admits that he is passionately interested in his

<sup>23</sup> *Ep.* 5.8. The idea for this epistle may be based upon a remark in one of Cicero's letters. In writing to his historically minded friend Atticus, Cicero expresses a desire to write history. See: Cic. *Att.* 16.13c.2; Guillemin (above, note 1) 132. This fact, however, would not at all qualify the sincerity of Pliny's desire to write history.

<sup>24</sup> Titinius Capito was himself author of a work of historical nature dealing with the reign of Domitian. See: Plin. *Ep.* 1.17, 5.8, 8.12; A. Stein, *RE* s.v. "Octavius" 1856; H. Peter, *Hist. Rom. Rel.* 2 (Leipzig 1906) clxxiii-clxxiv. Peter cites Pliny's publication of his speech against Publicus Certus (*Ep.* 4.21, 7.30, 9.13) and his biography of Vestricius Cottius (*Ep.* 2.7, 3.10) as derived from his frustrated desire to write history. He concludes that Pliny was not equal to the task of writing a history.

<sup>25</sup> Another strong reason why Pliny liked the idea of trying a new literary medium such as history is that by his own confession Pliny, like many of his contemporaries,



own fame, and that the writing of history seems almost the only means of assuring it, oratory and poetry meeting with little success unless they be of the highest genius. But men are curious by nature, and are captivated by information however badly written.<sup>26</sup> He also has behind him the great tradition of his uncle, a fine historian. In spite of all this Pliny explains that he has delayed the undertaking of such a work because it would interfere with the time necessary for the revision and publication of his speeches. If he tried to do both at the same time, he would do justice to neither. Pliny then makes a rather brief comparison between oratory and history on the basis of subject matter. Both employ *narratio*, *sed aliter*:

huic [oratory] pleraque humilia et sordida et ex medio petita, illi [history] omnia recondita, splendida, excelsa conveniunt.<sup>27</sup>

Towards the end of the letter Pliny asks his friend to suggest for the meantime what period of history he would advise for treatment. Almost at once Pliny in discussing the question himself dismisses remote periods (*vetera et scripta aliis*) as having been already done by others. One would find inevitable and troublesome a collation of several historians. He then wonders whether he should deal with matters *intacta et nova*. This is dangerous because you are bound to give offense.<sup>28</sup> There will be more to censure than to praise. It is this period, however, which Pliny obviously prefers since he ends the letter in a rather pompous protestation that he will not be discouraged by this drawback, and that his is a strong enough mental constitution to tell the truth regardless of the consequences.

was a dilettante in the field of literature (*Ep.* 9.29). Pliny gives very high praise to a friend who like himself composes orations, and writes epistles, poetry — and history (*Ep.* 1.16).

<sup>26</sup> This is a key passage for indicating not only the popularity of history in Pliny's own day, but also the fact that much of it was of a popular nature. Pliny undoubtedly wanted to have a part in this general literary movement, although, to be sure, a respectable and proper part. See: E. M. Sanford, "Lucan and his Roman Critics," *CP* 26 (1931) 250–52; H. Peter, *Geschichtliche Litteratur über die röm. Kaiserzeit* (Leipzig 1897) 1.80.

<sup>27</sup> *Ep.* 5.8.9. Pliny's attitude towards history is that of his master: Quint. *Inst.* 10.1.31–34.

<sup>28</sup> Many of those — or their descendants — who had played unattractive parts under former *mali imperatores* were still alive. Pliny is elsewhere a witness of the bruised feelings of family pride resulting from a frank portrayal of fairly recent events (*Ep.* 9.27), and Tacitus is consciously aware of the possibility of offending some of his contemporaries (*Ann.* 4.33).

For the time being, while he was busy with his orations, Pliny might well find an answer to his quandary within the epistle. He might in this way try his hand at writing history in a minor key before launching out into a bold and hazardous venture.<sup>29</sup> In the epistle he might treat briefly a single historical episode which could be both fresh and elevated. Has he not done so in his letter dealing with Cornelia? Here is material which Pliny does represent as being rather unknown, and in treating which he assumes the pose of one who desires to get at the real truth of the whole case (*Ep.* 4.11.15). Here is an event which in its elevation will stir the minds of men. Even if Pliny had not adorned his narrative with rhetorical embellishment, the mere story would have held us. Here is also a subject taken from a period, the reign of Domitian, which had, at least for Pliny and Tacitus, more to censure than to praise.<sup>30</sup> It is an incident not taken from materials that are *vetera et scripta aliis*, but rather from a period of much more recent date where there are subjects *intacta et nova*.<sup>31</sup>

It seems true, therefore, that Pliny as a wishful historian was disposed to use the epistle as a means of sublimating for the present his urge to write a history. As a writer of epistles Pliny was glad to include letters dealing with exciting events of the past within his collection. In writing to a friend about a recent incident in the senate he says (*Ep.* 3.20.10–11):

Haec tibi scripsi, primum ut aliquid novi scriberem, deinde ut non numquam de re publica loquerer, cuius materiae nobis quanto rarior quam veteribus occasio tanto minus omittenda est. Et hercule quousque illa vulgaria 'quid agis? ecquid commode vales?' Habeant nostrae quoque litterae aliquid non humile, nec sordidum nec privatis rebus inclusum.

The matters *humilia et sordida*, common to oratory, are apparently to be avoided so far as is possible and practicable in Pliny's epistles. In the above quoted passage Pliny has undoubtedly in mind the

<sup>29</sup> It is certainly reasonable to believe that if Pliny had lived beyond an age where he reached the height of his literary powers, he might well have set himself to the task of composing a history.

<sup>30</sup> A history of the principates of Nerva and Trajan could hardly do this. Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 1.1; *Agr.* 3.1; the whole of Pliny's *Panegyric* and especially 18, 44, 45, 48, 53, 80, 82, 89–95.

<sup>31</sup> If we accept Mommsen's general scheme for the chronology of the publication of the epistles as correct, Bk. IV was put out around 104/5 A.D., at which time in all probability Tacitus had not yet published his *Histories*. See: Schanz-Hosius<sup>4</sup> (1935) 2.625; E. Köstermann, *Annales* (above, note 2) praef. xiv–xv.

thrilling events of state so often recorded in the correspondence of his great model Cicero. Pliny goes on to say that under the present direction of the state by one man an author does not have many chances to write about stirring political events. When, as in the present case, an opportunity presents itself, it must be taken advantage of and the subject included within the collection of letters.<sup>32</sup>

Pliny in another letter complains of the paucity of this same kind of subject matter. A friend has asked Pliny to write him not only many but long letters. Pliny answers that he has not done so because he has realized that his friend is rather busy, and because he is quite occupied himself. He continues (*Ep.* 9.2.1-3):

Praeterea nec materia plura scribendi dabatur. Neque enim eadem nostra condicio quae M. Tulli, ad cuius exemplum nos vocas. Illi enim et copiosissimum ingenium et par ingenio qua varietas rerum qua magnitudo largissime suppetebat; nos quam angustis terminis claudamur, etiam tacente me perspicis, nisi forte volumus scholasticas tibi atque, ut ita dicam, umbraticas litteras mittere.

As we read those letters which Pliny composed concerning contemporary scenes from the senate and the centumviral court, we feel, as Pliny must himself have felt, the great disparity between these epistles and the correspondence of Cicero, so full of really moving political action.<sup>33</sup> If unlike Cicero Pliny did not have in his own day exciting events to write about in his letters, he could, nevertheless, provide his readers from time to time with stirring happenings mainly political which he had himself lived through in the past or with which he had some other personal connection. Such events would mainly come from the reign of Domitian, but conceivably also from earlier principates.<sup>34</sup> If Trajan was the best of all possible princes, still under emperors like Domitian there was a great deal more *varietas rerum*,<sup>35</sup> if not too wholesome in character yet certainly

<sup>32</sup> Pliny's phraseology for expressing this last thought is interesting: "absentibus amicis quasi ministrare epistulis possumus" (*Ep.* 3.20.12).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Henderson (above, note 10) 35, 181-84.

<sup>34</sup> This period would presumably cover the reigns of Claudius through Domitian and especially the latter's principate. Such is actually the case in all the letters of Pliny which in any way deal with or allude to past historical events. *Ep.* 1.5, 12; 2.1; 3.7, 11, 14, 16; 4.11; 5.5, 16; 6.16, 24; 7.19, 27, 33; 8.6; 9.13.

<sup>35</sup> *Varietas rerum* is a semi-technical phrase used in connection with thrilling events of the past — as Cicero points out, the stories we most enjoy in reading. Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.4-6; Plin. *Ep.* 4.24.6; Tac. *Ann.* 4.33.13. See also: B. L. Ullman, "History and Tragedy," *TAPA* 73 (1942) 50-51.

more impassioned.<sup>36</sup> Pliny would, of course, have to relate the narration of past events to something in the immediate present in order to justify his dealing with them in his letters. We have already seen an example of how he accomplishes this in his letter dealing with the case of Cornelia and Licinianus. Pliny, therefore, narrated in his epistles past historical episodes not only from his desire to write history, but also from his concern to write letters treating, as Cicero's did, subjects of poignant interest.

Let us consider three more of these "historical" letters of Pliny, and in doing so further illustrate the points established above concerning their literary character and content. Pliny opens a letter to Maecilius Nepos by stating (*Ep.* 3.16.1):

Adnotasse videor facta dictaque virorum feminarumque alia clariora esse, alia maiora. Confirmata est opinio mea hesterno Fanniae sermone.

The ostensible purpose of this letter is to discuss the fact that the most famous acts of a person's life are not necessarily the greatest. As evidence of this fact Pliny spends the whole of the letter in narrating various acts of courage and bravery of Arria. These acts, Pliny says, *obscuriora* but none the less as great as the famous "Paete, non dolet" scene of Arria,<sup>37</sup> were related to him in a recent conversation with Fannia, the granddaughter of the famous lady. The letter ends in the following manner: "Unde colligitur, quod initio dixi, alia esse clariora, alia maiora" (3.16.13).

Pliny first relates the pathetic tale of how Arria concealed from her ill husband the fact that their beloved son had already died of the same malady. Arria would answer her husband's inquiries about his son by saying that he was sleeping well. Then, when she could no longer restrain her tears, she would offer some excuse to leave the room. Pliny continues (3.16.6):

Praeclarum quidem illud eiusdem, ferrum stringere, perfodere pectus, extrahere pugionem, porrigere marito, addere vocem immortalem ac paene divinam: "Paete, non dolet"!

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps the reason why Tacitus *senectuti seposuit* (cf. *Hist.* 1.1; *Agr.* 3) his history of the principates of Nerva and Trajan was that while he was willing to take the chance that death might overtake him before getting to or completing the history of a happier age, he wanted, nevertheless, to be as sure as possible that he first deal with the more exciting periods of the Empire, the periods of the *Histories* and the *Annals*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ep.* 3.16.13. Cf. Martial's treatment of the well-known theme: *Mart. Epigr.* 1.13.

We are then told that this famous act is no greater than Arria's courage in hiding from her husband the death of their son. As if to reaffirm this same point Pliny depicts another less familiar action in the life of the heroine. When Paetus was summoned to Rome by Claudius for his part in the conspiracy of Scribonianus, Arria in spite of her insistent requests was not allowed to accompany her husband on board his ship. Not at all daunted, in her conjugal devotion she hired a small fishing vessel "*ingensque navigium minimo secuta est*" (3.16.9).

The last, the longest, and the most important part of the letter deals with the rather obscure acts of Arria during the few days before her death (3.16.9-12). Arriving at Rome Arria spurns the idea of seeking the *clementia* of the emperor, and manifests her resolution not to outlive her husband. She is obdurate to the appeals of her son-in-law, Thræsea Paetus, not to commit this brave act. A guard is placed over her by her immediate family, whereupon Arria in order to show her determination to meet death with her husband almost kills herself by dashing her head against a wall. Pliny continues: "*Focilata 'dixeram' inquit 'vobis inventuram me quamlibet duram ad mortem viam, si vos facilem negassetis'*" (3.16.12). The narrative ends at this point, and Pliny concludes the letter as described above. He intends us to infer that when Arria had so clearly indicated her resolution to die, her relatives ceased their objections, and shortly afterwards she showed Paetus the way to death and glory as previously told in the letter.

Essentially the epistle is concerned with a historical topic, the bravery of Arria. Her attempt to conceal from her husband the death of their son, and later her determination to abide as closely as possible by her husband in his recall to Rome, as separate incidents in illustrating the virtues of Arria lead up to the more fully developed description of Arria's final acts of bravery and devotion. So, for example, in the *Annals* before the historian comes to deal with the last bravely spent days of Thræsea Paetus' life, he presents to the reader in earlier and separate portions of his work several short incidents illustrating the bravery and boldness of Thræsea.<sup>38</sup> These incidents are presented as if to prepare us for the final and lengthy treatment of Thræsea's death. Because Tacitus is writing a complete and chronological history of a whole period, these incidents are

<sup>38</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.49; 14.12, 48-49; 16.21-35.

separated from each other by long passages dealing with other subjects. Pliny, because he can deal with only one literary unit in a letter, brings these historical episodes together as illustrating a single topic. The result is a swiftly moving and dramatically complete narrative. Indeed, a dramatic presentation of past events is one of the great advantages of a topical treatment of history over a strictly chronological one, an advantage which Tacitus was acutely aware of, and for the sake of which he sometimes altered his own chronological arrangement.<sup>39</sup>

Even if we take into account, however, Pliny's topical treatment of these past events, there is one aspect of his narration that is unnatural. The actual suicide of Arria is out of its normal position. It could, and would more naturally, occur at the end of the letter following Pliny's description of Arria's attempted suicide a few days before she died. The reason why Pliny has not followed here a systematic or historical disposition of his material is because he has sought to conceal in this way the fact that he is really writing history within an epistle. He has, moreover, framed the letter within remarks personally directed to his addressee. We have noted this device before in the letter about Cornelia. Another device used is to connect his narration with something that has occurred to him recently, here an idea of his lately confirmed by a conversation. This idea, moreover, or proposition, that the more famous acts of a person are not necessarily the greater, is the means by which Pliny is justified in narrating not merely certain less well-known acts of Arria, but also her most famous feat. This is a clever device, and Pliny makes it the more effective by putting the act of suicide out of its normal or rather formal position and including it informally with the first incident as a comparison illustrating the truth of his proposition.<sup>40</sup>

The last two letters of Pliny with which we shall deal are addressed to Tacitus. Since both these epistles are written to an historian, we shall see that it is somewhat easier for Pliny to justify his historical narrations. In *Ep.* 7.33, Pliny, having Cicero's famous letter to the historian Luceius in mind,<sup>41</sup> asks Tacitus to in-

<sup>39</sup> See H. Furneaux' edition of the *Annals*, Vol. 1, Intro. 27.

<sup>40</sup> We have previously noticed in Pliny's letter on Cornelia the disruption of natural narrative sequence in order to connect the account of a past event with the supposedly contemporary interest of the letter.

<sup>41</sup> Cic. *Fam.* 5.12. The important difference between Cicero's and Pliny's requests that their respective deeds be celebrated in a historical work is that Cicero in

clude within his *Histories* an incident involving Pliny's own *gloria*. Our author opens the letter by paying high tribute to the destined greatness of Tacitus' work, and then goes on to his request, which he emphasizes by stating (7.33.3):

Demonstro ergo, quamquam diligentiam tuam fugere non possit, cum sit in publicis actis, demonstro tamen, quo magis credas iucundum mihi futurum, si factum meum, cuius gratia periculo crevit, tuo ingenio, tuo testimonio ornaveris.

Pliny proceeds at once in an orderly fashion to narrate the incident, the main point of which is that Herennius Senecio and Pliny in prosecuting Baebius Massa,<sup>42</sup> the so-called favorite of Domitian, in 93 A.D. ran a great personal risk.<sup>43</sup> Upon the senate's finding Massa guilty, Senecio, supported by Pliny, applied to the consuls "ne bona dissipari sinant, quorum esse in custodia debent."<sup>44</sup> Massa growing angry at this further assault upon his honor and charging that Senecio "non advocati fidem, sed inimici amaritudinem implesse, impietatis reum postulat." Everyone was struck dumb with terror except Pliny. Rising up in all his glory he stated (7.33.8):

'Vereor . . . clarissimi consules, ne mihi Massa silentio suo praevaricationem obiecerit, quod non et me reum postulavit.'

On the following days Pliny was showered with compliments for his bravery, and here Pliny brings his narration to a close. The letter then concludes (7.33.10):

Haec, utcumque se habent, notiora, clariora, maiora tu facies; quamquam non exigo, ut excedas actae rei modum. Nam nec historia debet egredi veritatem, et honeste factis veritas sufficit.

Pliny obviously wishes to appear in history as another Helvidius Priscus, Lucius Piso or Thrasea Paetus.<sup>45</sup> One wonders what Tacitus felt about his friend's request. Tacitus makes clear in the *Agricola* that at the time Baebius Massa was accused for *res repetundae* there was nothing to be feared from him.<sup>46</sup> This is not to

his letter does not even outline the actions of his consulship, Pliny narrates in detail his one act of glory.

<sup>42</sup> *PIR*<sup>2</sup> B 26.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 3.4.6.

<sup>44</sup> Herennius was afraid that Massa's property might be turned over to persons falsely claiming amends, and that thus the money might find its way back to Massa.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Tac. *Hist.* 4.4-9; *Ann.* 2.34; 13.49; 14.12, 48-49.

<sup>46</sup> Tac. *Agr.* 45. See also H. Furneaux and J. G. C. Anderson's edition of the *Agricola* (Oxford 1922) 159-60.

mention the highly suspect charge of *maiestas*.<sup>47</sup> Pliny says no more about what happened to the charge probably because there was nothing more to say. Finally, Tacitus who like Pliny had led a passive existence under Domitian but who unlike his friend admitted as much would certainly see in Pliny's request an attempt to have himself represented as something other than what he had been.<sup>48</sup>

Pliny would also seem to have had grave doubts as to whether Tacitus was aware of or would include on his own judgement such a tale. He is not willing to rely upon Tacitus' use of the *diurna acta*<sup>49</sup> as a source, and he states in various ways how anxious he is for Tacitus as a friend to narrate the episode. The sincere expression, moreover, of strong desire that Tacitus include the episode in his *Histories* is also Pliny's artful excuse for narrating the account himself. In reality the narration of the incident has nothing to do with Tacitus' granting the petition. Pliny asks, moreover, that Tacitus amplify the whole account, but he himself has done a very good job of making into something glorious an action that seems to have entailed little or no danger.

It appears, therefore, that Pliny, not at all sure that Tacitus intended to narrate the incident, or that he would even comply with his request to do so, decided to take no chances. Cicero in his letter to Luceius, with which we know that Pliny was quite familiar, is of great aid to us here (*Fam.* 5.12.8):

Quod si a te non impetro, [his request for a history of his consulship] hoc est, si quae te res impediērit (neque enim fas esse arbitror quicquam me rogantem abs te non impetrare), cogar fortasse facere, quod non nulli saepe reprehendunt, scribam ipse de me, multorum tamen exemplo et clarorum virorum.

Pliny has done just this,<sup>50</sup> and in spite of his protestation that the *amplificatio* should not exceed the truth, he has, nevertheless, just

<sup>47</sup> Pliny is not above reproach in his critical attitude towards charges of *maiestas* under Domitian: "crimina maiestatis in harena colligebat [Domitian]" (*Pan.* 33). Cf. Suet. *Dom.* 10.1.

<sup>48</sup> On Pliny's efforts to create a false impression of what was actually his retiring behavior under Domitian see: Henderson (above, note 10) 13-14; M. Hammond, "Pliny the Younger's Views on Government," *HSCP* 49 (1938) 130; A. C. Andrews, "Pliny the Younger, Conformist," *CJ* 34 (1938) 150-51.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 5.13(14). 8; Tac. *Ann.* 16.22. For Tacitus' use of the *acta diurna urbis* as a source of information see Furneaux (above, note 39) Intro. 18-19.

<sup>50</sup> Kroll and Schuster believe that in most cases the persons addressed in the letters bear no significance as to the contents of the epistles. Thus Pliny's request in this letter to Tacitus may be interpreted as a mere device, not to be taken seriously but



as Cicero himself desired, succeeded well in making the deeds appear "pluscula maiora quam concedit veritas."<sup>51</sup>

Finally, there is Pliny's famous letter dealing with his uncle's death in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius (*Ep.* 6.16). There is no need to rehearse the well-known contents of the epistle. It is rather our concern to view the account as something more than what Pliny says it is, source material for the *Histories* of Tacitus. If, moreover, the letter was composed with something more in mind than the conveyance of information to a friend, then we have our finest example of Pliny's experimentation with writing history.

Towards the end of this epistle Pliny, having finished his account of his uncle's death, says: "Interim Miseni ego et mater — sed nihil ad historiam, nec tu aliud quam de exitu eius scire voluisti" (6.16.21). We may take this not only as a hint to Tacitus that the author would enjoy relating his personal reminiscences of the eruption, a hint apparently taken by Tacitus,<sup>52</sup> but also as a part of Pliny's technique to make his historical narratives appear informal, here mere *commentarii*,<sup>53</sup> and thus more in accordance with the epistolary form. In reality, the words, in relation to the letter as a whole, are somewhat inane. Our author would never have spoiled the literary unity of the epistle by introducing another long topic foreign to his subject. In *Ep.* 6.20, moreover, where Pliny does describe to Tacitus his personal experiences in the great disaster, he states that such a topic is not suitable to the genre of history, and that he hopes it is worthy of the epistle (6.20.20).<sup>54</sup>

Also at the end of his letter on his uncle's death Pliny remarks in the manner of Thucydides that he has faithfully related either what he saw personally or what was reported to him immediately after the disaster "cum maxime vera memorantur. . . ." Pliny continues: "Tu potissima excerpes: aliud est enim epistulam, aliud historiam, aliud amico, aliud omnibus scribere" (*Ep.* 6.16.22). When we have finished reading such a magnificent narration of a past event, it appears all the more senseless for Pliny to insist with us that this is nothing more than a purely personal letter between friends, that it does not hope to be anything more than an answer to a friend's request for information. There is, indeed, a great

allowing Pliny to narrate his own account of the episode. Kroll (above, note 19) 238–39; M. Schuster, *Burs. Jahresber.* 221 (1929) 53–54.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.3 (the quotation has been slightly modified).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 6.20.1.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Cic. *Fam.* 5.12.10.

<sup>54</sup> This latter comment is a strained attempt at modesty.

difference between writing a work of history and a single letter treating one historical event. If, however, you compose such a letter with great stylistic care and publish it for all to read and enjoy, then there is no longer any real literary distinction between the narration in the letter and the narration of the same incident in a history. Tacitus in his own account for his own stylistic purposes might leave out some of the things narrated by Pliny, but Pliny's account as it stands is a literary whole which, being a masterpiece, cannot be seriously thought of either by author or by reader as just so much source material. Pliny understands well the proprieties of history and of the epistle, and it is only because he is so thoroughly conscious of these distinctions that he minimizes his own literary efforts when he has treated in the letter *aliquid supra naturam epistulae*.<sup>55</sup>

In order to appreciate fully just what Pliny has really accomplished in this letter we must first remind ourselves that while for us the main interest of the letter may be the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, this was neither the purpose of the epistle nor the intention of either Pliny or Tacitus. As Pliny makes amply clear at the very beginning and end of his narration, this is the account of the death of a great man (6.16.1; cf. 6.16.21):

Petis, ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris possis. Gratias ago; nam video morti eius, si celebretur a te, immortalem gloriam esse propositam.<sup>56</sup>

The fact that such a great man died under such dramatic circumstances made it extremely attractive to Tacitus to include an account within his *Histories*. For it is when Tacitus relates the dramatic death of a great man that he becomes excessively literary, even sensational. Consider in the *Histories* the death-scene of Otho, and in the *Annals*, the deaths of men like Seneca.<sup>57</sup> Pliny himself understood the literary possibilities, and admirably enough he has given us a death-scene which in style and content is exactly comparable to the death-scenes in Tacitus mentioned above. Pliny places his

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Quint. *Inst.* 9.4.19 f. Quintilian distinguishes between "oratio vineta atque contexta," and the "soluta, qualis in sermone et epistulis," except when these latter "aliquid supra naturam suam tractant, ut de philosophia, de re publica, similibus."

<sup>56</sup> The words *exitus* and the *gloria* therefore are peculiarly applicable in the literature of the Silver Age to the deaths of great men. H. W. Traub, "Death and Fame in Silver Latin Literature" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, 1954) 137-41, 262-68.

<sup>57</sup> Tac. *Hist.* 2.46-50; *Ann.* 15.60-64.

emphasis upon the resolution of his uncle in the face of danger, his rational calmness as exemplified by his final words and deeds, his kindness to others, and the dramatic details of his last hours. We see the indefatigable scholar steering a direct course towards the point of danger and calmly dictating his observations of the phenomenon which is destined to bring about his death. Pliny the Elder so truly takes a nap in the midst of danger that the slaves standing outside of his room hear the snores of the great man within.<sup>58</sup> In short, Pliny has done a particular kind of historical narration in the exact manner of a great historian.<sup>59</sup>

To be sure Tacitus had asked his friend to send him source material for his history, and Pliny had complied only too gladly. Here was a golden opportunity for him to enter into friendly rivalry with his great literary colleague.<sup>60</sup> Pliny, who in imitating particular passages and phrases of Tacitus liked to try to outdo them,<sup>61</sup> could here emulate on a larger but less detailed scale the technique and literary flavor of Tacitean death-scenes. Roman citizens in reading both Pliny's account of his uncle's death and Tacitus' version of the same event might in the manner of the good citizen at the games be in doubt as to which narrative was worthy of Pliny and which worthy of Tacitus (cf. *Ep.* 9.23.2-3).

In summary, it may be said that Pliny in certain of his letters narrates in the manner of an historian individual events taken from the past, and that in this respect he stands apart from the epistolary practice of Cicero and Seneca.<sup>62</sup> The causes for such an unwonted

<sup>58</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 2.49; Plut. *Cat. min.* 70; *Otho* 15-18.

<sup>59</sup> R. M. Haywood, "The Strange Death of the Elder Pliny," *CW* 46 (1952) 1-3, has caught well the essential points of Pliny's narration: its vividness in composition, its unfactual character, its Tacitean flavor. All of these qualities are to be expected of the literary death-scene, even the Tacitean flavor. Death-scenes were a popular element in the literature of the day: Traub (above, note 56) 2-4, 301-10. That this epistle represents Pliny's as well as Tacitus' interest in the literary death-scene seems to be a more sensible view of the letter than the attempt of F. Lillge to make it conform to the basic structure of an Athenian tragedy: "Die literarische Form der Briefe Plinius des jüngeren über den Ausbruch des Vesuvius," *Sokrates* 6 (1918) 209-34, 273-97.

<sup>60</sup> The thought that source material might prove to be superior to any literary piece (a history) derived from it is not a strange idea to Latin literature. Cf. Cicero's famous remarks on Caesar's *commentarii*: Cic. *Brut.* 262.

<sup>61</sup> This has been admirably demonstrated by R. T. Bruère: "Tacitus and Pliny's *Panegyricus*," *CP* 49 (1954) 161-79. It is also true of Pliny's imitations of Cicero: F. Zucker, "Plinius epist. viii 24, ein Denkmal antiker Humanität," *Philologus* 84 (1928) 209-32, and especially 219 ff.

<sup>62</sup> It should, however, be borne in mind that although Cicero himself did not treat of history in his letters, nevertheless, to Pliny and his contemporaries that great writer

use of the epistle stem in the main from the fact that Pliny was greatly interested in the genre of history, and hoped one day to compose a work of that nature which would be another lasting monument to his name. Another contributing factor is to be seen in Pliny's concern that some of his letters, like many of Cicero's, be exciting recitals of matters mainly political.

The literary epistle as employed by Pliny provided an opportunity to try his hand at narrating briefly separate historical incidents. These same letters, to change slightly a phrase applied by Pliny to the literary creation of a friend, were both in form and content *inter epistulam historiamque mediae*.<sup>63</sup> Because, however, he was of a conventional nature and acutely aware of the proprieties of things, Pliny was careful to have these same efforts at history conform to the usages of letter-writing.<sup>64</sup> The means by which he accomplished this, together with the manner in which he narrated the historical accounts, reaffirms the fact that one of the most outstanding characteristics of Pliny as an author is his great feeling for and interest in literary forms.

Even Pliny's choice of subject matter for historical treatment confirms this opinion. If we consider the material used by Pliny, we see that the main theme involved in almost every such letter is glorious death or perilous heroism under former principates. These are basic themes to the *Histories* and *Annals* as well, especially in those parts where Tacitus deals with the same periods that concern Pliny, the periods of the *mali principes*. There are also scattered through the letters of Pliny a number of notices concerning other authors of historical works who in treating former periods of despotism under the Empire laid stress on the same approach.<sup>65</sup> The fame and popularity of these works and especially the primacy of Tacitus must have aroused Pliny's attention and admiration. If Pliny was unable to compose a history that in sustained greatness might approach the grandeur of Tacitus, at least in his separate and select endeavors he could rival his friend even in certain feats where the historian shone most brightly.

gave in his letters fascinating views of past eras and past events; and Cicero was Pliny's ideal.

<sup>63</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 5.5.3: "tres libros . . . inter sermonem historiamque medios."

<sup>64</sup> Andrews (above, note 48) 143-54.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. Plin. *Ep.* 4.20, 5.5, 8.12, 9.27.