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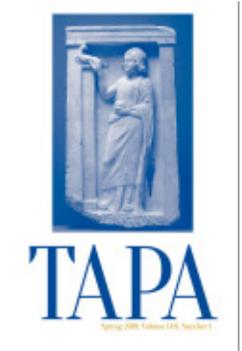
Model or Anti-model?: Pliny on Uncle Pliny

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Model or Anti-model? Pliny on Uncle Pliny*

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SUMMARY: It is often assumed that Pliny the Younger refers to his uncle and adoptive father, Pliny the Elder, with unquestioning admiration. I argue that there is instead a deep ambivalence in the Younger's references to the Elder, especially in the triptych *Ep.* 3.5, 6.16, and 6.20, but also elsewhere in the *Epistles*. Far from trying to construct a literary monument to his uncle's memory, Pliny deliberately chips away at that ideal image. In his subtle critiques of the Elder, Pliny justifies his rejection of his uncle's choices in life and literature and instead crafts his *own* literary monument.

INTRODUCTION

TONE IS NOTORIOUSLY HARD TO GAUGE IN THE WRITTEN WORD, AS ANYONE who has ever sent an ill-judged e-mail knows—*experto crede*—and this is only more true when we are separated from the written word in question by a vast gulf of time and language and culture. When reading the *Epistles* of the Younger Pliny, scholars have tended to assume that he refers to his famous uncle in a tone of unquestioning reverence.¹ The assumption is not unreason-

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¹ E.g., Berry 2008, esp. 302–7 for a traditional reading of *Ep.* 6.16 that “publicises and commemorates the noble actions of one Pliny and the literary brilliance of another” (302). Another prominent instance is Lefèvre 2009: 123–41, arguing that the Elder is “ein unerreichbares Vorbild” (123) and emphasizing that the Younger fails to live up to the Elder's example; so too Jones 2001: 32: “The uncle sets the standard . . . the youth

able. Pliny the Elder, after all, was Pliny the Younger's mother's brother and his adoptive father, a famous man of letters and public service. Given Roman cultural expectations, Pliny the Elder could well have been *the* model for his ambitious nephew, and he certainly could not be the target for his nephew's unveiled criticism.² And yet on closer inspection, as I hope to show, this supposed unswerving and unstinting piety is not so clear.³ The Elder may have served as a model for the youthful Pliny; for the mature Pliny, he clearly did not. The mature Pliny of the *Epistles* has chosen to deviate from his uncle's example and prescriptions in life and literature. There is a profound ambiva-

understandably falls short of his uncle's example." Pliny's admiration and heroization of his uncle is to be found in, e.g., Bradley 2010: 394; Ripoll 2003: 71–74; Zehnacker 2002: 445–48; Radicke 1997: 452; Van der Paardt 1991: 61–62; Schönberger 1990: 528; Copony 1987: 215, 228; Gigante 1979: 328; Sallmann 1979: 210, 215–18; Barrett 1972: 39; Bütler 1970: 32, 80–84; Lillge 1918: 273; Gierig 1802: 42–43; Catanaeus 1510: 111. Riemer 2005 and Beck 2013 both view the Younger Pliny as writing an apologia for his uncle in the Vesuvius letters, perhaps in response to negative rumors then circulating (cf. Suet. fr. 80 Reifferscheid, re-edited by Reeve 2011; further Sallmann 1979: 217, Wolff 2003: 72; and n. 60 below). Henderson 2002a on 3.5 similarly sees the Younger as “mythologizing” the Elder and deeply empathetic with him (88–89), composing a “tribute” aiming at his “immortalization” (95); so too Henderson 2002b. Cova 2001: 55 notes that Pliny the Younger's “grande ammirazione” for the Elder is the “opinione ricevuta” (seemingly his own in Cova 1981: 328).

² Pliny himself hints at this worldview at, e.g., *Ep.* 8.14.6 *suus cuique parens pro magistro, aut cui parens non erat maximus quisque et uetustissimus pro parente*; cf. 5.8.4, *Cic. Off.* 1.116, and Bernstein 2008.

³ Some scholars have taken steps in this direction. Haywood noted some of the oddities in the Vesuvius letters, but still thought that Pliny “intended to influence the reader to believe that his uncle showed himself a hero in a great emergency” (1952: 3); so too Martin 1979. Eco 1990 showed that a story critical of the Elder Pliny *could* be extracted from *Ep.* 6.16 and 6.20, but argued instead that Pliny the Younger masterfully crafted a tribute to his uncle out of unpromising material. More recently, Gibson and Morello 2012: 105 have pointed out that in book 3 “Pliny engages with the limitations of the Elder Pliny as a potential model for his more mature self” (cf. 123), but they do not discuss details, and even they are inclined to see the Vesuvius letters as portraying the Elder's bravery (e.g., 114); so too Gibson 2011: 194 speaks of Pliny's “deference towards his Uncle” in the Vesuvius letters. My work here is most complementary to Cova 2001, who really does suggest that Pliny sometimes covertly criticizes his uncle; and yet Cova argues that Pliny is making the Elder into a new kind of hero, a “hero of *studia*” (66). He does not read the criticisms in the Vesuvius letters in any detail, nor does he touch on 3.5, and I think we can push Pliny's covert critique much further. Méthy 2007: 424–27 detects a similar ambiguity in 3.5; so too briefly Bernstein 2008: 205.

lence in his mentions of and allusions to the Elder Pliny; far from writing simply to eulogize his uncle and build a literary monument to his memory, the Younger seems to have deliberately chipped away at that ideal image. Whatever else he may be doing in his *Epistles*, he is always crafting his *own* literary monument: Pliny's letters are always about Pliny himself.⁴ In painting this particular picture of his uncle, the Younger Pliny is implicitly justifying his own rejection of his uncle's literary and life choices, and throughout he invites the discerning reader to activate the full meaning of the text.

I argue for Pliny's ambivalence through a close reading of *Ep.* 3.5 (on the Elder's literary works and daily routine), 6.16 (on the Elder's death after the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius), and 6.20 (on the Younger's activities during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius). These are highly polished, closely connected, thoroughly literary letters that ask to be read as a triptych, and in them we see apparent praise mixed with covert critique.⁵ I will likewise make brief mention of several other significant presences and absences of the Elder Pliny in the Younger's *Epistles*. Pliny's ambivalence toward his uncle is ultimately just a particularly marked example of a general tendency in his letters to undercut supposed models of the older generation in favor of—at least implicitly—himself.

EP. 3.5: PLINY THE ELDER'S LIFE AND WORKS

In *Ep.* 3.5 the Younger Pliny nominally sets out to answer a request from his addressee, Baebius Maecet, to provide a catalog of the Elder's works.⁶ Pliny

⁴ Baraz 2012 is a good example of how Pliny himself is always central in the *Epistles*, even when at first glance he might not appear to be; similarly Noreña 2011 on the *Panegyricus*. The notion that self-fashioning is a primary project of the *Epistles* underpins much recent work on Pliny; see Gibson and Whitton 2016: 32–34 and Häger 2015 with further references.

⁵ I am skeptical on the question of whether Pliny deliberately arranged all nine books of private letters in a “grand design” with thematic cycles running throughout, an approach associated most strongly with Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello, e.g., Gibson and Morello 2012. Nevertheless, the pairing of 6.16 and 6.20 is of obvious significance, and even if 3.5 does not look forward to those letters, they certainly can look backwards to it. It is perhaps striking that although the fact that the Elder is dead is mentioned in 3.5.7 in a book with several obituaries, no details are given until 6.16; see unpersuasively Beck 2013: 21–22. Berry 2008: 301 is too reductive in claiming that the pairing of 6.20 with 6.16 “diminishes the function of 6.16 as a pair to 3.5.”

⁶ On this letter see esp. Henderson 2002a: 69–102 and Henderson 2002b, as well as Gibson and Morello 2012: 115–23, Lefèvre 2009: 123–26, and Méthy 2007: 424–27.

does so, but he self-consciously wanders far beyond the bounds of his original commission, further providing a comprehensive description of his uncle's daily routine. This letter, perhaps even more so than the famous Vesuvius pair, has exerted an enormous influence on posterity's image of the Elder.⁷ Pliny the Younger is obsessed with daily routines, describing also Spurrinna's in *Ep.* 3.1 as well as his own in 9.36 and 9.40, and all of these letters must be read and assessed together. I will first consider *Ep.* 3.5 itself, and then compare it with its congeners. Although this has gone largely unnoticed, Pliny's portrayal of the Elder is not warm; he neither shows affection for his uncle nor receives any, and many of his apparently complimentary remarks are left-handed at best.

The first portion of the letter fulfills its ostensible mandate, providing a list of *Opera omnia Pliniana* in order of their composition.⁸ The massive *Naturalis Historia* is the crown jewel—perhaps fittingly, given its own list-like nature. It is admitted to be a work of great learning (*eruditum*, 3.5.6), but acknowledgement of the Elder's erudition is perhaps the only piece of unalloyed praise in the letter.⁹ Even here the *opus* is accompanied by two ambiguous descriptors: it is *diffusum* and *uarium*, each of which could have a negative interpretation. Is the *Natural History* a loose, baggy monster? Pliny walks a fine line with this description, as he constantly will in his discussions of the Elder, providing the necessary materials but allowing readers to do much of the construction work.

With the catalog out of the way, Pliny deftly moves into a description of how the Elder managed such a prodigious output (*Ep.* 3.5.7):

Miraris quod tot uolumina multaque in his tam scrupulosa homo occupatus absoluerit?

Are you amazed that a busy man could complete so many volumes, and many of them with such careful attention to detail?¹⁰

This question provides the hook on which Pliny hangs his entire digression about his uncle's daily routine, although it is perhaps misleading to describe as a digression what takes up the vast majority of the letter. In passing we should note that Pliny has already sounded a quiet note of criticism amid the sym-

⁷Carey 2003: 5–7.

⁸On this order, see Gibson 2011: 195–205; cf. Sherwin-White 1966: 216.

⁹Cf. 3.5.8 *acre ingenium* and esp. 3.5.3 *hunc . . . pari ingenio curaque composuit*, implicitly ranking the Elder above Silius Italicus in nearby 3.7.5 (*scribebat carmina maiore cura quam ingenio*). So too 6.16.7 *eruditissimo uiro*. Gellius shared this appraisal (*NA* 9.16.1): *aetatis suae doctissimus*.

¹⁰Translations are my own. Pliny is cited from the Oxford Classical Text of Roger Mynors.

phony of apparent praise: the Elder wrote *tot uolumina* (“so many volumes”), with emphasis firmly on his voluminous output (not, say, *opera*), *multaque in his tam scrupulosa* (“and many of them with such careful attention to detail”).¹¹ While the *-que* might appear simply to tack on a further compliment, it is in fact almost a corrective; of that voluminous output, “much” of it was careful work, but not, say, “most” or even “the majority.” Perhaps not everything that the Elder wrote lived up to the Younger’s high stylistic standards.¹²

The praise becomes even more mixed as we learn about the contents of the Elder’s daily planner. He is said to be endowed with *summa uigilantia* (“the greatest wakefulness,” 3.5.8), a virtue appropriate to someone who had programmatically declared *uita uigilia est* (“life is watchfulness,” Plin. *HN* pr. 19). From the Vulcanalia—August 23—onwards the Elder works by night.¹³ Pliny clearly counts such vigilance as a virtue; he praises Trajan for the same quality (*Pan.* 49.8). But the Elder’s virtuous *uigilantia* is almost immediately undercut (*Ep.* 3.5.8):

Erat sane somni paratissimi, non numquam etiam inter ipsa studia instantis et deserentis.

¹¹ Cf. later 3.5.17 *tot ista uolumina peregit*, where redoubled emphasis on voluminous output is perhaps coupled with a note of additional depreciation (*ista*). The word *uolumen* refers to physical books (*OLD* s.v.); so elsewhere in the *Epistles* (1.20.5; 3.5.5; 3.18.1; 5.10.3; 7.26.4; 8.15.1). Horace’s critique of Lucilius’s quick and copious output is a useful comparandum (*Hor. Sat.* 1.4.6–13).

¹² Cf. *Ep.* 3.5.18, where the Elder’s compositional practice is described with the word *instantia* (“haste”). If *haec* in *Ep.* 5.8.10 refers to *historia*, then the Elder’s methods may be suited to history—a genre featuring *instantia* (*Ep.* 5.8.10, the word’s only other occurrence in the *Epistles*) and pleasing no matter how it is written (*historia quoquo modo scripta delectat*, *Ep.* 5.8.4)—but not at all to Pliny’s own preferred field of action, oratory. On the vexing problem of whether *haec* = *historia* and *illa* = *oratio* in *Ep.* 5.8.9–11, see Marchesi 2008: 165–68 with extensive bibliography, and briefly Woodman 2012: 234.

¹³ Mount Vesuvius is usually thought to have erupted August 24, i.e., the day after the Vulcanalia, based on *Ep.* 6.16.4. Some archaeological research has admittedly called into question the transmitted text; see Rolandi et al. 2007, Stefani 2006. But if Pliny’s text is correct, it is remarkable that in both 3.5 and 6.16 we get a rare mention of a specific date (Riggsby 2003: 180n25 notes dates only in 1.7.4, 8.6.13, 9.39.2), and that the dates coincide so nicely. Gibson and Morello 2012: 111–12 well dilate on some of the implications of this, including not least the fact that the Younger does not make any explicit connection between a religious celebration of Vulcan and the eruption of a “volcano.” This mention of dates could serve to join 3.5 to 6.16, or, since the Elder really did die on August 24, Pliny could be invoking the Elder’s death without having 6.16 specifically in mind. On the Elder’s *lucubratio* see Ker 2004: 232–36.

He was admittedly constantly dozing off, more than a few times even waking up with his head on his books.

Why does the Younger Pliny feel the need to add this detail? Not only is it unflattering; it directly calls into question the *summa uigilantia* that had just been ascribed to the Elder, the quality that he himself seemed so proud of. If *sane* were translated more prejudicially—“of course,” say—the remark could have even more bite. Regardless, this depreciatory aside could have easily been omitted; instead it punctures the Elder’s virtue on a point of personal pride. Furthermore, it shows that the Elder signally failed to meet the criteria for profitable *lucubratio* laid out by Pliny’s teacher Quintilian: one must enjoy good health (*bona ualetudo*, *Inst.* 10.3.26) and come to the task fresh and rested (*integri ac refecti*), for “fatigue is likewise a great obstacle to good writing” (*obstat enim diligentiae scribendi etiam fatigatio*, *Inst.* 10.3.27).¹⁴ A reference to the *Institutio Oratoria* is possible here, or a reminiscence of Pliny’s youth on the benches at Quintilian’s school.¹⁵ In any case, the Elder’s sleepiness will prove a recurrent theme.¹⁶

The fundamental reason that the Elder could get so much done was that he devoted every waking moment to *studia*. He was always reading or being read to, and he famously found no book so bad that it did not have some good (*dicere . . . solebat nullum esse librum tam malum ut non aliqua parte prodesset*, *Ep.* 3.5.10). He was moreover a speed reader, a man who distinctly favored quantity over quality (cf., e.g., *HN* pr. 17), and even at dinner-time his reading was done *cursim* (3.5.11)—“quickly,” to be sure, but also with a note

¹⁴ Pliny the Elder himself insists that he gets enough sleep for his health, but no more (*HN* pr. 18 *cum somno ualetudinem computamus*).

¹⁵ Quintilian also inveighs against those who compile “raw material” and work it up (*Inst.* 10.3.17), as well as those who dictate to amanuenses (10.3.19–22), both eerily accurate descriptions of the Elder’s procedures in this letter. Indeed, Quintilian’s *Institutio* may have eclipsed the Elder’s own work on the education of the orator, in which he *oratorum ab incunabulis instituit et perficit* (*Ep.* 3.5.5; cf. too Quint. *Inst.* 1 pr. 6 *non inutiles fore libri uidebantur quos ab ipsis dicendi uelut incunabulis per omnes quae modo aliquid oratori futuro conferant artis ad summam eius operis perducere festinabimus*; 9 *oratorum autem instituiimus illum perfectum*).

¹⁶ Note that it has already perhaps been alluded to indirectly when Pliny described the inspiration for the Elder’s *Bellorum Germaniae XX*, viz. the appearance of Drusus Nero in a dream (*Ep.* 3.5.4; see Marincola 1997: 47–48 for speculation on the role of this dream in the Elder’s work); see too *Ep.* 3.5.19. Lefèvre 2009: 124 reads the description of the Elder’s *uigilantia* here as sincere praise, ignoring the repeated references to sleep.

of “cursorily,” i.e., “superficially.”¹⁷ Pliny the Younger, by contrast, espoused an entirely different philosophy of reading: “a man should read deeply, not widely” (*aiunt enim multum legendum esse, non multa, Ep. 7.9.15*).¹⁸ Indeed *Ep. 7.9* is obsessed with careful reading to the point of memorization and with sedulous written composition (e.g., 7.9.3). Pliny the Elder has no time for deep meditation on the best *auctores*, and he likewise composes in haste (*instantia*, 3.5.18; cf. *HN* pr. 12–15).

The Elder’s obsession with staying ahead of time’s winged chariot reaches a sort of *reductio ad absurdum* in the anecdote that once one of his friends stopped a *lector* as he was reading because he had mispronounced something. The Elder cuttingly remarks, “Couldn’t you understand him? Then why did you try to make him repeat himself? We’ve lost ten further lines thanks to this interruption of yours” (“*intellexeras nempe? . . . cur ergo reuocabas? decem amplius uersus hac tua interpellatione perdidimus*,” *Ep. 3.5.12*). The loss of ten lines is minuscule and hardly worth complaining about, but more importantly Pliny the Elder’s own interruption only causes more lost time and so vitiates the very sentence he is speaking. When he is then described as being endowed with *tanta parsimonia temporis* (*Ep. 3.5.13*), we have to wonder whether this “frugality” is really “niggardliness,” that is, whether it can really be a good thing.¹⁹ Pliny the Elder certainly comes across as a cranky older man, in strong contrast to the generally cheerful impression we form of his nephew.²⁰

Even when the Elder traveled, he focused solely on literary pursuits (*in itinere quasi solutus ceteris curis, huic uni uacabat, Ep. 3.5.15*; cf. 6.16.10). He kept a slave always at his side with a book and a notebook, *cuius manus hieme manicis muniebantur* (“whose hands were protected with long sleeves in the winter”), all so that he would not lose a moment of time for *studia* even in bitterly cold weather. I think we are meant to see a bit of irony in the Elder’s “care” for his literary slave; in the repeated *m*-sound we may even hear the poor man’s stammering to speak in the freezing cold. The Younger, by contrast, takes real care of his household; he is deeply concerned with the health of his

¹⁷ *OLD* s.v. *b*. The adverb is used three times elsewhere in the *Epistles*, always with at least as much emphasis on superficiality as speed (1.20.2; 4.9.23; 5.14.8).

¹⁸ On this letter see Keeline 2013; briefly Cova 2001: 65.

¹⁹ Henderson 2002a: 82 (≈ 2002b: 270) translates *tanta erat parsimonia temporis* as “now that is what can only be called the ‘Time Scrooge!’” Henderson is (I think) joking, but I really do see the Scrooge-like connotations of the phrase.

²⁰ An impression of Pliny that is admittedly not always accurate; see Strunk 2012, Gibson 2015.

own “literary slave” Zosimus, packing him off to take the cure in Egypt and elsewhere (*Ep.* 5.19).²¹

Furthermore, even in Rome the Elder traveled in a *sella* (*Romae quoque sella uehebatur*, 3.5.15). An innocuous statement? On the contrary: the *sella*, along with its relative the *lectica*, is a deeply problematic symbol of Roman luxury. While Jared Hudson briefly dismisses Pliny’s working in a litter as “somewhat eccentric, but not inappropriate,” I think instead that it has to be read in the context of the constant critiques of such transport that Hudson discusses in the rest of his chapter.²² Pliny clearly shared the traditional Roman distrust of litters (cf. *Pan.* 22, 24). It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that in the city he himself preferred to walk. But it is further striking that the Younger sets up an implied comparison between himself doing the right thing—walking in the city²³—and his uncle doing the wrong thing, and then underscores it by recounting how his uncle actually upbraided him for his entirely appropriate actions (*Ep.* 3.5.16):

Repeto me correptum ab eo, cur ambularem: “poteras” inquit “has horas non perdere.”

I remember how he scolded me for walking: “You could’ve,” he said, “not wasted these hours.”

The imperfect subjunctive could represent some specific instance of walking, but it more likely refers to the Younger’s general mode of transportation. Indeed, a reader familiar with the Elder’s own work might remember his criticism of contemporary litters and the like: “we walk on borrowed feet” (*alienis pedibus ambulamus*) and “we have nothing of our own save luxuriousness” (*HN* 29.19). Such an intertext would point up the Elder’s hypocrisy, but regardless, Pliny would not have been proud of his uncle’s behavior in this department and would be all the more eager to show his own contrasting and appropriate conduct.

It is further striking that, in this supposed testimonial to his uncle, Pliny only reports anecdotes that make him out to be an unfeeling drudge. Pliny the Younger, however, is perfectly capable of expressing warm feelings of af-

²¹ It is perhaps worth noting that Zosimus is a man who is twice described as exhibiting flawless *pronuntiatio* (5.19.3, 6), plainly a concern of Pliny’s (cf. 9.34), in contrast to the Elder’s flagrant disregard (3.5.12); cf. fleetingly Cova 2001: 64. See also Pliny’s remarks on the illness of his *lector* Encolpius at 8.1.2–3. On Pliny and slavery more generally see the references in Gibson and Morello 2012: 303.

²² Hudson 2013: 32–74, quote from p. 66.

²³ See O’Sullivan 2011: 73.

fection when they are merited, as famously toward his wife Calpurnia (*Ep.* 6.4, 7; 7.5),²⁴ but more relevantly toward other members of the Elder's generation. Of Corellius Rufus he can describe not only his admiration (*admiratione; admiratus sum*), but indeed his love (*diligere, Ep.* 4.17.4; cf. 3.3.1 *amauerim*).²⁵ Perhaps as importantly, he can report that others feel that way toward him: Verginius Rufus, for one, showed him the affection of a father (*ille mihi tutor relictus adfectum parentis exhibuit, Ep.* 2.1.8), and Pliny the Younger fully reciprocated (*illum non solum publice quantum admirabar tantum diligebam, Ep.* 2.1.7).²⁶ Pliny's love for others and their love for him is a pervasive theme in the collection.²⁷ Pliny the Elder, by contrast—the man who really did become Pliny's father, even if only by testamentary adoption²⁸—is never given such qualities, nor does Pliny ever report any affection toward him.²⁹

²⁴ See further Carlon 2009: 157–75.

²⁵ The catalog of praise continues (*Ep.* 4.17.6): *ille meus in petendis honoribus suffragator et testis, ille in incohandis deductor et comes, ille in gerendis consiliator et rector, ille denique in omnibus officiis nostris, quamquam et imbecillus et senior, quasi iuuenis et ualidus conspiciebatur.*

²⁶ For more on Verginius and Pliny, cf. Verginius's remark to Pliny reported at *Ep.* 2.1.9 “*etiam si filium haberem, tibi mandarem,*” as well as 9.19.5 *familiariter ab eo dilectus probatusque*, 9.19.2 *utrumque dilexi* (sc. *Frontinum et Verginium*). Pliny's despair at Verginius's death is expressed at *Ep.* 2.1.12. On Pliny's epistolary monument to Verginius, see further Klodt 2015.

²⁷ In addition to the instances mentioned above, Pliny loves or is loved at: (with forms of *diligo*) 1.14.1, 10; 1.22.1, 8; 2.13.5; 3.3.1; 3.9.8; 3.11.5; 3.15.2; 4.4.1; 4.15.4, 13; 4.21.3; 5.14.4; 6.8.1; 6.12.3; 6.29.1; 7.11.3; 7.16.1; 7.19.10; 7.20.7; 7.23.2; 7.24.2; 8.23.2; 10.87.1; 10.94.1; (with forms of *amo*) 1.10.2; 1.13.6; 1.16.1; 2.7.6; 2.9.5; 2.13.8; 3.2.4; 3.3.1, 5; 3.4.3; 3.9.8; 4.15.1, 12; 4.19.2, 6; 5.1.12; 5.5.1; 5.6.41 (his Tusculan villa); 6.8.2, 4; 6.26.2; 7.28.3; 8.4.8; 8.24.1 (the noun *amor*); 9.20.2; 9.22.1; 9.37.1. Sometimes Pliny refers to his addressee; sometimes he describes the feelings of or his feelings toward a third party. The frequency of affection elsewhere makes its absence in the case of the Elder all the more striking.

²⁸ The only evidence for the adoption is *Ep.* 5.8.5 (*per adoptionem pater*); Pliny's referring to the Elder as his “uncle” (*auunculus*) even during the latter's last days in the shadow of Vesuvius points to a testamentary adoption. See briefly Birley 2016: 52; Sherwin-White 1966: 70, 221. For the most up-to-date details on Pliny's life and career, see Whitton 2015a.

²⁹ The preserved post-adoption prosopographic records cannot easily be used as evidence of either Pliny's affection for his uncle or his disaffection; the onomastic evidence is collected in *PIR*² P 490 and discussed in Salomies 1992: 27–28, 44, 59–60. Note too that Pliny the Younger never credits his uncle with helping him in his own career, whereas he is fulsome in his praise of Corellius and Verginius for the help they gave him. Syme 1991: 508–10 implies that the Younger would have met Corellius and Verginius precisely because they were the Elder's friends.

The plain fact of the matter is that Pliny the Elder is represented as a workaholic. Even when he is at his villa he does not bother to exercise or even to take a moment to relax; he thought that any time not devoted to *studia* was time wasted (*Ep.* 3.5.16). He has no time for family—no wife or children—nor, apparently, for friends.³⁰ He is only concerned with pouring forth a flood of words, and they need not necessarily be polished or well chosen. In contrast to the Younger’s *non multa sed multum*, the Elder left one hundred and sixty notebooks of excerpts alone, all written in a tiny hand on both sides of the page (*commentarios . . . opisthographos quidem et minutissimis scriptos*, *Ep.* 3.5.17). He may at first appear a picture of diligence, but the practice of writing on both sides of a papyrus scroll was highly unusual and can only be taken as a further example of the Elder’s niggardly *parsimonia*.³¹ It may likewise indicate his general *scribendi cacoethes*, by contrast to the Younger’s more refined mode of composition, as with Juvenal’s biting remarks on the front and back effusions of poetasters (1.4–6).³²

Taken on its own, *Ep.* 3.5 paints an unflattering portrait. But it cannot just be viewed in isolation. By juxtaposing Pliny the Elder’s daily routine with that of Spurinna at the head of the same book, Pliny prompts us to compare the two.³³ The difference is stark: in contrast to Pliny’s grim portrayal of the Elder’s all-consuming dedication to work, he can say that he may never have spent a more pleasant time than he did at Spurinna’s villa (*nescio an ullum iucundius tempus exegerim, quam quo nuper apud Spurinnam fui*, 3.1.1). Indeed, he says quite explicitly that it is Spurinna whom he would like to emulate in his old age (*aemulari uelim*, 3.1.1; cf. *mihi . . . exemplum*, 3.1.11). Spurinna rests in bed for an hour after waking; he takes a three-mile walk (one doubts the Elder was capable of such a feat); he reads a book or speaks with friends, but

³⁰ Syme 1991: 510–11 conjectures that the Elder could have married at some point, but without evidence.

³¹ Sherwin-White 1966: 219: “This was a device of poverty, or as in the Elder’s case, due to a kink of eccentric meanness.” On the Elder’s working methods and “*commentarii opisthographi*,” see Dorandi 1986 with the correctives of Naas 1996, 2002: 109–17.

³² Indeed, if you believe that Pliny the Younger was intimately concerned with the aesthetic experience of books as physical objects, e.g., in ordering his letters—see esp. Whitton 2015b—then the Elder’s disregard for the physical object may reflect a disregard for its aesthetic and intellectual contents as well.

³³ Tables of their respective routines, based on Leach 2003: 164–65, can be found in Gibson and Morello 2012: 118. Henderson 2002a: 76–78, 200–2 (≈ 2002b: 265–67) compiles an extremely detailed series of verbal correspondences between 3.5 and 3.1. See further Cova 2001: 65–66, and very briefly Lefèvre 2009: 123.

by preference speaks with friends; his wife or a friend accompanies him for a drive. Even after the drive he gets out to walk another mile (3.1.4–7). It is only after all this activity that he retires to his room—in untrammelled silence and solitude—and writes. And what he writes is Greek and Latin lyric poetry (3.1.7)! Before bathing he exercises still more, either walking or tossing a ball, and he indulges in a bit of light reading before dinner (3.1.8). This is not a man given to *lucubratio*: unlike the Elder, who retired from dinner as early as possible to work (3.5.13), Spurinna’s dinner parties are carried on into the night in good fellowship. Furthermore, he is not stingy; the meal is served on Corinthian bronze (3.1.9).³⁴ The result? Spurinna has retained his physical and mental faculties into his seventy-seventh year. Pliny the Elder, by implicit contrast, died at the age of fifty-five, and his death was in a sense caused by overwork and excessive adherence to routine, as we shall see. Spurinna’s is the life that Pliny wants, albeit in retirement (3.1.11). In the meantime he has a career of public service ahead of him, just as did Spurinna—a career as a senator, unlike the Elder’s equestrian *cursus* (3.1.11–12).³⁵

Another important comparandum is Pliny the Younger’s own daily routine. Pliny ends the collection of private letters as we have it with a description of his routine; its placement in book nine perhaps reflects his growing self-confidence. Pliny too is extensively engaged in literary activity, but the pace is altogether more relaxed, and he specifically remarks that he does not obsess over exact times (*hora quarta uel quinta (neque enim certum dimensumque tempus), ut dies suasit . . .*, *Ep.* 9.36.3; cf. *non numquam ex hoc ordine aliqua mutantur*, 9.36.5). He finds plenty of room for exercise and conversation with friends (9.36.3–4). As for interruptions, by contrast to the Elder, for the Younger Pliny an occasional interruption is pleasant (*Ep.* 9.36.5):

Interueniunt amici ex proximis oppidis, partemque diei ad se trahunt interdumque lasso mihi opportuna interpellatione subueniunt.

Friends come to visit from nearby towns and take part of the day for themselves and sometimes help me with a well-timed interruption when I’m tired.

No complaining about lost lines and time here! Pliny the Younger furthermore finds time for hunting (admittedly equipped with notebooks; cf. *Ep.* 1.6) and dealing with his tenants (*Ep.* 9.36.6). He has, in sum, embraced a very different lifestyle from that of his uncle.

³⁴ For the details of Corinthian bronze, see Jacobson and Weitzman 1992.

³⁵ Gibson and Morello 2012: 107 rightly advert to the Elder’s equestrian status; so too Henderson 2002a: 98 (≈ 2002b: 279).

The Younger's winter routine is similar, although he often finds himself preparing for court cases and so obliged to work after dinner and even into part of the extended winter nights (*Ep.* 9.40.2). Again, by the culminating book of the collection Pliny can say (*Ep.* 9.32.1):

Ipse uitam iucundissimam (id est, otiosissimam) uiuo.

I'm living the most pleasant—that is to say, the most leisurely (*otiosissimam*)—life.

The Elder, if he had any *otium* at all (*si quid otii*, *Ep.* 3.5.10)—the implication being that such occasions were rare—devoted those precious moments to making notes and excerpts (*adnotabat excerpebatque*, *Ep.* 3.5.10). The Younger may at times be forced to focus on pressing business, but he well recognizes the deep pleasure of relaxing and “doing nothing” (*illud iners quidem, iucundum tamen nihil agere nihil esse*, *Ep.* 8.9.1). Indeed, as he says in a different but perhaps programmatic context, “it is pleasant to vary work with *otium*, *otium* with work” (*iucundum . . . laborem otio otium labore uariare*, *Ep.* 8.8.4; cf. 7.3.4, 7.7.2). If Pliny's *otium* is admittedly *studiosum* (*Ep.* 1.22.11), and if he is obsessed with how best to use such periods of rest, he nevertheless creates an entirely different impression from that of his workaholic uncle. Indeed, he says so explicitly: “I am thoroughly lazy by comparison to him” (*qui si comparer illi sum desidiosissimus*, *Ep.* 3.5.19; cf. 1.2.3, 1.6.1, 1.8.2, 2.2.2, 4.16.3). This “indolence” is not necessarily a bad thing,³⁶ and Pliny is here positively inviting us to make the comparison.

Pliny the Elder is not the model for the mature Pliny the Younger. While the Younger does wish to produce literary works, he has many other ambitions besides. He has friends and an affectionate relationship with his wife; he wants children (*Ep.* 10.2). Unlike his parsimonious uncle, he is generous with his time and money. He is concerned to take care of his body, which, if Trajan's diminutive is any guide (*corpusculi tui*, 10.18.1), lacks the obesity of a man who never walked.³⁷ He pursues a long-term career as an advocate (cf. the Elder's implicitly short career in the courts, *Ep.* 3.5.7 with Sherwin-White

³⁶ On *otium* in Pliny see esp. Gibson and Morello 2012: 169–99, who well note “Pliny's self-confessed propensity for idleness” (170); see too their p. 300 with further references.

³⁷ The force of the diminutive is admittedly hard to gauge; while it is used generally of small bodies, it often carries a notion of pity or affection (so *Ep.* 6.4.2, of Calpurnia recovering from an ailment). See *TLL* 4.1025.75–1026.30. Regardless of nuance in Trajan's usage, it is hard to imagine the word used of a fat man.

1966 ad loc.), and he is proud to have entered the senate rather than remaining an equestrian. Above all, Pliny the Younger seeks a *uarietas* that seems never to have interested his uncle. In painting a picture of Pliny the Elder's routines and cast of mind, Pliny the Younger is, as ever, furnishing us with the materials to evaluate his own life and character. His subtle critiques of his uncle's way of life amount to subtle hints of praise for his own.

EP. 6.16: PLINY THE ELDER'S DEATH

So much for Pliny the Elder's life. I turn now to that other signal moment that shaped the Elder's image for posterity, his death in the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius.³⁸ This is one of Pliny's most famous letters, and it is usually read as entirely eulogistic of Pliny the Elder; he is often called a hero.³⁹ In fact, however, it is deeply problematic, as has been recognized since at least Richard Haywood's brief article in 1952. Umberto Eco famously claimed that Pliny the Younger had artfully papered over the cracks in his uncle's conduct; that is to say, although the Elder behaved inappropriately, the reader must work hard to excavate that from Pliny's artful reporting of "just the facts."⁴⁰ I think we can push further both the Elder's troublesome behavior and Pliny's artful reportage. What if, instead of concealing the Elder's flaws and faults, the Younger is in fact deliberately exposing them to view? Instead of reporting the details, he could easily have suppressed unflattering information, or at least explained it otherwise, and almost no one would have been the wiser (after all, very few people were with Pliny the Elder when he died). Instead he has again sown tares among the wheat in his supposed *laudatio*. A set of expectations for the Elder's conduct is raised that he signally fails to meet. Throughout the letter we see him reacting to circumstances rather than being in command and control, and often making the wrong decisions to

³⁸ The bibliography on *Ep.* 6.16 and 6.20 is enormous; Beck 2013 is one of the most recent treatments, with a novel take on whether the letters are "real" or "fictional" (23–25). For a clew through the scholarly labyrinth see Gibson and Morello 2012: 306 and Berry 2008: 297–98n2–5; Cova 2004 is a discussion of the state of contemporary scholarship, while earlier work is collected in Aubrion 1989: 335–36. Berry himself goes too far in seeing these letters as exclusively about the Plinies ("the backdrop of Vesuvius . . . is incidental," 301), and he tends to take Pliny's own statements at face value (e.g., 300, 308; cf. Augoustakis 2005, Marchesi 2008: 188).

³⁹ See nn. 1 and 3. Some critics go even further: Jones 2001, for example, countenances the idea that Pliny the Younger is (at least implicitly) condemning *his own* behavior during the eruption of Vesuvius (esp. 47–48).

⁴⁰ Eco 1990.

boot. He has been thrown off his routine as described in *Ep* 3.5—although he tries to cling to it—and simply does not know how to act. In the parallel *Ep*. 6.20, by contrast, we see Pliny the Younger in the same situation showing more flexibility and agency and surviving the disaster, fittingly for a man who practices a more adaptable daily routine. The links between this letter and *Ep*. 3.5, and its particular parallels with 6.20, make the whole triptych resonate with extended meaning.⁴¹

Pliny's obituary for his uncle is replete with unsettling elements. Writing at the instigation of Tacitus, who wants the information for his *Historiae*,⁴² Pliny begins with an unfavorable comparison of the Elder's literary output with that of his addressee: although the Elder himself wrote quite a number of works that will "remain," nevertheless Tacitus's *aeternitas* will add quite a bit to the Elder's *perpetuitas* (*quamuis ipse plurima opera et mansura condiderit, multum tamen perpetuitati eius scriptorum tuorum aeternitas addet*, *Ep*. 6.16.2). The contrast between *aeternitas* and *perpetuitas* is pointed, with the former approaching "immortality" and the latter mere "permanence."⁴³ The Elder starts at a disadvantage. Again, there is no need for Pliny to (implicitly) belittle his uncle in order to compliment Tacitus. We should also note that Pliny envisions a wide audience for this story; he both hopes that it will be included in the *Historiae* and disseminates it himself in the present letter. Finally, in Pliny's introduction, the Elder's death is not given any special praise: he perished in a famous natural disaster, Pliny says, which itself gives him a certain afterlife. There is not a word here about that death being virtuous.⁴⁴

As Pliny begins his description, he mentions an unusual element, namely that the Elder is on the spot in Misenum at the head of the fleet (*Ep*. 6.16.4).⁴⁵

⁴¹ Cf. n. 5 above.

⁴² Pliny's *quo uerius tradere posteris possis* (*Ep*. 6.16.1) has occasioned unneeded heavy weather, with critics wondering about how something can be "more true": cf., e.g., Sallmann 1979: 213 (problem), 217 (a solution); Schönberger 1990: 543. The word simply means something like "more accurately."

⁴³ See *OLD* s.vv.; very briefly Lefèvre 2009: 127. Cf. *Ep*. 7.33.1 (to Tacitus) *auguror, nec me fallit augurium, historias tuas immortales futuras*.

⁴⁴ Pliny does end his introduction by writing (6.16.3): *equidem beatos puto, quibus deorum munere datum est aut facere scribenda aut scribere legenda, beatissimos uero quibus utrumque. horum in numero auunculus meus et suis libris et tuis erit*. The fact that the Elder wrote things "worth reading" in his own books is beyond dispute; the idea that he did things "worth writing about" in fact comes about *only because of Tacitus's books*. The actions themselves are not described as having intrinsic virtue.

⁴⁵ Cf. Sherwin-White 1966 ad loc. For details on the fleet at Misenum, see Starr 1941: 13–21, and for the duties of the *praefectus* his pp. 30–38.

The Elder's presence will ultimately point up his incompetence and underscore the fact that the fleet is left without a commander when he dies. When the extraordinary and menacing cloud appears on the horizon, the Elder is diligently adhering to the routine described in *Ep.* 3.5. He had bathed and eaten lightly, and was engaged in *studia* (*Ep.* 6.16.5; cf. 3.5.11). His curiosity piqued by this singular phenomenon, he calls for his shoes and finds a place with a good view of the developing *miraculum*.⁴⁶ Once he has seen the pine-tree-shaped cloud, he decides he ought to inspect it more closely for the sake of science (*magnum propiusque noscendum ut eruditissimo uiro uisum*, *Ep.* 6.16.7), but as he is leaving he receives a letter from a certain Rectina, who is terrified by the approaching menace and begs the Elder to rescue her by ship (*accipit codicillos Rectinae Tasci imminente periculo exterritae (nam uilla eius subiacebat, nec ulla nisi nauibus fuga): ut se tanto discrimini eriperet orabat*, *Ep.* 6.16.8).⁴⁷ How the messenger could get through when Rectina herself apparently could not is left unexplained.⁴⁸ And so the Elder abandons his scientific inquiry and instead embarks on a rescue mission to save not just Rectina but the many people who dwelt on the coastline. In sum (*Ep.* 6.16.10):

Properat illuc unde alii fugiunt, rectumque cursum recta gubernacula in periculum tenet adeo solutus metu, ut omnes illius mali motus omnes figuras ut deprenderat oculis dictaret enotaretque.

He hurries to the place where others are fleeing from,⁴⁹ and he holds a fixed course and a fixed rudder straight to the danger, so free from fear that he dictated and noted down all the motions and all the forms of that evil as he took them in with his eyes.

⁴⁶ Note that the Elder himself perhaps did not realize that Vesuvius was an active volcano: at *HN* 3.62 he just refers to it as a *mons* (see Sherwin-White 1966: 372). On the question of the scientific reliability of Pliny the Younger's account of the eruption, see the comprehensive bibliography and sensible comments in Berry 2008: 297–98n2.

⁴⁷ There are major (and unsolvable) textual issues with the name *Rectina*, but they do not impinge on the argument here; see Lefèvre 2009: 130n63 with further references.

⁴⁸ Copony 1987: 218, observing this and the messenger's remarkable timing, suggests that the entire scene is Pliny's own invention. One reply is that perhaps Rectina wanted to flee together with her family (Lefèvre 2009: 130n61). R. Martin 1979: 15 also wonders whether the messenger could have arrived so quickly after the eruption; P. Martin 1982: 16–17 speculates that the messenger could actually have been sent before the eruption because of the widespread earthquakes reported in Dio (66.22–23; cf. *Ep.* 6.20.3).

⁴⁹ To wonder, as Copony 1987: 221 does, how the Elder could go where everyone else was fleeing (given the winds etc.) is probably to take too literally Pliny's rhetorical flourish.

The heroism of this action is everywhere vitiated by the event. The Elder embarks on a rescue mission which almost certainly failed—Pliny reports nothing of its success, which he surely would have done if there had been something to say—and which resulted in his own inglorious death.⁵⁰ We see a man who not only is not in control of the situation (although as commander of the fleet he was certainly supposed to be), but who altogether fails to understand it. He appears brave, in a sense, and just as he is given full credit in 3.5 for being a man of great learning, he is here acknowledged to be fearless—but this fearlessness is throughout presented as recklessness.⁵¹ He sets a course where others rightly fear to tread, and we see him clearly linked to his practices in *Ep.* 3.5.15:

In itinere quasi solutus ceteris curis, huic uni uacabat.

When traveling he was as it were free from all other cares and devoted himself to this (i.e., *studia*) alone.

The Elder thus continues his normal routine, as he has been doing all along, but this is fundamentally the wrong course of action.⁵² Just as in *Ep.* 3.5, he has someone at his side to take down his every word as he travels. Our man of science has his head somewhere in Clouduckooland, not in the real world of people living and dying. While a volcano is spewing death and destruction he is focused on dictation.

Then conditions worsen. Ash begins falling on the ship, and it gets hotter and denser the closer they get to the coast; soon they are being bombarded by actual rocks (*Ep.* 6.16.11). Here the Elder hesitates a moment, but he determines to brazen it out (*Ep.* 6.16.11):

Cunctatus paulum an retro flecteret, mox gubernatori ut ita faceret monenti “Fortes” inquit “fortuna iuuat: Pomponianum pete.”

Unsure for a moment whether he should turn back, when the helmsman warns him to do just that he says: “Fortune favors the bold: head for Pomponianus!”

He does not know what he should do, and he receives sound advice from a seaman who plainly does. Perversely, however, this impels him in the opposite

⁵⁰ Contra Lefèvre 2009: 135, who believes that the report of the Elder’s death crowds out mention of all other “circumstantial” details. This is the general tendency of Berry 2008 and Sherwin-White 1966: 375 as well.

⁵¹ His courage is also mentioned at 6.16.9, 12, 16.

⁵² Sallmann 1979: 214, although noticing the oddity of the Elder’s activities, nevertheless thinks the description here is high praise.

direction, and with a misapplied proverb he presses on.⁵³ Rather than favoring him, Fortune will soon take his life.

The Elder's change of course is noteworthy. He had been bound for Rectina; now he heads for Pomponianus. This is a strange and unexpected deviation. To suppose that Rectina is the wife of Pomponianus is a desperate expedient:⁵⁴ she, the supposed instigator of the rescue, is never mentioned in the rest of the letter. More importantly, Pliny is writing here not just for Tacitus but for Tacitus's *Historiae* and his own reading public, and he surely would have made such a relationship clear if one had existed. This is a letter composed with the greatest possible care, and yet this appears to be a glaring inconsistency. But Pliny is not likely to have invented this particular detail. If he had been simply making things up, he would have taken more care to make the "facts" align, especially in such a polished and public letter.⁵⁵ The inconsistency is more likely the Elder's own: he decides to change course. If we take Pliny seriously as a skilled literary artist, we should interpret his artful decisions in composition. He does not dilate on the implications of the Elder's caprice, but he has left them to be uncovered by the alert reader.

After the Elder lands, his behavior is so inappropriate to the situation that it would be comic if it were not tragic. When he arrives, Pomponianus and his family have their luggage packed and are ready to leave as soon as they can catch a favorable wind.⁵⁶ But rather than waiting for the winds to change, the Elder sticks to his routine, bizarrely ordering a bath, and after bathing cheerfully reclining for a good dinner (*utque timorem eius sua securitate leniret, deferri in balineum iubet; lotus accubat cenat, aut hilaris aut (quod aequae magnum) similis hilari*, *Ep.* 6.16.12). He is supposedly trying to relieve Pomponianus of his fear by showing that he himself is not worried, but he obviously should be deeply concerned (*Ep.* 6.16.13):

Interim e Vesuuio monte pluribus locis latissimae flammae altaque incendia
relucebant, quorum fulgor et claritas tenebris noctis excitabatur.

⁵³ Lefèvre 2009: 129 tries to justify the proverb here.

⁵⁴ So Lefèvre 2009: 130, relying on Sherwin-White 1966: 373, who also makes Pomponianus a son of the Pomponius Secundus about whom the Elder wrote two books (*Ep.* 3.5.3). While such a connection would create another marvelous link between *Ep.* 3.5 and the present letter, it is supported by no evidence: see Syme 1968: 150 = *RP* 2.720, Jones 1968: 127. Lefèvre also speculates that, if they are not married, Rectina's villa could be in the vicinity of Pomponianus's.

⁵⁵ Contra Copony 1987: 221–22.

⁵⁶ On the troublesome nature of this wind, see Van der Paardt 1991: 57; Romer 1985; Sallmann 1979: 211–12.

Meanwhile from very many places on Mt. Vesuvius blazed forth vast swaths of flame and tall fires, whose brightness and clarity contrasted with the darkness of the night sky.

It should not take a great man of science to realize that something is gravely wrong here, and the Pomponianus family clearly does. Why can the Elder not see this? Everyone at this point should be trying desperately to escape, over land if the winds still prevented sea travel.⁵⁷ Instead, he insists—ostensibly to allay his companions' fear—that they are only seeing bonfires or the burning remains of houses that had been abandoned, another bizarre appraisal. To cap it all off, the Elder then lies down to sleep, manifesting the odd proclivity that we saw so clearly in *Ep.* 3.5 (*Ep.* 6.16.13):

Tum se quieti dedit et quieuit uerissimo quidem somno; nam meatus animae, qui illi propter amplitudinem corporis grauior et sonantior erat, ab iis qui limini obuersabantur audiebatur.

Then he gave himself over to sleep and slept in most true slumber; for the passing of his breath, which on account of the magnitude of his body was rather heavy and loud, was heard by those placed outside his threshold.

This is obviously not the moment for sleep, as Pliny will go on to make clear, and it is further odd that Pliny has chosen to amplify the Elder's somnolence in this context when the Elder himself is so emphatic that *uita uigilia est*—if ever a time called for *uigilia*, this was surely it. The Elder does not just sleep: he *se quieti dedit*, and *quieuit*, and moreover *uerissimo quidem somno*. As if all this were not enough, in a rather amusing paraphrase Pliny presents the proof of this statement, namely that the Elder snored and his snoring was heard loud and clear by people stationed outside his room. The description of the snoring would indicate a certain modest restraint; this is high style, for criticism must be cloaked, and a verb like *sterto* is avoided.⁵⁸ But it was hardly necessary to mention it. Nor was it necessary to add the explanation that he habitually snored and was fat. This entire portrait is unflattering in the extreme, and all of it could have been omitted.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ A flight by land is indeed implied when the Elder is eventually abandoned on the sea shore in the face of continuing adverse winds (*Ep.* 6.16.20); he could not manage such an escape then, and he presumably could not have managed it at this point either. His presence is only a liability.

⁵⁸ *TLL* s.v. *meatus* 8.512.67–78.

⁵⁹ Lefèvre 2009: 132 makes a weak attempt to read praiseworthiness into the Elder's snores; cf. the delightfully titled—"Kaltblütiges Schnarchen"—Görler 1979: 432.

The utter inappropriateness of sleep at this moment is made crystal clear by the sequel (*Ep.* 6.16.14):

Sed area ex qua diaeta adibatur ita iam cinere mixtisque pumicibus oppleta surrexerat, ut si longior in cubiculo mora, exitus negaretur. excitatus procedit, seque Pomponiano ceterisque qui peruigilauerant reddit.

But the entryway to his room was already full of a mixture of ash and pumice-stone and the ground level had so risen up that if he had delayed longer in his chamber, he would not have been able to escape. He was woken up and got out, and he rejoined Pomponianus and the rest who had stayed awake.

The Elder is slumbering away as his room is progressively being blocked in. Far from a heroic defiance, the Elder's sleep would have resulted in a pointless death. It is perhaps not out of place to wonder whether he was drunk: he had just enjoyed a dinner party and he was snoring as he slept and he was sleeping through a deadly calamity. In any event, the Elder is rescued by people watching out for him—the irony that he himself was there supposedly to save them is not lost. They wake him and he rejoins Pomponianus et al., all of whom had stayed awake (*peruigilauerant*, the intensive prefix underscoring the contrast). Again, this feels like a pointed jab at a man whose motto was *Vita Vigilia Est*.

The situation is increasingly grim. There is a debate about whether they should remain inside or go outdoors, and braving the falling ash and rocks is deemed the lesser of the two evils. They then don their “helmets” (*Ep.* 6.16.16):

Ceruicalia capitibus imposita linteis constringunt; id munimentum aduersus incidentia fuit.

They put pillows on their heads and fasten them with linen cloth; this was their protection against falling objects.

Pliny the Elder, we must remember, is here in his capacity as admiral of the Roman fleet. But he has been reduced to a parody of a military man, waddling about with a pillow on his head instead of a proper helmet. Moreover, he is laboring heavily and cannot continue. The party decides to go down to the shore, and from Pliny's neutral language we can tell that the commander of the fleet is no longer in command (*Ep.* 6.16.17 *placuit egredi in litus*). Conditions will not permit them to embark. And so (*Ep.* 6.16.18–19):

Ibi super abiectum linteum recubans semel atque iterum frigidam aquam poposcit hausitque. deinde flammae flammarumque praenuntius odor sulphuris alios in fugam uertunt, excitant illum. innitens seruolis duobus adsurrexit et statim concidit, ut ego colligo, crassiore caligine spiritu obstructo, clausoque stomacho qui illi natura inualidus et angustus et frequenter aestuans erat.

There he lay down on top of a piece of linen cloth spread on the ground and again and again called for cold water and gulped it down. Then the flames and the odor of sulfur, a harbinger of flames, turned the others to flight and roused him. Leaning on two little slaves he got up and straightaway collapsed again, as I understand it, because his breath was obstructed by the rather thick air, and his esophagus, which was by nature infirm and narrow and often agitated, was closed off.

Again there is nothing heroic here. He is forced to lie down and guzzles water to no effect. At the approach of fire he tries to get up—was he asleep again? (*excitant illum*)—but even then he is forced to rely on slaves, and even the slaves are described in depreciating tones (*seruolis*).⁶⁰ The picture is pitiful at best, with the corpulent Pliny the Elder requiring two slaves to hold him up. No sooner had he managed to get to his feet than he collapsed again, and this time he would not get up.⁶¹ No noble words at the last.⁶² When daylight later returned his dead body was discovered; perhaps unsurprisingly, he looked like he was sleeping (*habitus corporis quiescenti quam defuncto similior*, *Ep.* 6.16.20). The fact that his companions abandoned his body shows again how the Elder, so far from helping the people he had set out to save, was only a hindrance.

This is the inglorious end of Pliny the Elder. He had set off on a rescue mission, but he fails spectacularly. Not only does he fail to rescue anyone; he gets himself killed in the process, and in so doing he provides the clearest proof that he was unequal to the situation. He consistently makes poor decisions—indeed he only survives as long as he does because those he was trying to save keep their heads, stay awake, and look out for his welfare. At the close of his life we see the admiral with a pillow for a helmet, desperately

⁶⁰ Elsewhere in Pliny this diminutive clearly has a demeaning connotation: *Ep.* 3.16.8, *Pan.* 7.6. Beck 2013: 12 thinks that here the diminutive is meant to counteract the notion in the Suetonian *Vita* that the Elder was assisted in suicide by his slaves. But the author of the *Vita* clearly bases much of it on Pliny's letters, and so it seems special pleading to think that he had a reliable alternative source for the Elder's death. (Pliny obviously cannot be responding specifically to the *Vita* in a letter if the *Vita* itself is drawing on that letter as a source.) For the moment the problems of the composition of the *Vita* seem intractable (see Reeve 2011), and it is not at all clear from what date the rumor about assisted suicide might stem.

⁶¹ The specific cause of the Elder's death remains the subject of discussion—e.g., Retief and Cilliers 2005—but is probably unrecoverable. See the sensible cautions of Lefèvre 2009: 134.

⁶² A common feature of *exitus* literature; cf., e.g., *Ep.* 1.12.10 “κέκρικα” or *Ep.* 3.16.6 “*Paete, non dolet.*”

demanding water and supported by two little slaves as he tries and fails to flee. This, to me, is a damning portrait of the Elder's inadequacies; if the man being described were not Pliny's uncle, would anyone call him a hero? He tried to keep to his routine in the most inappropriate of circumstances, and it led to his death. And this is a portrait that Pliny the Younger has painted deliberately and with the finest craftsmanship. In this instance, of course, he is concerned not just to justify his present way of life, but perhaps also his decision not to accompany his uncle on the rescue mission. Just as in his letter on his uncle's life and works, here in discussing his death Pliny has provided abundant materials for criticism of the Elder, this time cloaking them lightly under the robe of an obituary.

EP. 6.20: PLINY THE YOUNGER'S SURVIVAL

We have now arrived at Act III of our drama. At the close of *Ep.* 6.16 Pliny had left a hook dangling for Tacitus (*interim Miseni ego et mater—sed nihil ad historiam etc.*, *Ep.* 6.16.21). Tacitus apparently takes the bait, and in 6.20 Pliny describes his own and his mother's activities during the eruption of Vesuvius. This letter combines elements of 3.5 and 6.16, but contrives to reject them all. The letter unfolds in particular parallel with 6.16, which at some level occurs simply because the two letters are describing the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, but the similarities are deeper and more pervasive than such necessary coincidences. By artful juxtaposition Pliny is again inviting us to compare his behavior with that of his uncle. We see the young Pliny trying to imitate his Elder, as his activities correspond with what his uncle is doing in 6.16, but he leads us to question the wisdom of that imitation, and what is in fact implicitly praised are the occasions when he breaks out of the Elder's mold. Unlike the Elder, Pliny the Younger will show agency and initiative, and unlike the Elder he will survive the calamity and save his mother too.

In *Ep.* 6.16 we were told that Pliny had stayed behind to devote himself to *studia*, and specifically to a sort of homework assignment from his uncle (*mihi si uenire una uellem facit copiam* (sc. *auunculus meus*); *respondi studere me malle, et forte ipse quod scriberem dederat*, *Ep.* 6.16.7). This theme is repeated and amplified in 6.20.2:

Profecto auunculo ipse reliquum tempus studiis (ideo enim remanseram) impendi; mox balineum cena somnus inquietus et breuis.

After my uncle had set out I myself devoted the rest of my time to *studia*—after all, that's why I'd stayed behind—followed by a bath, dinner, and a short and restless sleep.

This is the young Pliny's attempt to emulate the Elder's routine. The obsessive devotion of one's "remaining time" to *studia* is even paralleled verbally in *Ep.* 3.5.9: *reuersus domum quod reliquum temporis studiis reddebat*. Furthermore, the Younger follows the Elder's rhythm of bath, dinner, and slumber (*frigida lauabatur, deinde gustabat dormiebatque minimum, Ep.* 3.5.11). This, of course, is also precisely what the Elder Pliny himself is busy doing chez Pomponianus (*Ep.* 6.16.12–13). The contrast between the Younger's troubled and fitful sleep and the Elder's deep slumber in the midst of the eruption is striking, showing the Younger's natural tendency toward a sort of restless agency instead of his uncle's sleepy passivity.

That pointed contrast is continued when Pliny's mother bursts into his bedroom only to find Pliny already getting up himself, intending to wake her if she happened to be still sleeping (*inrupit cubiculum meum mater; surgebam inuicem, si quiesceret excitaturus, Ep.* 6.20.4). The Elder must be woken up by others (*excitatus, Ep.* 6.16.14), and the only thing that was "rising" naturally was the level of ash and stone outside his bedroom (*area . . . iam cinere mixtisque pumicibus oppleta surrexerat, Ep.* 6.16.14). The Younger clearly has the better of this implicit comparison, showing initiative where the Elder is merely the victim of circumstances. Pliny and co. then also go outside to avoid the danger of collapsing buildings, and sitting there Pliny tries to resume his imitation of his uncle (*Ep.* 6.20.5):

Dubito, constantiam uocare an imprudentiam debeam (agebam enim duo-deucensimum annum): posco librum Titi Liui, et quasi per otium lego atque etiam ut coeperam excerpto.

I'm not sure whether I should term it steadfastness or idiocy (for I was seventeen years old): I call for a book of Livy, and I read it as though at leisure and I even make excerpts as I had begun to do.

This, of course, is the "homework assignment" that the Elder had given Pliny, and nothing could smack more of the Elder's prescription than that the Younger make excerpts. But the mature Pliny, looking back, recognizes that this was the *imprudencia* of a seventeen-year-old boy.⁶³ He is told as much by a friend of his uncle's on a visit from Spain, who, when he sees Pliny sitting and reading, rebukes the Younger's *securitas* (*ut me et matrem sedentes, me uero etiam legentem uidet, illius patientiam securitatem meam corripit, Ep.* 6.20.5). Just so was the Elder filled with *securitas* at an utterly inappropriate moment (*Ep.* 6.16.12), and he devoted himself to *studia* without fear (*solutus metu, Ep.*

⁶³ Cf. Gibson and Morello 2012: 114–15.

6.16.10 ~ 3.5.15). The Younger's *imprudencia* is an implicit criticism of the Elder; when he is imitating his uncle, he is engaged in foolish behavior, but at least he has the excuse of youth. The Elder has no such way out.

Perhaps the Spaniard here is the voice of reason.⁶⁴ A bit later he repeats his complaints, pleading with Pliny and his mother to depart—Pliny the Elder, he says, would have wanted them to be alive and safe—and when they refuse he leaves them and escapes danger himself (*nec moratus ultra proripit se effusoque cursu periculo aufertur*, *Ep.* 6.20.11). The intervention of the Spaniard, who breaks into the narrative in direct speech and urges them to change course, is precisely parallel to the helmsman in 6.16 who urged Pliny the Elder to turn back (6.16.11). If they had left at this moment, they too could have escaped, but just as the Elder has made a series of ill-considered decisions and refused to turn aside when he had the chance, so too do they decide to stay behind. But they do not stay behind long, for shortly thereafter (*nec multo post*, *Ep.* 6.20.11) conditions begin to deteriorate, and they resolve to flee together, just as the Elder eventually tries to do. If they had only listened to the reasonable Spaniard, they could perhaps have avoided the entire ordeal that they soon endured, just as the Elder Pliny could have if he had turned back. While the Spaniard *periculo aufertur*, they are stuck *in tantis periculis* (*Ep.* 6.20.17). Unlike the Elder, they are lucky enough to survive the nightmare.

In this letter many of the elements of 3.5 and 6.16 are combined, repeated, and rejected. Whenever the young Pliny imitates his uncle and his uncle's passive adherence to an inappropriate routine, it leads him into senseless danger. When he dares to deviate and seize the initiative—waking up, fleeing, and so forth—he saves himself and his mother by avoiding the Elder's mistakes. In not imitating his uncle, then, Pliny the Younger succeeds in the very mission where the Elder had failed.⁶⁵ Looking back more than two decades later, Pliny can see that when he tried to follow the Elder's example, his behavior was the *imprudencia* of a young man, that it was, in sum, thoroughly foolish. Just as in 3.5 and 6.16, here too the mature Pliny rejects such a foolish imitation of his uncle in favor of a superior course of action—his own.

UNSPOKEN REJECTIONS

We have already seen that Pliny the Younger embraces a radically different lifestyle from that of his uncle, striving to blend *negotium* and *otium* in due

⁶⁴ Jones 2001: 41 hints at this idea too, writing: "these judgments may reflect . . . Pliny's own mature estimation of what was involved in the situation—or at least his suspicions thereof."

⁶⁵ Pliny's success is well noted by Van der Paardt 1991: 63.

proportion (cf. n. 36). He has further embarked on a senatorial career, climbing to the highest reaches of Roman government, unlike his equestrian uncle. He is married and has an affectionate relationship with his wife Calpurnia (*Ep.* 6.4, 7; 7.5); he is eager to have children (*Ep.* 10.2); he is constantly making time for his friends and their needs (*Ep. passim*). While the Elder seems at some point to have given up legal advocacy (*Ep.* 3.5.7 with Sherwin-White 1966 ad loc.), the Younger prides himself above all on being a case pleader. On a smaller scale we might even contrast the Younger's care for proper pronunciation with his uncle's disregard for elegant speech (cf. n. 21). The Younger Pliny departs from his uncle in all these ways, but he never explicitly mentions them. The implications are left for the reader to notice.

Pliny's forging his own path is perhaps most visible in the literary realm. To leave aside his larger epistolary project, we can focus on a few small examples. In *Ep.* 5.8 he responds to Titinius Capito, who had urged him to write history. Pliny claims that he would like to but demurs. In the course of his reply he notes that Pliny the Elder had written history too (*Ep.* 5.8.4–5):

Me uero ad hoc studium impellit domesticum quoque exemplum. auunculus meus idemque per adoptionem pater historias et quidem religiosissime scripsit. inuenio autem apud sapientes honestissimum esse maiorum uestigia sequi, si modo recto itinere praecesserint.

I'm driven to this literary pursuit (sc. writing history) by an example from my own family. My uncle, who was also my father by adoption, wrote histories and wrote them most scrupulously. Moreover, I find in the sayings of the sages that it is most proper to follow the footsteps of your ancestors, provided that they have walked the appropriate path.

Pier Vincenzo Cova saw a hint of stylistic depreciation in the adverb *religiosissime*, which he took to mean “con grande rispetto per la verità e nessuna cura formale.” This is possible.⁶⁶ It would certainly accord well with the Elder's practice of hasty composition (*Ep.* 3.5.18 *instantia*; cf. n. 12). It might also mean someone who is “fastidious” to the point of pedantry, someone concerned to include every possible detail without being able to see the forest for the trees: the sort of person who might write twenty books of history on the German Wars and thirty-one *A fine Aufidii Bassi* (covering ca. 50–71 C.E.⁶⁷) and

⁶⁶ Cova 1975: 128, comparing Cic. *Brut.* 44 *quem (= Atticum) rerum Romanarum auctorem laudare possum religiosissimum*; Atticus notoriously avoided stylistic ornament (cf. *Att.* 2.1.1). See further *OLD* s.v. *religiosus* 8b, which is not quite adequate.

⁶⁷ *FRHist* 1.520, 532.

thirty-seven on *Natural History*! The adverb certainly need not imply praise.

In any case, Pliny hardly needed to add the qualification “provided that they have walked in the appropriate path”; surely no one would have questioned the simple statement that it was right to follow in the footsteps of your forefathers. Does Pliny intend a certain irony when he mentions following in the footsteps of a man who so notoriously did not walk? The discussion of the Elder’s litter at 3.5.15 is focalized by the words *in itinere*, and, as I have argued, that form of *iter* was very much not *rectum*. Even if this is thought to be taking things too far, we might still simply wonder if Pliny wants us to question whether the Elder had in fact proceeded along the right path in writing history. He goes on to talk about how he is busily revising his courtroom speeches and so lacks the time at present for history, but the seeds of doubt have already been sown, and in choosing not to write history he rejects the path taken by his uncle.⁶⁸

One more example. *Ep.* 9.33 is “the one about the dolphin.” Here, as has been widely recognized, Pliny draws on material found in his uncle’s *Historia Naturalis* (*HN* 9.24–28). Pliny’s version, however, is a strikingly literary rewriting of the Elder’s supposedly scientific account, blending elements from different stories found in the Elder into one coherent narrative.⁶⁹ Although there are close parallels between the two accounts, even down to the level of verbal echoes, Pliny the Younger suppresses all mention of the Elder as his source.⁷⁰ Instead he claims that he learned the story from one of his companions at a dinner party, an anonymous source of great reliability (*magna auctori fides*, *Ep.* 9.33.1). Benjamin Stevens has rightly pointed out that Pliny insists too stridently on the chance nature of this encounter for it really to have been due to chance.⁷¹ In the course of his story he consistently outdoes his uncle’s version, and the most knowledgeable readers seem to be urged to make a comparison between the two that is favorable to the Younger Pliny. So here

⁶⁸ Gibson and Morello 2012: 116 comment: “The model of the Elder Pliny is thus implicitly rejected—albeit with clear pride.” They do not remark on the pendant proviso.

⁶⁹ See Cova 2001: 62–63 and, in much more detail although missing some of Cova’s points, Stevens 2009. Beck 2016 is skeptical that Pliny is engaging with the Elder. He looks instead to historiography and wonders if Pliny means to play Herodotus to Tacitus’s Thucydides (2016: 85–86). I am more sympathetic to the approach of Hindermann 2011, who sees deliberate engagement and even rivalry with the Elder.

⁷⁰ Four verbal parallels, the first dubious (forms of *miraculum* and *mirus* found in both treatments), the other three generally convincing, are noted in Stevens 2009: 165–70.

⁷¹ Stevens 2009: 164. Beck 2016: 82 thinks that Pliny could easily be telling the truth about his source, but he does not account for Pliny’s special and noticeable emphasis.

too Pliny defies his uncle and goes his own way, but he never explicitly says so. The inference, nevertheless, is there to be drawn by anyone who cares to do so.

More subtle critiques may be found as well. Roy Gibson sees Pliny alluding with pointedly corrective force to his uncle's description of Catullus in the preface to the *Historia Naturalis*.⁷² Cova pointed out possible criticism of the Elder in Pliny's non-reference to his uncle when describing Lake Vadimon; Pliny's potential literary rivalry with the Elder in the realm of describing *mirabilia* is further discussed by Judith Hindermann.⁷³ Pliny's criticisms in such cases are sophisticated and indirect, only to be recognized by a reader who can go beyond the surface meaning of the text. In all of these smaller instances, just as in 3.5, 6.16, and 6.20, Pliny the Younger differentiates and distances himself from the Elder.

CONCLUSION

Pliny the Elder is simply not a model for the mature Pliny the Younger, still less *the* model. *Epistles* 3.5, 6.16, and 6.20, in particular, constitute a closely connected triad in which Pliny critiques his uncle and justifies his departures from the Elder's example. In 3.5 the Elder's life is placed under the microscope, and the picture is not flattering; in 6.16 the same is done for his death. 6.16 contains numerous echoes of 3.5, with Pliny portraying the Elder as clinging to his routine in the face of a natural disaster. 6.20 in turn closely parallels 6.16 and incorporates elements of 3.5, as the mature Pliny retrospectively presents his seventeen-year-old self both imitating his uncle, for which he is implicitly criticized, and breaking free from that imitation, for which he is implicitly praised. Pliny's critiques of his uncle, moreover, are not confined to this triad. Even in other letters, like 5.8 on writing history or 9.33 on the famous dolphin, Pliny continues to distance himself from the man who might be expected to be his natural model.

Throughout the *Epistles* Pliny shows a marked ambivalence toward his adoptive father, never recounting any anecdotes of affection and constantly providing material for covert criticism. There is indeed very little untempered

⁷² Gibson 2011: 189–93 on Plin. *Ep.* 1.16.3–6 ~ Plin. *HN* pr. 1; the fulcrum is the adjective *duriusculus*, found in extant Latin only in these two passages, applied to Catullan poetry. Gibson believes that Pliny takes a great deal of pride in his uncle's magnum opus. Henderson 2002a: 89–97 (≈ 2002b: 273–78) likewise sees close and sympathetic engagement with the *Historia Naturalis* in the *Epistulae*.

⁷³ Cova 2001: 60–61 (on *Ep.* 8.20 ~ *HN* 2.209); see too his n. 20 on the intermittent spring of Larium (*Ep.* 4.30 ~ *HN* 2.232); Hindermann 2011, including *Ep.* 8.8 (on the source of the Clitumnus). On these letters more generally cf. Lefèvre 2009: 252–72.

praise of the Elder to be found; he is a brave and learned man and a hard worker, but at what price? Pliny the Younger must in some sense labor under a mighty anxiety of influence vis-à-vis his uncle, and that may account for his subtle attempts to distance himself.⁷⁴ But this is not simply some manifestation of unconscious anxieties; the letters in which these feelings are expressed are extremely artful and polished compositions, teeming with literary allusions⁷⁵ and published for a (relatively) broad reading public. Pliny thought hard about what he was writing and presumably meant it.

Who are Pliny's models then? It might be tempting to point to elders like Verginius Rufus and Corellius Rufus and Vestricius Spurinna.⁷⁶ For these men he seems to have real admiration and indeed affection. And yet even in these cases, as Gibson has shown, Pliny eventually shows signs of ambivalence. In book 9, for example, we learn that neither Verginius nor Corellius is in fact the flawless model that he may have earlier seemed to be;⁷⁷ they are likewise implicitly damned in 8.14, where the Senate is said to have provided no suitable examples to Pliny's generation (8.14.8).⁷⁸ None of these men will do as Pliny's ideal *exemplum*. Indeed, there is perhaps a generational issue affecting every potential model for a man living and writing after Domitian.

Ultimately Pliny embraces no one from the older generation uncritically as a model. This is closely connected with his tendency, increasingly on display as the books go on, to put *himself* forward as an exemplary model for the next generation. As William Johnson has put it, "Pliny, in short, often serves as the ultimate model for his own program."⁷⁹ If the letters are always fundamen-

⁷⁴ On Plinian anxieties see Hoffer 1999.

⁷⁵ Most notably and programmatically *Ep.* 6.20.1 *quamquam animus meminisse horret, incipiam* (I omit Mynors's "... after *horret*) ~ *Aen.* 2.12, on which see Schwerdtner 2015: 147–61. For other literary allusions in these letters, see Marchesi 2008: 171–89; cf. Lefèvre 2009: 137n108. Lefèvre himself seems to go too far in seeing allusions on occasion, e.g., 129–30 comparing Pliny's voyage to Stabiae with Caesar's stormy crossing of the Adriatic in 48 B.C.E. For even more speculative reaching after allusions see Berry 2008: 302–3.

⁷⁶ Corellius Rufus: 1.12, 4.17, 7.11.3, 7.31.4, 9.13.6; Verginius Rufus: 2.1, 5.3.5, 6.10, 9.19; Vestricius Spurinna: 1.5.8–10, 3.1, 3.10, 4.27.5–6, 5.17.

⁷⁷ Corellius: 9.13.6 with Gibson 2015: 196–97; Verginius: 9.19.5 with Gibson 2015: 199–201.

⁷⁸ See Gibson 2015: 218.

⁷⁹ Johnson 2010: 42. Cf. Gibson and Morello 2012: 127, 132 on "Pliny's growing sense of his own exemplarity." Pliny's (feigned?) diffidence about himself seems to fade in the later books, perhaps as he simply becomes more confident; we have already seen that he postpones description of his own daily routine until the end of book 9. See also Bradley 2010: 403–12; Bernstein 2008.

tally about Pliny himself, in criticizing and showing ambivalence about his predecessors he is better able to point up his own exemplary qualities. This is thus all part and parcel of Pliny's project of self-fashioning. His discussion of his uncle is really a special—indeed exemplary—case of the much broader phenomenon of self-justification and self-promotion that we see throughout the *Epistles*, and should be read in that light.

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