The Impossibility of *Historia* after Domitian: Pliny’s *Letter* 5.8

Holly Haynes, The College of New Jersey

**A.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| C. Plinius Titinio Capitoni suo s.Suades ut historiam scribam, et suades non solus: multi hoc me saepe monuerunt et ego volo, non quia commode facturum esse confidam - id enim temere credas nisi expertus -, sed quia **mihi pulchrum in primis videtur non pati occidere, quibus aeternitas debeatur, aliorumque famam cum sua extendere. [2] Me autem nihil aeque ac diuturnitatis amor et cupido sollicitat, res homine dignissima, eo praesertim qui nullius sibi conscius culpae posteritatis memoriam non reformidet.** [3] Itaque diebus ac noctibus cogito, si 'qua me quoque possim tollere humo'; id enim voto meo sufficit, illud supra votum 'victorque virum volitare per ora'; 'quamquam o-': sed hoc satis est, quod prope sola historia polliceri videtur. [4] Orationi enim et carmini parva gratia, nisi eloquentia est summa: historia quoquo modo scripta delectat. Sunt enim homines natura curiosi, et quamlibet nuda rerum cognitione capiuntur, ut qui sermunculis etiam fabellisque ducantur. Me vero ad hoc studium impellit domesticum quoque exemplum. [5] Avunculus meus idemque per adoptionem pater historias et quidem religiosissime scripsit. Invenio autem apud sapientes honestissimum esse maiorum vestigia sequi, si modo recto itinere praecesserint. Cur ergo cunctor? [6] Egi magnas et graves causas. Has, etiamsi mihi tenuis ex iis spes, destino retractare, ne tantus ille labor meus, nisi hoc quod reliquum est studii addidero, mecum pariter intercidat. [7] Nam si rationem posteritatis habeas, quidquid non est peractum, pro non incohato est. Dices: 'Potes simul et rescribere actiones et componere historiam.' Utinam! sed utrumque tam magnum est, ut abunde sit alterum efficere. [8] Unodevicensimo aetatis anno dicere in foro coepi, et nunc demum quid praestare debeat orator, adhuc tamen per caliginem video. [9] Quid si huic oneri novum accesserit?**Habet quidem oratio et historia multa communia, sed plura diversa in his ipsis, quae communia videntur. Narrat illa narrat haec, sed aliter: huic pleraque humilia et sordida et ex medio petita, illi omnia recondita splendida excelsa conveniunt; [10] hanc saepius ossa musculi nervi, illam tori quidam et quasi iubae decent; haec vel maxime vi amaritudine instantia, illa tractu et suavitate atque etiam dulcedine placet; postremo alia verba alius sonus alia constructio. [11] Nam plurimum refert, ut Thucydides ait, κτῆμα sit an ἀγώνισμα; quorum alterum oratio, alterum historia est.** His ex causis non adducor ut duo dissimilia et hoc ipso diversa, quo maxima, confundam misceamque, ne tanta quasi colluvione turbatus ibi faciam quod hic debeo; ideoque interim veniam, ut ne a meis verbis recedam, advocandi peto. [12]Tu tamen iam nunc cogita quae potissimum tempora aggrediar. Vetera et scripta aliis? Parata inquisitio, sed onerosa collatio. Intacta et nova? Graves offensae levis gratia. [13] Nam praeter id, quod in tantis vitiis hominum plura culpanda sunt quam laudanda, tum si laudaveris parcus, si culpaveris nimius fuisse dicaris, quamvis illud plenissime, hoc restrictissime feceris. [14]Sed haec me non retardant; est enim mihi pro fide satis animi: illud peto praesternas ad quod hortaris, eligasque materiam, ne mihi iam scribere parato alia rursus cunctationis et morae iusta ratio nascatur. Vale. | You urge me to write history, and you aren’t the only one: many have often advised me to do so, and I want to—not because I’m confident I’d do it well (you’d be rash to believe that unless you’d already tried it) but because **it seems to me a particularly beautiful thing not to let die those to whom eternity is owed, and to extend the fame of others along with *one’s* own.** **Nothing concerns me so much as the love and desire for a long-lasting name, a person’s most worthy aspiration, especially the one who conscious of no fault in himself does not fear posterity’s memory of him.** Therefore day and night I wonder if ‘I could possibly raise myself from the earth’ for this would answer my prayer, while over and above it would be ‘to fly as victor through the mouths of men’; ‘although o—’: but for me what *historia* almost alone seems to promise is enough. For oratory and poetry both win little favor, unless their eloquence is tip-top: *historia* gives pleasure no matter how it is written. Humans are curious by nature, and captured by the bare account of things as folks who are drawn by gossip and storytelling. Familial example also drives me forward to this endeavor. My uncle and father by adoption wrote history with the utmost care. And I find in the philosophers that it is a most honorable thing to follow in the footsteps of one’s ancestors, provided that they followed an honest path. Why then am I delaying? I’ve acted in certain big and important cases. Even if my hope from these is slim, I mean to revise them, so that so much work doesn’t die with me for want of a little extra effort. For if you have an eye on posterity, whatever isn’t finished may as well never have been begun. You will say: ‘you can revise your speeches and write history at the same time.’ I wish! But each is a great enough endeavor that it’s more than enough to bring one to completion. I was twenty-one years old when I began to speak in the forum and only now finally do I see, though darkly, what work the orator has cut out for him. What if I added a new burden to the one I already have? **Indeed *oratio* and *historia* have many things in common, it’s true, but differ widely in the very ways in which they seem similar. That one narrates, and so does this, but differently: in this one, as a rule, one finds daily, trite, and all-too-common facts; in that one, there are only majestic, extraordinary, and spectacular events. Of this one you generally see the bones, muscles, and nerves; of that one you first see the flesh, and, metaphorically speaking, its mane. This one you like mostly because it is forceful, harsh, and pressing; that one is pleasing because it proceeds with calm, grace, and even sweetness. In sum, they have different words, a different tone, and a different structure. It’s not the same, as Thucydides puts it, if something is ‘forever’ or ‘up for grabs,’ not at all. And to one of these categories belongs oratory, history to the other.** **For these reasons I am not inclined to confuse and mix up two dissimilar things that are also different in the very way in which they express their greatness, for fear that swept away in such a flood, as it were, I do there what I ought to do here. Therefore in the meantime I seek (so as not to ebb away from my own words) a recess.****You now think about what era I might best begin with. Older times that have been written up by others? The research is done, but the compilation is a bore. How about recent history that no one has touched yet? That could give serious offense and win little favor. For beside the fact that amongst so many human vices there is more to blame than to praise, it is also the case that if you praise you will be said to have been niggardly; if you blame, too excessive, though you were generous with the one and sparing with the other.** But these things won’t slow me down; I have enough courage of my convictions. I only ask that you pave the way for what you encourage me to do, and choose the material, so that another good reason for hesitation and delay doesn’t arise for me just as I’m ready to write. All best. | **2****3****4****5****1** |

**B.**

“Habet quidem oratio et historia multa communia, sed plura diversa in his ipsis, quae communia videntur. Narrat illa narrat haec, sed aliter:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| I | II |
| huic pleraque humilia et sordida, et ex medio petita, | illi omnia recondita splendida excelsa conveniunt; |
| hanc saepius ossa musculi nervi, | illam tori quidam et quasi iubae decent; |
| haec vel maxime vi amaritudine instantia, | illa tractu et suavitate atque etiam dulcedine placet. (58-9)\* |

**C.** *advocare* citations: *OLD* = “rare (and possibly unique) example of *advocare* meaning ‘to make or secure an adjournment of a case”; *TLL* = “to summon”.

\*Gamberini, Federico. 1983. *Stylistic Theory and Practice in the Younger Pliny*. *Altertumswissenschaftliche Texte und Studien*, Olms.