

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

This paper will read Pliny's Letter 5.8 as a testament to the breakdown of moral discourse and the concomitant difficulty of finding a subject-position in the wake of the Domitianic regime, both problems that make *historia* an impossible genre in this era. Other letters in Pliny's collection (e.g. 1.5, 4.22, 7.33) and the testimony of Tacitus' *Agricola* both illustrate the deformation of language under Domitian's tyranny, where the atmosphere of suspicion and guilt obstructed any clear sense of one's own position in the moral economy. In 5.8, responding to a suggestion that he write history, Pliny shows that as a code for conventional moral wisdom *historia* has become an impossible genre. Problematic too is the authoritative narrative voice, or "I", it necessitates. The letter's literary strategies of deferral express these problems even as its content appears to argue the merits of *historia* and compare it with those of *oratio*. They emphasize the insufficiency of the narrative "I", suggesting instead the importance of dialogue as the means both toward the ethical reconstruction of post-tyrannical discourse and the literary fame for which Pliny also hopes.

The key illustrative passage is §9-11 in which Pliny creates a deliberate confusion in his evaluation of *historia* and *oratio*. Two principal concerns emerge: first, to underline the artificiality of genre boundaries that dissolve when language undergoes the kind of trauma it suffered under Domitian, and the conventions that secure the author's "I" and his authoritative moral stance no longer have traction. Second, to create a literary situation in which to recognize the self or "I" in dialogue with another. In this passage, a microcosm of the letter as a whole, this situation involves deferring a direct answer to the question of whether Pliny should write history. This deferral, inherent in the confusion the passage self-consciously creates, sustains the dialogue with present and future addressees.

Since Pliny appears to offer the discussion as part of his argument for rewriting his speeches instead of writing history, its interpretation is significant both as a window on rhetorical theory and on Pliny's own literary choices. Older scholarship on the letter (e.g. Leeman 1963; Ussani 1974-5; Gamberini 1983) focuses almost exclusively on Pliny's unclear use, in this passage, of the pronouns *haec* and *illa* to designate the two genres. If the two pronouns take their common meaning of "the latter" and "the former" respectively, the adjectives he appends to each do not align well with the genres they appear to designate. These studies therefore attempt to untangle what Leeman calls "the exasperating mess of [Pliny's] literary judgments" (336). More recent studies (Marchesi 2008; Woodman 2012) integrate the passage into a broader interpretation of the letter as a sophisticated bid for literary fame on his own terms and against Cicero and Tacitus as his literary rivals; but these too adopt the older methodology of attempting to clarify which genre is designated by each of the pronouns and the adjectives appended to them.

My paper argues that the "mess" Leeman sees is a conscious strategy. Even benign attempts to disentangle it miss the deliberate and ironic confusion that Pliny creates in this passage and emphasizes in the sentence immediately following it, in which he says that he "asks for an adjournment" (*veniam...advocandi peto*) in order not to get "swept away by such a flood and do there what I ought to do here" (*ne tanta quasi colluvione turbatus ibi faciam quod hic debeo*). The point is to show his addressees that the dysfunctionality of language in the post-Domitianic era disrupts the conventions that adhere to either genre, including the potential for *gloria* and the perpetuation of the author's fame. In particular the passage illustrates the breakdown of historical discourse in an era of moral disarray and extreme sensitivity to potential blame (§12-13). However his recognition of this problem does not lead to an explicit refusal to

write history, a gesture that would still imply Pliny's authority over and agency within his own discourse. Instead Pliny strategically defers his response in order to show the loss of such a position and agency within a language disturbed by the effects of tyranny, turning the attention instead from the personal *gloria* that traditionally attends the writer of *historia* to the ethics of discourse inherent in the genre of epistolography.

Bibliography

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