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 **Portrait of the Artist as a Figure of Style: P.L.I.N.Y's Letters**

John Henderson

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Portrait of the Artist as a Figure of Style:

P.L.I.N.Y's Letters

John Henderson

Dear *Arethusa*,

I shall take our banner—RE-IMAG(IN)ING PLINY THE YOUNGER—perfectly literally to get the collection started. What follows revives the Pliny I imagined a score of years ago,¹ before pointing summarily to the main shifts in his reception since and keying my remarks to the suite of papers to follow. Recycling earlier material is, for sure, a resource utilized by ancient letter writers, and this subtype may stand for the whole apparatus of self-commentary that impels these *Epistles*.

|

Pliny's *Letters* are introduced to English students by two scholars, A. N. Sherwin-White and Betty Radice. Their approach is similar: 31.1 "The personal letters provide us with the fullest self-portrait of any Roman we know, with the possible exception of Horace, and they are genuine social history" (Radice 1975.120). "Pliny's letters deal with a wide variety of topics. They hold a mirror up to the high society of the capital of the Roman empire at the time of its greatest prosperity. Pliny observes with a friendly and complacent eye, but he observes with precision" (Sherwin-White 1967.xii). Another perspective is possible: the *Letters* are a creative self-dramatization, a literary stab at self-immortalization; Pliny has constructed **[End Page 115]** a mosaic to vie with any grander *monumentum*.² My argument is that readers are invited to take very seriously the notion that the style is the man, with all the problems that it involves. It soon becomes clear that self-conscious self-representation is the source of unresolvable uncertainties for Pliny's readers, especially if they have the recovery of "genuine social history" in mind.

"He is not a social climber, and . . . the people who receive his letters are genuinely amongst his friends" (Radice 1975.126). This conclusion follows from the absence of many of the big names of the day from the *Letters*. But we may reflect that Pliny shows himself "in" with enough top people: he isn't going to be swamped by them. The point is for us to see the *nouus homo* who has reached the consulate and enjoyed continuous advancement throughout a sparkling and accelerated career, and to see him nonchalantly set at the top of his own social pyramid. Obeisance will only come in Book 10, to the emperor. Again, whatever theory we choose to hold about the compilation and publication dates of the various books or collections of books, we may well credit Pliny with considerable perspicacity in projecting into the future the likely success of young addressees. Let us just take two prominent cases: Book 1 is dedicated to Septicius Clarus, and its last letter is an appeal on behalf of Suetonius—who has already received the address of 1.18.³ At the dramatic date of Book 1, around 100 C.E., both may rank as comparative nonentities. It's surely important to know that Septicius will eventually become Praetorian Prefect under Hadrian and the dedicatee of Suetonius's *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* when Suetonius had moved from being chief secretary of the imperial libraries to being the emperor's personal secretary for correspondence (*ab epistulis*). Not simply because Pliny *may* only have begun to publish his *Letters* (much) later than their dramatic dates, but because Pliny could—admittedly at the risk of history springing some surprises—see some way ahead into the future and associate budding talent with his own avuncular influence. Let us also consider a statistic: eleven letters is the largest number among Pliny's 247 letters addressed to one individual. And he just happens to be Tacitus, who clearly stands in Pliny for the guaranteed immortality through writing that is safely within the reach of a monumental, grand, historian. (Pliny's epistolary mosaic is more precarious.⁴) Pliny's relationship with Tacitus is pretty obviously not that of **[End Page 116]** "a genuine . . .

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1 = Henderson 1983 (Part II = Henderson 1982). All translations are by me.



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