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LETTERS FROM AN ADVOCATE:

Pliny's 'Vesuvius' Narratives (*Epp.* 6.16, 6.20)*

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To us in the modern era, the most memorable letters of Pliny the Younger are *Epp.* 6.16 and 6.20, addressed to Cornelius Tacitus. Their particular interest lies in the fact that they are our only eye-witness account of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79; and that eruption fascinates us because two of the towns it destroyed form what is now, after the city of Rome itself, the most important Roman archaeological site so far uncovered.¹ In this paper I propose to review these so-called 'Vesuvius' letters, focusing mainly on their purpose, artistry and literary connections. I shall not be considering the question (albeit an important one) of their value as historical evidence for the eruption.² Nor shall I be looking at them from a

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¹ This gives the letters a significance which they would not have had for their ancient readers. The point is made by A.Cameron with respect to 6.16 ('The fate of Pliny's *Letters* in the late empire' *CQ* n.s. 15 (1965) 289-98, 290): 'Now today every schoolboy reads in some anthology how Pliny's uncle met his end on the slopes of Vesuvius, but in the days when the not especially interesting letters of this not very important barrister were not a school text, even a scholar...might easily have skimmed through a few books without ever reaching *Ep.* 6.16, or without remembering its contents even if he actually read it' (my emphasis).

² On this question, see especially H.Sigurdsson, S.Cashdollar and S.R.J.Sparks 'The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79: reconstruction from historical and volcanological evidence' *AJA* 86 (1982) 39-51; H.Sigurdsson, S.Carey, W.Cornell and T.Pescatore 'The eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79' *National Geographic Research* 1 (1985) 332-87; R.Scandone, L.Giacomelli and P.Gasparini 'Mount Vesuvius: 2000 years of volcanological observations' *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 58 (1993) 5-25 (further bibliography listed at A.E.Cooley *Pompeii* (London 2003) 150-1). These modern scientific studies consider Pliny's account of the eruption of Vesuvius either reliable (the first two) or at least not demonstrably false (the third). In particular, they accept his account of what he claims to have witnessed at

historiographical viewpoint: this has already been done by a number of other scholars,³ and in any case part of my own argument in the present paper is that 6.16 is historiography only to a limited extent, and that 6.20 is not at all historiographical. Finally, I am not concerned with a number of other past discussions of the letters in other terms—as vulcanological writing,⁴ or as *laudatio* or *laudatio funebris*, or as *exitus* literature.⁵ I see the letters as, first and foremost, literary letters written by an advocate, and hence approach them primarily from an oratorical viewpoint. I will begin by asking what these letters actually are; a discussion of each letter in the light of my answer to that question will follow.

What are the ‘Vesuvius’ letters?

Misenum: see Sigurdsson, Cashdollar and Sparks 44, 50 (‘There are no deposits of AD 79 known at Misenum today, which is not surprising in view of the low resistance of such ash layers to erosion’); Sigurdsson, Carey, Cornell and Pescatore 381 (‘There can be no doubt that the surge traveled across the Bay of Naples and reached Misenum... The passage of a surge cloud over a long distance across water was also documented in the 1883 Krakatau eruption in Indonesia...’); Scandone, Giacomelli and Gasparini 8 (‘We have to conclude that the phenomena in the proximity of Misenum were due to a pyroclastic surge’). For the latest scientific bibliography and a revision of the timing of the phases of the eruption see A.Marturano and A.Varone ‘The AD 79 eruption: seismic activity and effects of the eruption on Pompeii’ in M.S.Balmuth, D.K.Chester and P.A.Johnston (eds) *Cultural Responses to the Volcanic Landscape: The Mediterranean and Beyond* (Boston Mass. 2005) 241-60. According to the authors, ‘Stringent philological criteria ascribe a limited chronological validity to the first of the two letters of Pliny the Younger...but the new stratigraphic evidence agrees very well with some paragraphs currently judged questionable’ (243).

³ Most recently by S.Tzounakas ‘*Neque enim historiam componebam*: Pliny’s first epistle and his attitude towards historiography’ *MH* 64 (2007) 42-54. See also H.W.Traub ‘Pliny’s treatment of history in epistolary form’ *TAPA* 86 (1955) 213-32; R.Ash ‘*Aliud est enim epistulam, aliud historiam...scribere* (Epistles 6.16.22): Pliny the historian?’ *Arethusa* 36.2 (2003) 211-25; A.Augoustakis ‘*Nequaquam historia digna?* Plinian style in *Ep.* 6.20’ *CJ* 100 (2005) 265-73.

⁴ See L.Casertano ‘Le lettere di Plinio sull’eruzione vesuviana il più antico documento vulcanologico?’ *Pompei 79; XIX centenario* (1979) 122-7; H.M.Hine ‘Seismology and vulcanology in antiquity?’ in C.J.Tuplin and T.E.Rihll (eds) *Science and Mathematics in Ancient Greek Culture* (Oxford 2002) 66-7.

⁵ See K.Sallmann ‘Quo verius tradere posteris possis. Plin. epist. 6,16’ *WJA* N.F. 5 (1979) 209-18; M.Gigante *Il fungo sul Vesuvio secondo Plinio il Giovane* (Rome 1989) 24-8 (= ‘Il racconto pliniano dell’eruzione del Vesuvio dell’ a. 79’ *PP* 34 (1979) 333-8).

Epp. 6.16 and 6.20 were probably written, on A.N.Sherwin-White's calculation,⁶ in AD 106 or 107, and are addressed to Pliny's friend Cornelius Tacitus. At that time, Tacitus had written his *opera minora*, the *Agricola*, *Germania* and *Dialogus*, and was collecting material for his *Histories*. But he was known to his contemporaries primarily as a successful advocate, not yet as one of the great historians. The letter (9.23) in which Pliny tells the story of the Roman *eques* who asked Tacitus, 'Are you Tacitus or Pliny?' does not provide evidence of Tacitus' reputation as a historian: Tacitus had said to the *eques*, 'You know me *ex studiis*', which, as Sherwin-White points out,⁷ denotes forensic oratory. Another letter (7.20), in which Pliny tells Tacitus that in conversations *de studiis* people mention the two of them in the same breath, likewise refers to oratory alone.⁸ *Epp.* 6.16 and 6.20 are therefore, in the first instance, letters from one famous advocate to another.⁹

Ep. 6.16 opens with a sentence which explains the letter's *raison d'être*: *Petis ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris possis* (§ 1). Tacitus has asked Pliny for an account of the death of his uncle, Pliny the Elder, so that he can pass on to posterity a more authentic version than he would otherwise be able to; this letter will provide that account. The information which Pliny will go on to supply would obviously have been intended for Tacitus' *Histories*,¹⁰ but since the later books of that work are lost, we do not know what use, if any, Tacitus made of it. It is possible that Pliny's opening sentence is intended to recall the opening of the *Agricola*: *Clarorum virorum facta moresque posteris*

⁶ A.N.Sherwin-White *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford 1966) 36-7, 41.

⁷ Sherwin-White (n.6) *ad loc.*

⁸ See R.Syme *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 112.

⁹ On the relationship between the two men, see M.T.Griffin 'Pliny and Tacitus' *SCI* 18 (1999) 139-58—a useful corrective to an earlier view which saw Pliny and Tacitus as polar opposites.

¹⁰ The work is not here named, but Pliny mentions the *Histories* at 7.33, where he asks Tacitus to include him in them.

tradere (*Agr.* 1.1).¹¹ The reference would be a compliment his correspondent, while at the same time making the point that, just as Tacitus had a distinguished relative in Cn. Iulius Agricola, so too had he one in C. Plinius Secundus. But it is far from certain that the echo is intended: *posteris tradere* is a common phrase. In any event, the opening of the letter (§§ 1-3) makes it clear that its subject is the death of the elder Pliny, and not the eruption of Vesuvius in which he and others lost their lives; this is confirmed later at § 21 *nec tu aliud quam de exitu eius scire voluisti*, and at the beginning of the second letter, *litteris quas...de morte avunculi mei scripsi* (6.20.1).

It may perhaps seem surprising that it was the death of a distinguished Roman, and not the destruction of a number of towns together with their inhabitants, that aroused the interest of the historian. But the deaths of famous Romans are a regular and prominent feature of the *Histories* and *Annals*.¹² The destruction of the towns in the eruption of AD 79 is referred to at the beginning of the *Histories*, but in the same breath as the burning of temples, sacrilege and adultery in high places: *hausta aut obruta fecundissima Campaniae ora; et urbs incendiis vastata, consumptis antiquissimis delubris, ipso Capitolio civium manibus incenso. pollutae caerimoniae, magna adulteria...* (*Hist.* 1.2.2). Although Tacitus' detailed account of the period is lacking, it looks as if he considered incidents of this kind to be noteworthy not so much for their intrinsic interest or significance (still less for the numbers of casualties) as for the gloomy and inauspicious context that they provided for the political events which were his main focus (these events are stated at the beginning of the paragraph: *Hist.* 1.2.1 *quattuor principes ferro interempti*—i.e. the deaths of famous Romans).

¹¹ Tzounakas (n.3) 52-3 also sees an echo of the *Agricola* (*Agr.* 42.4 *sciunt, quibus moris est illicita mirari, posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos viros esse, obsequiumque ac modestiam, si industria ac vigor adsint, eo laudis excedere, quo plerique per abrupta sed in nullum rei publicae usum ambitiosa morte inclaruerunt*) in a letter of Pliny (*Ep.* 1.1.2 *superest ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii*). However, the presence of an echo here is doubtful (especially since the letter is not addressed to Tacitus).

¹² For example, the suicides of Otho at *Hist.* 2.46-9, of Seneca at *Ann.* 15.60-64 and of Petronius at *Ann.* 16.18-19.

Pliny, for his part, explicitly states that history was concerned with spreading the fame of people who deserved immortality. In 5.8, the letter in which he gives his reasons for not following his uncle's example and writing history, he explains why he nevertheless considers writing history a worthwhile occupation: *volo...quia mihi pulchrum in primis videtur non pati occidere, quibus aeternitas debeat, aliorumque famam cum sua extendere* (5.8.1). At the end of both 6.16 and 6.20 a similar view of history is implied. In the first passage, Pliny says: *Interim Miseni ego et mater—sed nihil ad historiam* (6.16.21). The elder Pliny was a fit subject for history, but the author and his mother were not¹³—and as for the thousands who perished in the disaster, it went without saying that they were not worthy of history either. In the second passage, the point is reiterated: *Haec nequaquam historia digna* (6.20.20)—and *haec* here denotes not merely the personal story of Pliny and his mother, but the whole history of the eruption as described in the letter.¹⁴

Ep. 6.16, then, is an account of the death of the elder Pliny—strictly, a ‘Pliny the Elder’ letter, not a ‘Vesuvius’ letter. In the first place, it is source material provided by Pliny for his friend Tacitus; Tacitus will use it (Pliny hopes) to spread the elder Pliny’s fame. But the letter is, secondly, an ambitious literary composition in its own right, what Sherwin-White terms a ‘letter of substance’.¹⁵ It may have been intended as a pair to 3.5, the list of the elder Pliny’s writings and account of his daily routine: 3.5 describes the elder Pliny’s life, 6.16 his death. In the case of 3.5, Pliny gives us a rare indication that his letter is intended not just for the formal addressee, but for a wider readership of *studiosi*: *Fungar indicis partibus, atque*

¹³ Apart from the specific statement of Pliny to this effect (6.16.21), Pliny’s mother had no prominence, and no ancient source even gives her name (Sherwin-White (n.6) on 6.20.4).

¹⁴ *nequaquam historia digna* hints at the historiographical topos of *memoria / memoratu dignus* (cf. Liv. 38.29.3; Tac. *Agr.* 1.2 *agere digna memoratu*; *Ann.* 4.32.1, 13.31.1 *pauca memoria digna evenere*; *Hist.* 2.24.1 *crebra magis quam digna memoratu proelia*); Pliny displays to his historian friend his disinterested view as to what does and does not constitute suitable material for historiography.

¹⁵ Sherwin-White (n.6) 14.

etiam quo sint ordine scripti notum tibi faciam; est enim haec quoque studiosis non iniucunda cognitio (3.5.2). In 6.16, also, it is clear from the outset that a wider readership is envisaged: after all, Tacitus does not need to be informed that he has asked Pliny for an account of his uncle's death. *Ep.* 6.16, being intended, like Tacitus' projected history, for a wide readership, will therefore spread the elder Pliny's fame; and at the same time it will spread Pliny's own, as author.

Ep. 6.20 also opens with a sentence which explains the letter's *raison d'être*: *Ais te adductum litteris quas exigenti tibi de morte avunculi mei scripsi, cupere cognoscere, quos ego Miseni relictus (id enim ingressus abruperam) non solum metus verum etiam casus pertulerim* (§ 1). Tacitus, either out of politeness or from genuine interest, has asked Pliny in the most pressing terms (hence *cupere* not *velle*) for the account of Pliny's own and his mother's experiences which Pliny dramatically cut short at 6.16.21, *Interim Miseni ego et mater*—. This account, since it does not concern the elder Pliny, will be of no use to Tacitus as source material for history, but is nevertheless of considerable human interest, and its content is perfectly suited to the composition of a second ambitious literary letter. *Ep.* 6.20 forms an obvious pair with 6.16 (this diminishes the function of 6.16 as a pair to 3.5). But the particular factor which makes the two letters a pair is not that both are set against the backdrop of Vesuvius: as we have seen, that is incidental. The connection is, rather, that both letters publicise and commemorate the noble actions of a Pliny. In the case of 6.16, the eminence of the Pliny in question makes the letter valuable as source material for history. In the case of 6.20, the younger Pliny's actions are not going to earn him a place in Tacitus' *Histories*: at 7.33, Pliny asks Tacitus for a place in the *Histories*, for an incident which took place in AD 93-94, and it is clear from the words he uses that he has not been mentioned, in any context, in the work to date (7.33.1 *Auguror nec me fallit augurium, historias tuas*

immortales futuras; quo magis illis...inseri cupio).¹⁶ But his exclusion from Tacitus' account of AD 79 would not have prevented his actions in that year from coming to the notice of his contemporaries: after all, 6.20 must have been intended, like 6.16, for a wide readership. Furthermore, Tacitus' failure to include him has had no effect on later posterity: Pliny's letter has survived, whereas the relevant part of the *Histories* has not.

But let us now turn back to 6.16, and look more closely at a letter which publicises and commemorates the noble actions of one Pliny and the literary brilliance of another.

Ep. 6.16: Pliny the Elder

Roland Mayer, writing on Pliny, remarks that 'if we took the letters more seriously as works of art..., we would notice their arrangement in their books with the same attention we accord to the organization of Augustan poetry books'.¹⁷ The first matter to be considered, therefore, is the placing of 6.16 within its book. At first glance, 6.16 and 6.20 appear simply to be placed in the middle of a book amongst letters of relatively little consequence. The letter immediately preceding 6.16, however, is significant. In 6.15 Pliny relates with disapproval an act of clownish behaviour which has taken place at a poetry recital (6.17 also concerns a recital). An *eques*, Passenus Paullus—a man who, Pliny explains, claimed descent from the poet Propertius—introduced his performance by addressing his friend Iavolenus Priscus, who was present, with the words, '*Prisce, iubes...*'; whereupon Priscus replied, '*Ego vero non iubeo*', and the audience fell about laughing (6.15.2).¹⁸ To an educated

¹⁶ Pace Griffin (n.9) 140-1. See further Syme (n.8) 119-20 on Pliny's request and Tacitus' composition of the *Histories*. The terms in which the request is couched might, as the *PLLS* referee suggested, allude to Pliny's own status as an augur.

¹⁷ R.Mayer 'Pliny and *gloria dicendi*' *Arethusa* 36.2 (2003) 227-34, 232.

¹⁸ J.C.Yardley ('*Prisce iubes* again' *CR* n.s. 22 (1972) 314-15) is surely right to argue that Priscus' interjection was 'simply a joke' (315 n.5) rather than a subtle piece of literary criticism. On the use of *iubere* ('bid') with reference to literary requests, see P.White

Roman, however, the reference to an Augustan poet and the emphasis on the word *iubes* might well call to mind Aeneas' words at the opening of Virgil's *Aeneid* 2, as Aeneas responds to Dido's request for an account of his experiences (*Aen.* 2.3):

infandum, regina, iubes renovare dolorem.

Then in the next letter, of course, Pliny responds to Tacitus' request, and renews his own unspeakable grief by relating the circumstances of his uncle's death. The content of 6.15 is comical, that of 6.16 serious; but to the alert reader 6.15 nevertheless provides a hint of what is to follow, by alluding to the depth of Pliny's sorrow, and also the epic nature of what he is about to tell (*Aeneid* 2 describes the destruction of a city, while 6.16 is set against the destruction of cities and their peoples; cf. 6.16.2 *ut populi ut urbes memorabili casu*). Pliny does not quote the rest of Aeneas' proem here, but it could just as well serve as a proem to 6.16, addressed to Tacitus (*Aen.* 2.10-13):

sed si tantus amor casus cognoscere nostros
et breviter Troiae supremum audire laborem,
quamquam animus meminisse horret luctuque refugit,
incipiam.

However, Pliny does actually quote lines 12-13 of *Aeneid* 2, not here, but in the proem to 6.20 (§ 1): he has kept them back for his second letter because that is the letter in which, like Aeneas, he describes his own experiences (cf. *casus...nostros*). *Epp.* 6.15, 6.16 and 6.20, then, are bound together in a network of Virgilian allusion.

The proem to 6.16 in fact thanks Tacitus for his request, and then declares that, although the elder Pliny's memorable death and the number and lasting value of his books have already secured for him a kind of immortal life (§ 2 *quasi semper victurus*), nevertheless the eternity of Tacitus' writings will add much to his permanence (§ 2 *multum tamen perpetuitati eius scriptorum tuorum aeternitas addet*). The statement borders on paradox, but is a neat solution to the difficult rhetorical challenge of expressing fulsome gratitude to Tacitus while at the same time not dishonouring the elder Pliny's memory by conceding that he has not already attained immortality. Pliny would have expected Tacitus to notice his difficulty, and admire the delicacy and artfulness with which he has overcome it.

The narration which occupies the bulk of the letter begins at § 4. Pliny wastes no time. In the first sentence he tells us that his uncle was in command of the fleet at Misenum. In the second, Pliny's mother draws her brother's attention to a strange cloud. The elder Pliny had not noticed this, because he was busy studying (the information bears out what we were told about his habits at 3.5). Pliny then gives us his celebrated description of the cloud as resembling an umbrella pine. Being so learned (§ 7 *eruditissimo viro*), the elder Pliny realised that the cloud was important, and decided on a closer inspection. He ordered a warship to be made ready, and invited his nephew to join him; but Pliny, who was not the man of action that his uncle was,¹⁹ preferred to stay at home and study. Somewhat defensively, he explains that the task which prevented him from going to look at the eruption had been given to him by his uncle. We learn only at 6.20.5 what this was: he had to copy out some passages of Livy.

As he was leaving his house, the elder Pliny received a message from a woman named Rectina, who lived at the foot of Vesuvius, asking him to rescue her. This made him aware

¹⁹ Pliny admits this himself at 3.5.19 *qui si comparer illi sum desidiosissimus* (cf. Sherwin-White (n.6) 51).

that not only she but others were in danger, and he therefore changed his plans. *Quod studioso animo incohaverat obit maximo* (§ 9) is Pliny's wonderfully terse summation (the resolved double-cretic clausula, familiar from Cicero's speeches, adds to the impressive effect):²⁰ the sentence could serve as his uncle's epitaph. The elder Pliny launched the fleet (*deducit quadriremes*)—a decision which may conceivably have resulted in the saving of lives, though Pliny, who keeps the spotlight on his uncle throughout, declines to tell us whether or not it did. The passage which follows (§§ 10-11) is a piece of *enargeia*²¹ worthy of a great orator: we are given a memorable picture of the elder Pliny sailing towards the danger when everyone else is sailing away, and fearlessly dictating notes as lumps of hot ash fall round about him. The message is that this is a man who is greater than other men, and who combines the virtues of the scientist and the man of action.

Unable to land near Rectina's villa, the elder Pliny considers turning back. But when his helmsman urges him to do just this—giving him advice which would have saved his life—he decides to make instead for Pomponianus at Stabiae. He is prevented from going forward by the ash, and he has evidently concluded that it would be an act of cowardice to go back—so to Stabiae it had to be. *'Fortes' inquit 'fortuna iuvat: Pomponianum pete'* (§ 11). This is the only direct speech he is given in the whole account. The terse brevity is characteristic of a man well used to giving orders, and of someone who in his private life would not allow a single moment to be wasted (cf. 3.5.12-13). It also, when combined with the alliteration,

²⁰ On Ciceronian clausulae, see T.Zielinski *Das Clauselgesetz in Ciceros Reden* (Leipzig 1904; = *Philologus* Suppl. 9.4 (1904) 589-844); R.G.M.Nisbet 'Cola and clausulae in Cicero's speeches' in E.M.Craik (ed.) *Owls to Athens': Essays on Classical Subjects Presented to Sir Kenneth Dover* (Oxford 1990) 349-59; D.H.Berry 'The value of prose rhythm in questions of authenticity: the case of *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* attributed to Cicero' *PLLS* 9 (1996) 47-74.

²¹ On *enargeia* (*evidentia* in Latin), see H.Lausberg *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric* (Leiden 1998) 359-66. On the use of the technique in Roman oratory, see A.Vasaly *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory* (Berkeley etc. 1993) 89-104. J.A.Maritz 'The eruption of Vesuvius: technicolour (*sic*) and cinemascope?' *Akroterion* 19 (1974) 12-15 argues that this letter makes use of the 'zoom-lens' techniques of modern cinematography.

provides an archaic flavour (cf. Enn. *Ann.* 233 Skutsch *fortibus est fortuna viris data*): the elder Pliny resembles a hero of early Roman history. *Fortes fortuna iuvat*, which was proverbial,²² is what a commander might say to encourage his troops (as Turnus does at *Aen.* 10.284 *audentis fortuna iuvat*); in this case, ironically, the maxim would not hold true. Rectina, abandoned to her fate, is not mentioned, though Pliny must have known whether or not she survived. The reason is that he wishes to focus on his uncle alone: all the other characters who feature in the letter are mentioned only in order to shed light in some way on the elder Pliny's thoughts or actions.

The elder Pliny lands at Stabiae, and comforts his friend; but they are trapped where they are, unable to leave until the wind changes. From here onwards the elder Pliny devotes himself to setting an example which will reassure and inspire his companions. He bathes, dines, and enjoys himself, or pretends to. To allay his companions' fears, he declares that the fires on Vesuvius are bonfires left by terrified peasants, or else abandoned houses that have caught fire. Finally, he, and he alone, goes to sleep—and does genuinely sleep. It is a formidably impressive display of *securitas* (the term used at § 12).

He is wakened at the moment when, if he were to remain in the bedroom any longer, he would be entombed. The party leave Pomponianus' house, which is in danger of collapse: the elder Pliny was motivated by reason, the rest by fear (§ 16 *apud illum quidem ratio rationem, apud alios timorem timor vicit*).²³ Escape by sea is still impossible. The elder Pliny lies down; there is a smell of sulphur, and flames; the others run off; the old man stands up (helped by two slaves, who presumably refused to abandon their master), and is

²² See A. Otto *Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer* (Leipzig 1890) 144.

²³ The chiasmic inversion *timorem timor* allows the sentence to end with a cretic-trochee clausula.

asphyxiated (§ 19).²⁴ His body is found, intact and unharmed, the next day. Pliny does not tell us whether Pomponianus and the others survived; but some of them must have done, since they will be the source for his account.²⁵ He does not tell us, either, whether he held anyone to blame for his uncle's death. His feelings are nowhere stated.

The feelings of a modern reader, reading this account, might be rather different from those of Pliny. One such reader is Umberto Eco, who writes as follows:²⁶

When one carefully reconsiders the bare *fabula*, one gets the impression of reading the story of a very narcissistic and narrow-minded Roman admiral, completely unable to cope with the situation (in short, this efficient rescuer not only did not help anybody but also succeeded in depriving the fleet of its commander in chief, just when some efficiency was needed from the local military authority). Pliny the Younger does not conceal anything; if Tacitus had wished, he could have extrapolated the real story (perhaps he did) precisely as we are now doing.

For Eco, there are, in the first place, the bare facts: the elder Pliny moves towards the eruption before knowing that it is an eruption; even when he arrives at Stabiae, he is unaware of the scale of the disaster; and when he does finally understand that there is no escape, it is too late, and he dies. From these bare facts, we, and perhaps Tacitus, extrapolate the 'real story'—that the elder Pliny was self-centred and ineffectual, with disastrous consequences. Pliny's letter, however, is not addressed to an empirical addressee: 'it builds up, by a

²⁴ The *Vita Plinii Secundi* ascribed to Suetonius mentions a version in which the elder Pliny was overcome by the heat, and ordered a slave to kill him (for a discussion of the authorship of this work, see B. Baldwin *Suetonius* (Amsterdam 1983) 400-5). Sallmann (n.5) suggests that it was in order tacitly to correct that version that Pliny wrote this letter.

²⁵ Not perhaps the sole source, if the elder Pliny's notes (§10) were recovered (as suggested by F.A. Sullivan 'Pliny *Epistulae* 6.16 and 20 and modern vulcanology' *CP* 63 (1968) 196-200, 196). These notes could conceivably be the source for the information in § 11.

²⁶ U.Eco *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis 1990) 128.

discursive strategy, the type of reader who is supposed to cooperate in order to actualize the text such as the Model Author...wants it to be. We can refuse to play the role of the Model Reader...'²⁷

The problem with this analysis is that Eco has selected as his bare facts those details of the story that could be taken to reflect badly on the elder Pliny, while ignoring those that could be taken to reflect well on him (such as his launching of the fleet, his refusal to save himself while there was still a chance of saving others, and so on). As a result, what Eco terms the 'real story' is in reality simply his own interpretation of those facts. However, he must be correct in arguing that the letter is not addressed to an empirical addressee: Pliny views his uncle as a hero, and his text assumes that the reader will reach the same conclusion from the presentation of the facts that is given. The reader may or, as in Eco's case, may not reach this conclusion. But if it were as self-evident as Eco believes that the elder Pliny died in circumstances which were uniformly discreditable to him, then one would need to explain why Tacitus was so tactless as to ask the dead man's nephew to provide him with an account of them in the first place.

At § 21 of the letter, Pliny breaks off his narrative: *Interim Miseni ego et mater—sed nihil ad historiam, nec tu aliud quam de exitu eius scire voluisti*. With a certain rhetorical flamboyance (achieved by the use of *aposiopesis*, followed by a typically Ciceronian *esse videatur* clausula at *scire voluisti*), he draws attention to his restraint in restricting himself thus far to the point on which Tacitus had asked for information; and he hints that he has another tale to tell. Politeness then required of his correspondent that he ask him for it; and that was the cue for the sequel.

²⁷ *ibid.*

Ep. 6.20: Pliny the Younger

Ep. 6.20 begins with the Virgilian quotation discussed above: Pliny will tell Tacitus of his experiences at Misenum after his uncle's departure. He does not say 'my and my mother's experiences': in this letter he wishes the focus to be entirely on himself, so that the letter will form an exact counterpart to the earlier one. After his uncle's departure, he spent the rest of the day studying, then bathed, dined and retired to his bedroom; but he slept only fitfully, because of the violent tremors that were shaking the house. This corresponds with what the elder Pliny was doing at Stabiae at the same time, but whereas the nephew's sleep was *inquietus et brevis* (§ 2), the uncle *quievit verissimo quidem somno* (6.16.13). The uncle was woken, to prevent his becoming entombed; Pliny's mother came to wake her son, but found him already getting up, so that he could go and wake her, if she were still asleep. Pliny and his mother then went out to the courtyard of their house, and Pliny called for his volume of Livy and resumed his earlier work (§ 5 *lego atque etiam ut coeperam excerpo*); his manner of work was the same as that of his uncle (cf. 3.5.10 *nihil enim legit quod non exciperet*). With apparent modesty, Pliny in the letter hesitates whether to attribute his behaviour to *constantia* or *imprudencia*, pointing out that he was only seventeen at the time (the information also serves to justify his decision not to accompany his uncle); but he would presumably like us to compare his *constantia* with that of the elder Pliny. Both men deliberately carried on as normal in order to reassure those around them.

The detail that Pliny was reading Livy is striking. Why does he think it worth telling Tacitus what the book was?²⁸ If he had been reading a different author—Plautus or Terence, for instance (two authors named in the letter which follows)—would he have mentioned the

²⁸ My question assumes that Pliny really was reading Livy. The assumption is questionable; nevertheless, Livy is recommended by Quintilian as a suitable author for boys beginning their rhetorical education (*Inst.* 2.5.19)—and Quintilian was Pliny's teacher (*Plin. Ep.* 2.14.9, 6.6.3).

fact? Now had the detail been included not in this letter but in 6.16, we might well regard it as significant. We would notice the fact that that letter is, up to a point, a piece of historiography,²⁹ and conclude that Pliny was perhaps using the reference to Livy to denote his earlier self as a proto-historian. But 6.20 is not historiography, since its subject matter is not worthy of history (cf. 6.16.21 *sed nihil ad historiam*; 6.20.20 *Haec nequaquam historia digna*).³⁰ The reference to Livy will therefore have been included either because it has some other significance or simply because it is a detail which would potentially appeal to Tacitus, Tacitus being a man with historical interests. Otto Schönberger has made the attractive suggestion that the significance of the reference lies in that fact that Livy's history is, among other things, a repository of *exempla virtutis*.³¹ Pliny has just drawn attention to his own *constantia* in his unswerving dedication to the task in hand. *constantia* was a traditional Roman virtue; and of course the elder Pliny's behaviour, as we have seen, is even more obviously reminiscent of that of the heroes of early Rome.

While Pliny and his mother were sitting in the courtyard, a friend of the elder Pliny's from Spain suddenly appeared on the scene (§ 5). He rebuked Pliny for acting as though there were nothing amiss, but Pliny continued his reading. At this point in the narrative, the friend from Spain serves simply as a foil to Pliny, making the latter's equanimity more conspicuous;

²⁹ Traub (n.3) takes the view that Pliny in 6.16 (and in other letters) uses the epistolary form to write history. Ash (n.3) argues that Pliny uses the letter form to celebrate deserving individuals without going so far as to adopt the formal structure of historiography: 'Pliny...allows elements of historiography to infiltrate his letters, taking up what he considers important but abandoning the constraints of the genre so that he can best serve posterity' (224). These views are not necessarily contradicted by Pliny's programmatic statement that in publishing a collection of his letters he was not producing history (1.1.1 *neque enim historiam componebam*).

³⁰ Augoustakis (n.3) argues that Pliny's frequent use of the historic infinitive in this letter shows that his claims that 6.20 is not history are disingenuous. The style may indeed be historical, but the content is not, as Pliny fulsomely acknowledges.

³¹ O.Schönberger 'Die Vesuv-Briefe des jüngeren Plinius (VI 16 und 20)' *Gymnasium* 97 (1990) 526-48, 535-9.

but at §§ 10-11 Pliny will make the contrast between his own behaviour and that of the Spaniard much more pointed.

At dawn, with their house shaking, Pliny's party decided to leave Misenum (§§ 6-7). Their decision was prompted by reason; but they were followed by a large crowd who were, in the modern idiom, 'in shock' (*attonitum*), and whose behaviour was irrational (§ 7). The situation exactly parallels that in which the elder Pliny's party left Pomponianus' house (cf. 6.16.16 *apud illum quidem ratio rationem, apud alios timorem timor vicit*). Once the nephew's party were clear of Misenum and therefore out of danger of collapsing buildings, they halted, and Pliny at this point provides a description of the natural phenomena that they witnessed (§§ 8-9); in detail and quality of observation, this may be compared with the descriptions of the phenomena distributed throughout 6.16. He describes the carriages rolling around on level ground; the sea being sucked away, leaving marine creatures stranded; and the black cloud being rent by blasts of fire. In both 6.16 and 6.20, and in other letters, particularly the 'scientific' ones (for example 4.30 and 8.20), Pliny shows a talent for precise description; it is a talent that any scientist (such as his uncle) would have needed, but also one which was necessary in an advocate. Modern scholars remark on the lack of exaggeration in Pliny's descriptions of the eruption of Vesuvius;³² the temptation to exaggerate must have been considerable. In these letters we find no mention of the giants which feature so prominently in Dio's later account.³³

At §§ 10-11 the friend from Spain puts in his second appearance. In a passage of direct speech, he is made to pose a rhetorical dilemma: if the elder Pliny is still alive, he will want Pliny and his mother to survive also; and if he is dead, he would have wanted them both

³² See B.Radice 'The *Letters* of Pliny' in T.A.Dorey (ed.) *Empire and Aftermath: Silver Latin II* (London 1975) 134-5; cf. Sherwin-White (n.6) on 4.30.10.

³³ Dio 66.22-3.

to survive him; so why not run away? Pliny and his mother simply ignore the force of this logic and reply that they will not put their safety before the elder Pliny's; whereupon the friend makes his escape (§ 11 *non moratus ultra proripit se effusoque cursu periculo aufertur*). It is an unedifying spectacle: the friend comes across as selfish and faintly ridiculous. So why has Pliny included him? The answer must be partly because his appearance in the narrative serves to underline the dignity of Pliny's own conduct. But it also seems likely that Pliny was disgusted by the man's behaviour, and particularly perhaps by his lack of any true concern for the elder Pliny's fate, and so decided to put him in his account as an act of revenge. If this was one of his reasons for including him, it would explain why the man is not named: in Latin public address, to name a person is very often to pay him honour (hence the formula *quem honoris causa nomino*), whereas to refrain from naming him can be a sign of disapproval or outright hostility.³⁴ Of course, if Pliny has invented the character,³⁵ then that might be a reason why he is not named; but scholars have not so far succeeded (to my mind) in proving that a single detail in either this letter or 6.16 is invented.³⁶ I would therefore prefer to conclude that the friend from Spain is real; that Pliny, nearly three decades after the event, wishes to place the man's cowardly and crass behaviour on record; and that he declines to name him specifically in order to signal his disapproval. If this is indeed what is happening, then we have here a further instance of Pliny's malice to add to the others which scholars have pointed to in the letters.³⁷

³⁴ On avoidance of naming in Cicero, see J.N.Adams 'Conventions of naming in Cicero' *CQ* n.s. 28 (1978) 145-66, 163-4.

³⁵ Gigante (n.5) 41-2 (= *PP* 34 (1979) 321-76, 351-2) regards the episode as most likely a fiction derived from Virgil's account of the death of Androgeos at *Aen.* 2.370-95.

³⁶ That is not of course to deny that Pliny puts his own gloss on the events that he describes (through selection of material and explicit authorial comment). R.Cooney ('Fortes fortuna iuvat. Fiktion und Realität im 1. Vesuvbrief des Jüngeren Plinius VI, 16' *GB* 14 (1987) 215-28) argues that parts of 6.16 are fictional; however, cf. n.2 above on the essential accuracy of the scientific details. Sallmann (n.5) 218 observes that we simply do not know the extent to which the details of Pliny's account correspond with reality.

³⁷ See for instance A.N.Sherwin-White 'Pliny, the man and his letters' *G&R* 16 (1969) 76-90, 79-80.

Next, Pliny's mother makes a rhetorical appeal to him, reported in indirect speech (§ 12): *Tum mater orare hortari iubere, quoquo modo fugerem; posse enim iuvenem, se et annis et corpore gravem bene morituram, si mihi causa mortis non fuisset.* Here the rhetoric gives a sense of urgency and emotion; there seems to be a warmth of feeling that was absent in the friend from Spain's dilemma. But Pliny replies on the same lines as before, and says that he will not put his own safety before his mother's. In recounting the exchange, Pliny may have in mind the scene at *Aeneid* 2.634-49 where Anchises urges Aeneas to flee the burning Troy without him (the letter opened with a quotation from this book); but there are no verbal allusions to the Virgilian text.³⁸

So Pliny and his mother continue their flight together, pursued by a thick blackness. They realise that they will be overtaken by this blackness and therefore decide to move out of the road, to save themselves from being trampled by the fleeing crowd; as before, rational considerations guide their actions. The blackness catches up with them: it is not the dark of a moonless night, but as if a light has been put out in an enclosed space (§ 14). The comparison is truly frightening, because it gives a sense that the danger is very near at hand. At this point Pliny describes the sounds he could hear in the blackness as he sat beside the road and listened (§§ 14-15):

Audires ululatus feminarum, infantum quiritatus, clamores virorum; alii parentes alii liberos alii coniuges vocibus requirebant, vocibus noscitabant; hi suum casum, illi suorum miserabantur; erant qui metu mortis mortem precarentur; multi ad deos manus tollere, plures nusquam iam deos ullos aeternamque illam et novissimam noctem

³⁸ The parallel with Anchises is pointed out by W.Görler 'Kaltblütiges Schnarchen' in G.W.Bowersock, W.Burkert and M.C.J.Putnam *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies presented to Bernard M.W.Knox on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday* (Berlin and New York 1979) 427-33, 427. The rest of Görler's article, on alleged parallels with Lucan's description of the panic in Italy in January 49 BC (Luc. 1.469-98) and Livy's description of the death of Archimedes at Syracuse in 211 BC (Liv. 25.31.9), is much more speculative.

mundo interpretabantur. Nec defuerunt qui fictis mentitisque terroribus vera pericula auferent. Aderant qui Miseni illud ruisse illud ardere falso sed credentibus nuntiabant.

It is the most rhetorical passage in either letter (except at *miserabantur*, there is a Ciceronian rhythm before every mark of punctuation). It could easily be a passage of Livy.³⁹ Its primary generic affiliation, however, is with oratory, not historiography: it resembles historiography only inasmuch as historiography is rhetorical (and Pliny states at 5.8.9 that oratory and history have much in common). The mental impression which the passage gives us is so powerful that it is tempting to treat it as an instance of *enargeia*. However, *enargeia* denotes a depiction of a visual image,⁴⁰ and here the image is auditory: there is nothing whatsoever that can be seen.

This passage (continuing to § 17) also contains a philosophical element. Obviously, the whole tenor of the elder Pliny's actions in 6.16 is Stoic, and Pliny's actions in 6.20, being in the same tradition as his uncle's, are Stoic also. But here the phrase *erant qui metu mortis mortem precarentur* (§ 14) has an Epicurean connotation. Lucretius, at the end of the prologue to *De Rerum Natura* 3, describes how the fear of death sometimes drives people (paradoxically) to take their own lives (3.79-81):⁴¹

³⁹ Cf., for example, Livy's account of the destruction of Alba Longa at 1.29 (where, by contrast, the inhabitants of the doomed city maintain a grim silence). A.J. Woodman writes: 'Pliny, like his hero Cicero, never got round to writing the history which his friend urged; but it is clear that, had he done so, he would have chosen the style required by Cicero and employed by Livy' (*Rhetoric in Classical Historiography* (London 1988) 144).

⁴⁰ See the definitions cited at Lausberg (n.21) 359-61.

⁴¹ The parallel is noted by Gigante (n.5) 46 (= *PP* 34 (1979) 321-76, 356); he does not, however, point out the connection between the lines which follow (3.87-90) and the scene which Pliny is describing.

et saepe usque adeo, mortis formidine, vitae
 percipit humanos odium lucisque videndae,
 ut sibi consciscant maerenti pectore letum.

He then goes on to say that such people are like children who are afraid of the dark (3.87-90):

nam veluti pueri trepidant atque omnia caecis
 in tenebris metuunt, sic nos in luce timemus
 interdum nihilo quae sunt metuenda magis quam
 quae pueri in tenebris pavitant finguntque futura.

As with the section in which Virgil may be being recalled, there are no verbal allusions to confirm the association, but even so it seems on the whole more likely than not that Pliny, listening to the cries of his fellow men in the darkness outside Misenum or reflecting on the experience afterwards, cast his mind back to Lucretius' famous passage.

Sherwin-White has detected philosophical influence immediately afterwards at *plures nusquam iam deos ullos aeternamque illam et novissimam noctem mundo interpretabantur* (§ 15); he relates this to the Stoic idea of the world ending in a catastrophe of fire and flood.⁴² However, at this point in the narrative, it is absolute blackness which has terrified the crowd, not fire. Nevertheless, this idea may be in Pliny's mind a little later at § 17 where he says that he derived considerable consolation for his own imminent death from the reflection that the whole world was dying with him. By that point, the fire had returned.

⁴² Sherwin-White (n.6) *ad loc.*

At § 18-20 Pliny describes what happened once the blackness had dispersed. The terrified spectators looked out on a landscape covered with ash as if by snowdrifts. Pliny and his mother returned to Misenum, despite the continuing earthquakes, and resolved not to leave until they had had news of the elder Pliny. At that point (with the ominous words *donec de avunculo nuntius*) Pliny cuts off the narrative—just before they receive the news of their relative’s death. There is great poignancy: we know the content of 6.16, but Pliny and his mother are just about to discover it.

Pliny ends the letter by telling Tacitus that the story he has told is not worthy of history (§ 20). That is true: the teenage Pliny and his mother would not feature in Tacitus’ *Histories*, and both men knew it. But he also knew that he had written one of his very finest letters, and so his closing remark—that the story was not worthy even of a letter—is an extravagant piece of false modesty.

The Pliny narratives: some conclusions

I have argued that, although 6.16 is up to a point a piece of historiography, and would serve as source material for history, neither letter was written primarily as history. Instead, these are first and foremost ambitious literary letters, ‘letters of substance’, intended to spread the fame of their respective Pliny before a wide readership. The first one presents the elder Pliny as a dedicated scientist and a man of action; and the second presents a younger Pliny whose behaviour resembled that of his famous uncle, and who, in the most testing circumstances imaginable, was proved worthy of him.⁴³ In addition, both letters show the

⁴³ I am not persuaded by the closely similar arguments of E.Lefèvre (‘Plinius-Studien VI. Der große und der kleine Plinius. Die Vesuv-Briefe (6,16; 6,20)’ *Gymnasium* 103 (1996) 193-215) and N.F.Jones (‘Pliny the Younger’s Vesuvius *Letters* (6.16 and 6.20)’ *CW* 95 (2001) 31-48) that 6.20 is an admission by the mature Pliny of how he, as a young man, failed to live up to his uncle’s fine example.

younger Pliny to be a literary artist of the highest order. As befits letters written by one advocate and sent to another, they show a strong rhetorical influence. They show this above all in the quality of the narrative and the description; but the second half of the second letter is in addition a great rhetorical set-piece in the grand manner. In referring to these letters, then, one might more accurately speak not of the Vesuvius letters, but of the Pliny narratives.

In a recent article entitled ‘Pliny and *gloria dicendi*’, Mayer discusses Pliny’s anxious quest for *gloria*.⁴⁴ Pliny’s fame, such as it was, was based on his achievements as an advocate; however, the cases that he undertook, unlike Cicero’s, were not likely to be of much interest to posterity. One purpose of the letters, Mayer argues, was therefore to promote interest in Pliny’s published speeches, by providing details of the cases in which he was involved and drawing attention to his success as an advocate. The Pliny narratives, I suggest, have a similar purpose. Although not speeches, they nevertheless provide evidence of Pliny’s ability as an orator, while their subject matter is certainly more dramatic and engrossing than that of any speech that Pliny will ever have delivered. And whereas all of Pliny’s forensic speeches are now lost, these letters survive and are today the principal reason for their author’s posthumous fame.

⁴⁴ Mayer (n.17) 227-34. Pliny’s quest for *gloria* is also discussed in D.S.Barrett ‘Pliny, *Ep.* 6.20 again’ *CB* 43.3 (1972) 38-40.