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# PLINY THE YOUNGER AND THE ART OF NARRATION

## (SOME NOTES ON THE *EPISTULAE*)[1]

**ABSTRACT:** In this paper I try to examine some of Pliny's well known letters as pieces of literary fiction. The main interest here is not the authenticity of facts presented, but some literary techniques that Pliny uses in order to make his descriptions more vivid.

**KEY WORDS:** Pliny the Younger, narration, fiction, epistolography

## INTRODUCTION

Whoever wants to discuss the craftsmanship of Pliny's *Epistulae* must not forget that his ambitions and efforts were above all artistic. Like Tacitus and Suetonius (both his close friends), like Vergil, Lucan and Statius, Pliny the Younger had one major objective: to tell an entertaining story.

There is no exaggeration in saying that the authenticity of the letters as correspondence (altogether ten books) is highly doubtful. Some modern scholars regard the *Epistulae* as entirely fictitious, while others

[1] Some of the conclusions presented in this paper arose as a result of my studies during Lanckoronski Foundation scholarship stays in Rome (2015) and London (2017).

speak of the letters as a revision of simpler originals.[2] The reader may get some idea of Pliny's technique is on the basis of the first letter of the collection, addressed to one equestrian Septicius Clarus, probably also a friend of Suetonius Tranquillus.[3] We read in the opening phrase: *You have constantly urged me to collect and publish the more highly finished of the letters that I may have written* (I 1, 1).[4] Also, Pliny speaks about letters written with greater care and diligence in e.g. VII 9; IX 29; IX 2. We can then assume that letters *quas paulo curatius scripsissem* were not supposed to lie deep in a box, but to be shown to others such as Septicius Clarus. While reading Pliny's correspondence, one letter after another in accordance with their arrangement, we strengthen our belief that we are dealing here with a highly thought-out system. Were we to look for a comparison to a contemporary literary work, a modern diary like the one by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński would be a fairly good example.[5] The narrative that both authors construct and develop over the years (guided by the principle of continuous return) feature a number of different strands devoted to various topics and an impressive number of individuals: friends, enemies, idols and tutors, historical figures (both native and foreigners), literary characters and so on.[6] Thanks to this technique, which was perhaps invented by Pliny himself, we obtain a kind of *Journal of Pliny the Younger*, while the form of an *epistula* collection is only an (intelligent) excuse.

Another aspect to mention, while discussing historicity and authenticity of Pliny's *Epistulae*, is literary imitation. As Sherwin-White stated, "Pliny certainly writes under strong literary influences, both in the language and the content of the letters. Reminiscences of Vergil and of various subsequent writers of the imperial period are common enough. Themes from Cicero, the *Silvae* of Statius, and the lyrics of Martial

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2 Sherwin-White 1966: 11.

3 Suetonius' work *De vita Caesarum* is dedicated to Septicius Clarus.

4 All translations from Pliny's letters by J.B. Firth (1900) with a few words and phrases modified or modernized. I have decided to leave some longer quotations in the main text in order to give a taste of Pliny's narrative technique.

5 G. Herling-Grudziński's *Dziennik pisany nocą* in three volumes covering the years 1971–2000 has been recently reissued: Kraków 2011–2012.

6 See more on groups of letters in Sherwin-White 1966: 11–16; on chronology: 27–41; on the classification and distribution of types: 42–52.

recur."[7] Anne-Marie Guillemin in *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps*, "musters [these influences] for an attack on the truth and accuracy of the letters."[8] As literary influences are not the subject matter of this paper,[9] let us limit ourselves to the statement that Pliny's correspondence is without a doubt a self-conscious element of literary (Greek and Roman) tradition.

## NARRATION IN THEORY

Before we go any further, it is worth stopping for a moment and taking a glimpse at the issue of narrative theory.

In narratology there is a tradition of a tripartition of narrative: text (signs), the story (aspects, such as time or space) and the plot (elements, e.g. events). Such an approach to a literary work is now considered in narrative studies as relatively universal. It was most clearly and logically justified in Mieke Bal's *Narratology*.[10] It has also been adopted – with some modifications – in the field of classical studies, especially in Irene F.J. de Jong's *Narratology and Classics: A Practical Guide*.[11]

Those three levels could be described as follows: (1.) Narrative text is a text in which the author communicates to the recipient (here: tells a reader) a certain story through a specific medium (language). In general, the text is a finite and ordered whole, consisting of characters (letters, words etc.). (2.) The content of such a narrative text is called the story. On this level we deal with the narrator, time and space, as well as characters. (3.) Finally, the system of related events, that are triggered or experienced by actors, is a plot. This level was thoroughly examined in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Such a division is only conventional, but sometimes it turns out to be useful in analyzing a literary work. It is needed when it can bring

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7 Sherwin-White 1966: 16.

8 Sherwin-White 1966: 16.

9 Pliny's affinity with some other authors, especially Roman ones, has been the subject of research. Let us note that their great number only strengthens the claim that his letters are mostly of literary character. For more, see Marchesi 2008.

10 Bal 1997.

11 De Jong 2014.

something new, e.g. about construction of a character, reliability of the narrator or space as described in a story.

Among the most important lessons that can be drawn from studying the narrative are observations such as: the author and the narrator are always different; the time of the story and the time of the plot are not the same; a character is not identical with an actor (an actor does not have to be even a man) etc. Also, narratology helps us to trace strategies of misleading and deception, often developed by narrators.

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In the forthcoming paragraphs I will try to examine some of Pliny's letters as largely a manifestation of Latin fiction, rather than historical evidence of Pliny's epoch and the everyday life of his contemporaries.

Among the diversity of letters (as indicated before, collected in ten books) one will easily find some texts which can be described and analyzed as short stories or novellas. Let us now choose five letters (and four narratives) in order to take a closer look at Pliny's art of narration. These are: two letters (VI 16 and VI 20) on the eruption of Vesuvius, one on a friendly dolphin (IX 33), one on flooding of the Tiber (VIII 17), and one on ghosts (VII 27).

## AN EPIC ADVENTURE

Probably the best known of Pliny's letters, and also maybe the most important for us,[12] is the one (to be strict: two) considering events that accompanied the eruption of Vesuvius on 24th August in AD 79. Both letters, VI 16 and VI 20 are addressed to Pliny's friend Cornelius Tacitus. The date of those two letters (as that of some other *epistulae* addressed

[12] Pliny's account on this significant moment is the only one that survived from that period. We can be pretty sure that he was the only eyewitness of the Vesuvius disaster who wrote his memories down (some years after) with the purpose of publishing them. I think the fact that he wrote to Tacitus *Petis ut tibi avunculi mei exitum scribam, quo verius tradere posteris possis* (VI 16, 1), was merely an excuse, albeit a good one. Above all, Pliny wanted to tell this unusual story by himself.

to Tacitus) is uncertain, but it is highly possible that they were written in 104 or later.[13]

The importance of this account is that Pliny wanted to describe events that occurred in two different locations at the same time, or to put it in other words: he wanted to create and develop two narratives concerning the two main characters, Pliny the Elder, his uncle, and himself. It is difficult to determine whether the story would fit into one letter or whether Pliny tried to do it, but in any case his intuition was accurate. He decided eventually to divide his narrative into two independent accounts, one about his uncle (VI 16) and one about him and his mother (VI 20). He also wisely connected them by starting the first letter with the following words: *You say that the letter which I wrote to you at your request, describing the death of my uncle, has made you anxious to know not only the terrors, but also the distress I suffered while I remained behind at Misenum. I had indeed started to tell you of these, but then broke off* (VI 20, 1). This statement is an obvious allusion to: *Meanwhile my mother and I were at Misenum. But that is of no consequence for the purposes of history, nor indeed did you express a wish to be told of anything except of my uncle's death. So I will say no more* (VI 16, 21). It is highly doubtful if words „meanwhile my mother and I were in Misenum" were put here accidentally. We can assume Pliny ended letter VI 16 that way in order to announce the forthcoming one, VI 20.

The former begins with the following passage: *My uncle was stationed at Misenum, where he was in active command of the fleet, with full powers* (VI 16, 4).[14] Earlier that day the author's uncle had been sunbathing, then taking a cold bath, after which he had his meal, and now he was reading a book. Of course, a mysterious cloud drew his attention immediately, which soon turned out to be rising from Vesuvius. Pliny the Elder decided to abandon everything he was doing or planning, and to study more thoroughly this unusual phenomenon. *He was just leaving the house when he received a written message from Rectina, the wife of Tascus, who was terrified at the peril threatening her – for her villa lay just beneath the mountain, and there were no means of escape save by shipboard – begging him to save her from her perilous position. So he*

[13] Sherwin-White 1966: 371.

[14] In the year AD 79 the Younger Pliny was about 17 years old.

*changed his plans, and carried out with the greatest fortitude the task, which he had started as a scholarly inquiry* (VI 16, 8–10). So Pliny the Elder, a prefect in the Roman navy, left his sister and his nephew in Misenum and raced ahead towards the raging Vesuvius.

What was happening afterwards we all know enough well: Pliny the Elder sailed along the coast, constantly exposed to danger (VI 16, 11: *Already ashes were beginning to fall upon the ships, hotter and in thicker showers as they approached more nearly, with pumice-stones and black flints, charred and cracked by the heat of the flames, while their way was barred by the sudden shoaling of the sea bottom and the litter of the mountain on the shore*), and reached Stabiae, where he found his friend Tascius Pomponianus Secundus. The situation was getting scarier: *Elsewhere the day had dawned by this time, but there it was still night, and the darkness was blacker and thicker than any ordinary night. This, however, they relieved as best they could by a number of torches and other kinds of lights. They decided to make their way to the shore, and to see from the nearest point whether the sea would enable them to put out, but it was still running high and contrary* (VI 16, 17). When it became obvious that everyone needed to run, Pliny helped with the organization of the escape near the sea. As it soon turned out, it was too late. When the volcanic ash settled, some men found Pliny the Elder among others on the beach, he was dead (due to inhalation of poisonous ashes, according to Pliny the Younger's narrative in this letter).

Now, one would ask: how is it possible that the author, who stayed in Misenum, knows all the details which occurred elsewhere, after he was separated from his uncle? Hadn't the narrator thought it out, we would be forced to call it a point of view[15] mistake. But he had. At the very end of the letter he explains: *I have given you a full account both of the incidents which I myself witnessed and of those narrated to me immediately afterwards, when, as a rule, one gets the truest account of what has happened* (VI 16, 22).

Letter VI 20, as it was said before, is a dramatic relation of what was happening to the adolescent Pliny (the first-person narrator and main

[15] The term *point of view* was coined by Henry James who was not only a great novelist and short story author but also a serious theorist of literary fiction. For more on this subject see Rawlings 2007.

character at the same time) and his mother Plinia Secunda during the eruption of Vesuvius. The author begins his tale with a passage from Vergil's *Aeneis*: *Quamquam animus meminisse horret, … / incipiam* (II 12–13). This citation is very significant and worth remembering. The core of this narrative is Pliny's heroic flight (along with his terrified and confused mother whom he encouraged to escape and whom he eventually rescued) from Misenum along the crowded streets and further, outside the city. The description of uncontrollable horror and stir as seen and felt by the narrator among the people of Misenum is really impressive in its literary artistry: *Then the ashes began to fall, but not thickly: I looked back, and a dense blackness was rolling up behind us, which spread itself over the ground and followed like a torrent. "Let us turn aside," I said, "while we can still see, lest we be thrown down in the road and trampled on in the darkness by the thronging crowd." We were considering what to do, when the blackness of night overtook us, not that of a moonless or cloudy night, but the blackness of pent-up places which never see the light. You could hear the wailing of women, the screams of little children, and the shouts of men; some were trying to find their parents, others their children, others their wives, by calling for them and recognising them by their voices alone. Some were commiserating their own lot, others that of their relatives, while some again prayed for death in sheer terror of dying. Many were lifting up their hands to the gods, but more were declaring that now there were no more gods, and that this night would last for ever, and the end of all the world. Nor were there wanting those who added to the real perils by inventing new and false terrors, for some said that part of Misenum was in ruins and the rest in flames, and though the tale was untrue, it found ready believers* (VI 20, 13–16).[16]

From a narratological point of view, the description of the expedition of Pliny the Elder and the escape of Pliny the Younger are both masterpieces of the composition of space. Frame by frame the narrator constructs a reliable and appealing sequence of images. He launches the

[16] Pliny demonstrates his narrative mastery not only in providing a vivid description of the uproar, but also in credible insight. "One of the most obviously artificial devices of the storyteller is the trick of going beneath the surface of the action to obtain a reliable view of a character's mind and heart" (Booth 1983: 3).

elements (fire, water); puts the world in motion (running people, ashes falling on them); works on our senses: we hear shouts, see colors, etc.

After the earthquake (caused by the eruption of Vesuvius – the main trigger of the plot in this letter) Pliny the Younger and his mother returned to Misenum. The city was seriously damaged (broken walls, impassable roads, bemused inhabitants in a state of shock who had lost everything they have possessed), but their house had not collapse. They decided to wash and relax while waiting at home for Pliny the Elder to come back from Stabiae. He wouldn't, as we already know.

By providing us with two parallel strands of narrative Pliny managed to build up a three-dimensional world, where both time (altogether three days) and space (the Bay of Naples) really matter.[17] By tracking one character's *gestae*, hour by hour, we are able to match them, and determine the relationship, to those of the other one. For reasons the narrative on the Vesuvius eruption is probably Pliny's apogee.

## A FABLE

Another notable letter of Pliny's is the one in which he presents a story of a dolphin who befriends a young boy (IX 33).[18] Its analysis in terms of a short story is not new.[19] Let us then take a closer look at this letter, addressed to one Caninius Rufus, Pliny's friend from Comum. As A.N. Sherwin-White points out in his commentary to Pliny's *Epistulae*, "Caninius has been consulting Pliny in his search for a poetical theme in recent history."[20] Our author decided then to share a story he had heard

[17] To learn more on the theory of time and space in fictional writing, see Bal 1997; also in Polish translation, Bal 2012. Also, a new viewpoint on ancient (Greek) narrative literature is presented in a three-volume series of studies edited by Irene J.F. De Jong, René Nünlist and Angus M. Bowie: De Jong 2004; De Jong 2007; De Jong 2012. They examine narrative devices, such as the narrator and his narratees, time and space, focalization and characterization.

[18] It is pretty sure that the Younger Pliny heard the dolphin story from his uncle, who in his *Naturalis Historia* (IX 29) tells its shorter version, albeit different in details. Sherwin-White suspects Pliny could have concocted this one. Sherwin-White 1966: 514.

[19] Turasiewicz 1992.

[20] Sherwin-White 1966: 513.

with his friend, an aspiring poet in search of a theme. Again, it can be questioned if it wasn't only an excuse for Pliny just to tell an interesting story in his words.

After having said he will relate a true story (IX 33, 1: *I have come upon a true story – though it sounds very like a fable – which is quite worthy of engaging the attention of a mind so happy, so lofty, and so poetical as yours*), Pliny opens his narrative in a mostly classical (for a fairy tale) way: *There is in Africa a colony called Hippo, quite close to the sea, while hard by is a navigable expanse of water…* (IX 33, 2). The rest is also fable-like.

Pliny narrates a story about a dolphin which approaches a group of boys and starts to play with one of them. *A dolphin met him, and first swam in front of the boy, then behind him, then round him, then came up beneath to carry him, put him off, and again came under him, and carried the lad, who was much afraid, first to the open sea, and then, turning to the shore, restored him to dry land and to his playmates* (IX 33, 4). Everyone in the *colonia* was confused and excited. The situation repeated itself and every time the events occurred in similar way: the dolphin appeared and approached the same boy, never any other. *This was repeated on the next day, and the day after, and on subsequent days, until the men, who had been bred to the sea, began to be ashamed of being afraid* (IX 33, 6). What was also amazing *another dolphin accompanied the first one, but only as a spectator of the fun, and for company's sake, for he did not follow the other dolphin's example* (IX 33, 7). Furthermore, as we learn from Pliny's narration: *It is almost incredible, but yet every bit as true as the details just given, that the dolphin which thus carried the lad on his back and played with the boys, used to make his way up from the sea on to dry land, and, after drying himself on the sand and getting warm with the heat of the sun, would roll back again into the sea* (IX 33, 8). When the dolphin was lying on the beach, one legatus named Octavius Avitus anointed him with oil (for religious reasons). That made the dolphin retire into the ocean, and it was not until several days after that the friendly animal was seen again. Eventually, the dolphin was killed.

Was the story true? We do not know. Did Pliny the author believed it? We are not sure. And we do not care. Yet, what is certain is that Pliny the narrator wants us to believe that he is sure about the story's authenticity.

We could ask: why? After all this wasn't a report of any important event, but merely a curiosity. The most likely reason is amusement.[21]

## A REPORTAGE[22]

Letter VIII 17, which reports on the flooding of the Tiber river, was written after AD 107 and addressed to Macrinus.[23] Its artistry was already noticed and admitted by Gustaw Przychocki in his study on Pliny the Younger, where Pliny's attempt as a writer-reporter was called „splendid".[24]

Pliny, frightened by a storm and upcoming flood, asks his friend: *Have you, where you are, been having inclement and tempestuous weather?* (VIII 17, 1) But does he really? If so, what does *istic* stand for? This is another opening which gives us the right to wonder if the narrator addresses his letter to a real character. The following sentence is much more important, much more essential: *Here we have had nothing but storm after storm and constant deluges of rain. Tiber has deserted his proper channel and is now deep over the more low-lying banks* (VIII 17, 1). So, one more time Pliny's typical opening phrases: „How are you? Let me tell you how I am…". And again, we can assume Pliny needed a reliable introduction to begin his story of the flooding of the Tiber, whose banks he was in charge of some years earlier as an overseer (*curator*).[25] *Those who were caught by the storm upon higher ground saw everywhere around them, here the ruined remains of rich and splendid furniture, there the implements of husbandry, oxen and ploughs and their drivers, mingled with herds of cattle, loose and free from restraint, with trunks of trees and crossbeams from ruined villas, all floating to and fro in wide confusion. Nor have those places which lay too high for the river to reach them escaped disaster* (VIII 17, 4–6).

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21 Brooks 1984.

22 It is worth mentioning that the early modern critique called this type of literature a mixture of *belles letters* with pulp fiction.

23 Probably Caecilius Macrinus. Sherwin-White 1966: 467.

24 Przychocki 1984: 91.

25 For Pliny's *cursus honorum* a comprehensive account is Sherwin-White 1966: 72–82. On Pliny as a curator Tiberis: Sherwin-White 1966: 79.

Here again, Pliny focuses on the composition of space. He does not tell a story, but shows. That is a key. In the theory of narration prevalent in the English-speaking world the difference between *showing* and *telling* is one of the most important. By definition, fictional, epic prose and poetry strives for the best way to *show*. So that the verve and liveliness of this description allows us to count the Younger Pliny among epic poets.[26]

## A GHOST STORY

One of Pliny's longest letters is VII 27, which is addressed to Licinius Sura. According to A.N. Sherwin-White, it was written after the end of Pliny's *cura Tiberis*, or at least after the end of the first Dacian War.[27] In this letter Pliny wonders if ghosts exist and, if so, what their nature is: *I should very much like to know whether in your opinion there are such things as ghosts, whether you think they have a shape of their own and a touch of the supernatural in them, or whether you consider they are vain, empty shadows and mere creatures of our fears and imaginations* (VII 27, 1). As it is frequently the case, Pliny the Younger, the eager narrator, starts his letter with a question addressed to a friend. But, as we can now presume, this question too is probably used as an excuse for telling an exciting story by Pliny himself.

As we read, in Athens there was a large house which was obviously haunted by a ghost: at night a noise, resembling the clashing of iron, was frequently heard, first at a distance, but soon it would grow nearer and nearer. Afterward a phantom began appearing in the form of an old man with a long beard and messy hair. Because of the phantom the house stood empty and awaited for a brave buyer. One day a philosopher came to Athens. He was called Athenodorus. He liked the house and decided to buy it, especially appreciating the low price (because of the ghost). The encounter between the philosopher and the phantom took place, says Pliny, *when evening began to fall* […]. *At first the night was just as*

[26] Pliny's deep relationship with epic poetry of Homer and Vergil is probably a central theme which should be taken into greater consideration while studying the *Epistulae*. Also, one marvellous descriptive letter is VIII 20, which features a depiction of a unique lake.

[27] Sherwin-White 1966: 435.

*still there as elsewhere, then the iron was rattled and the chains clanked.* [The phantom] *stood and beckoned with its finger, as if calling him* (VII 27, 7–9). Athenodours followed him. The ghost showed the philosopher a place in the ground where, as it turned out, his body was buried. The following day the philosopher asked the authorities to have some people dig in the ground, exactly in the place indicated by the phantom the previous night. The bones found in the ground were chained. Then, after a proper burial, the ghost stopped visiting Athenodorus' house.[28]

Abandoned and haunted houses, hostile-sounding chains, ghosts resembling old men with long beards and gray hair – these are all characteristics of gothic fiction.

Again, asking here about what is true, and what is not, would be a misunderstanding. It is really not the point of this (artistic) writing.[29] Moreover, this also applies to letters considering political or private themes.[30]

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I'd say that here and there Pliny's main goal is simply to narrate about himself and his friends (or his enemy Rusticus), about interesting places and curious lawsuits, about ghosts and dolphins or to put it in one word: about everything he recognizes as worthy of it. This, of course, does not exclude a more sophisticated game. Let's quote Marchesi: "In order to be perceived as a unitary corpus, metaphorically spanning the period from dawn till dusk, Pliny's epistolary project required the collaboration of active and engaged readers. He expected them to be ready to accept

[28] Nilsson 1935: 100.

[29] Admittedly I have chosen some "extreme examples of pure and almost unrestrained fiction; this concerns mainly the ghost story. However, the situation is identical when it comes to e.g. Pliny's accounts famous political (therefore, historical) lawsuits, like those that took place after the death of Domitian. (At that time Pliny was first and foremost a widely known lawyer).

[30] I do not question here the historical importance of Pliny's *Epistulae*, for it is indeed enormous. Pliny's opus is no doubt one of the most crucial (historical) sources on the imperial period. What I am trying to say is that Pliny deserves equally serious attention as a narrator, and as such he should be read and studied as a peer of both epic poets and novelists as well as historians (i.e. authors of historical and quasi-historical tales) and biographers (i.e. authors of thrilling *res gestae*).

the subtleties of his authorial allusive games as part of their hermeneutic responsibilities."[31]

Pliny's letters meet the criteria of great literature: they operate simultaneously on several levels; they tell stories (and altogether: The Story) and they play literary games (with forms, with themes, with readers, with other authors). They never are *just* letters – even when they *only* amuse.

## PLINY THE NARRATOR

Whether Pliny the Younger was an eyewitness of the events he relates or not, all of these intriguing letters just discussed are related by a first-person narrator: „I, Pliny, will tell you a story…".[32] Pliny was either one of the participants (the eruption of Vesuvius), or a spectator (the flooding of the Tiber), or he had only heard a story from another (trustworthy!) person and relates it now to one of his friends (the ghost story). Of course, while regarding the narrative technique, all of these masterfully composed accounts should be read as equally fictitious, even the one considering the eruption of Vesuvius (albeit a historical event!), for, as it seems, the leaving of Misenum by Pliny and his mother was created as an analogy to the famous leaving of Troy by Aeneas.

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[31] Marchesi 2008: 250.

[32] F.K. Stanzel's theory of narration (first/third person perspective), which is popular in Poland, leaves us with a sense of considerable dissatisfaction. See the foreword by Jonathan Culler in Genette 1983: 10. We read: "One important and original proposal bears on the traditional notion of point of view. Most theorists, Genette argues, have failed to distinguish properly between 'mood and voice, that is to say, between the question who is the character whose point of view orients the narrative perspective? and the very different question who is the narrator?' Thus, if a story is told from the point of view of a particular character (or, in Genette's terms, focalized through that character), the question whether this character is also the narrator, speaking in the first person, or whether the narrator is someone else who speaks of him in the third person, is not a question of the point of view, which is the same in both cases, but a question of voice. And conversely, in what is traditionally called a first-person narrative the point of view can vary, depending on whether events are focalized through the consciousness of the narrator at the moment of narration or through his consciousness at a time in the past when the events took place. Insistence on the difference between narration and focalization is a major revision of the theory of point of view".

It is also important for us to notice and emphasize that Pliny the Narrator, in his (exceptional, in my opinion[33]) *Epistulae*, likes to ensure that both us and the addressees (in sum, the *narratees* of his stories/fictions) that the story he is going to tell, frequently unbelievable, is certainly a true one (e.g. IX 33, 1: *materia vera sed simillima fictae*). This is a well known method and a characteristic of great narrators of all centuries, who delight us with the most (*sic!*) fantastic stories we can imagine. Isn't Pliny's goal to draw the reader's attention?

Moreover, recent research indicates that the tenth book of the letters, so far considered separate (both stylistically and thematically), should be read along with the rest. As Greg Woolf points out, Pliny's letters/questions to Trajan and Trajan's letters/replies to Pliny provide a logical addition to the previous nine books. In his recent article, the scholar wisely argues that Pliny had to compose this book consciously as another narrative thread, somehow parallel to others, developed in books I–IX. The authenticity of this official correspondence is highly questionable. According to Woolf's findings, each letter in book X discusses a different aspect of managing the province by the governor (such as Pliny), and there is no repetition of topics. It is in this way, and only in this way, i.e. by reading all the books together, that we receive a complete message. We receive a self-portrait of a man – a writer, a lawyer, an intellectual, a host of a country estate, a local activist, a friend, a husband and a high official – with an epoch in the background.[34]

Finally, it is quite certain that there are many indications that the *Journal of Pliny the Younger* (as I dared to call the *Epistulae* for the purposes of this account) could and should be eventually read as one, complex, artfully composed narrative – a narrative of Pliny's life and his political and literary career, as well as of his times; a narrative containing

[33] I hardly agree with the patronizing tendency to treat Pliny the Younger as not the greatest, but still an interesting author (Winniczuk 1987: 5). The underestimation of Pliny's opus, as I see it, is a result of the misunderstanding of the real nature of the work. The *Epistulae* is much more than *epistulae* itself. It is a smartly crafted work, resembling, as it was said, diaries, or autobiographies, or even modern erudite essayistic novels. More or less, the same applies to Aulus Gellius' *Noctes Atticae* and other similar works, also (for their predilection for trivia) highly underestimated and considered as a mere collection of curiosities.

[34] Woolf 2015: 132–151.

hundreds of smaller ones (a story within a story), like those few we have just read and analyzed in this paper. Now one of the main tasks for "Plinyologists" is, in my opinion, to show the role of these mini-narratives in the (main) narrative as a whole. Another one is, in the light of all ten books of letters, to take a closer look at Pliny the Younger not as an author or even a narrator but as a literary character of his own Story. For he created not only a vivid world of an early period in the history of the empire, but also, as far as we can assume, a convincing, consistent and sparkling portrait of a Roman citizen of that era.[35] Those and other issues certainly require separate and in-depth discussion.

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[35] Another matter is the comparative examination of Pliny's letters and his *Panegyricus*. I mean not only studying the style etc., but also all the aspects of the narrative.

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