In Letter 5.8 Pliny shows that in the post-Domitianic era historia has become an impossible genre, both as a vehicle for conventional moral wisdom and because of the authoritative narrative voice it necessitates. The letter’s literary strategies of deferral express these problems even as its content appears to argue positively the merits of historia and compare it with those of oratio. Pliny emphasizes 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.

Numerous letters of Pliny the Younger express the desire for immortal fama, both his own and that of worthy others—a desire he often describes as likely to be fulfilled by the genre of historia. The Letters themselves demonstrate a complex understanding of the author’s position as a literary artist engaged in the process of creating a persona he hopes will outlast him. However, for Pliny the aim is not only...
to achieve enough fame that future generations will know him. More fundamentally, I argue in this paper, he also examines the very nature of the self as it can be known in language compromised by the tyranny of Domitian. The wide array of people, events, and circumstances encompassed by the *Letters* speak to a desire for fullness of self-expression, as if Pliny wishes to capture his life and himself as a whole. At the same time, his very choice of genre, epistolography, recognizes the self as a fragmentary and precarious entity. Pliny’s language both fears and celebrates the dependency of immortality upon others’ friendship, memory, and report. Further, it recognizes the elusiveness of a self that is discovered in language; particularly a language distorted by tyranny such as Domitian’s and entering a new era whose politics are still unknown.  

The language of Pliny’s letters testifies to the trauma of surviving tyranny and the difficulty, afterward, of speaking of it and oneself. *Letter 5.8*, a response to a suggestion that he write *historia*, argues for the necessity of seeking immortal *fama* in dialogue and with the recognition of one’s own mistaken historical actions. As such, it represents a pivotal point in Pliny’s articulation of his own literary endeavors and hope for future recognition. But his argument is necessarily indirect, and the letter itself often frustratingly ambiguous, for two reasons: first, these qualities enhance the dialogic relationship on which Pliny stakes much of his literary reputation in the publication of the letters; second, they illustrate the difficulty with which the self emerges linguistically in Pliny’s era. An analysis of *historia* and the hope it offers for its author’s immortality, the letter stylistically demonstrates the truth of its key point: *historia* is practically impossible because of the compromised position of its subject, understood simultaneously as the potentially culpable senator-survivor of Domitian’s regime, and the “I” that struggles to emerge in his discourse. Unlike the subject of Livy’s preface, which, although rhetorically tentative, nevertheless does not hesitate to make commanding moral evaluations of history, Pliny’s sense of “I” as it might emerge in *historia* is conditioned by a much more immediate threat to life and libertas, and by the survivor’s need to justify his presence when others perished.  

*Letter 5.8* responds to Titinius Capito’s suggestion that he write history. Briefly glossed, the letter reads as an *apologia* for not doing so because Pliny is preoccupied with revising his speeches. He considers these too important to languish without the extra care that might win him literary immortality. Though attracted to the immortal

3. On the letters as a literary management of Pliny’s “anxieties” in this period, see Hoffer 1999. On discovering the agency of the subject as a product of style—avoiding the search either for “deep interiority,” such as Hoffer’s study and also Ludolph’s (1997) imply, or a constructionist model of the subject, such as Marchesi’s (2008) analysis of Pliny’s self-construction through allusion, or Henderson’s (2002a) in which “context makes meaning” (Leach 2004.109) —see Altieri 1994: 17; 58–90. Altieri studies subject as an “I” that is both a product of its “social grammar” and an agent of its own expression. This is also an ethical question of finding articulations of the self that recognize the selves of others, and constructing shareable values. His theory of the subject informs my effort here to bridge the gap between models of interiority and constructivism, or between the literary and sociological/historical aspects of Pliny’s text.  

4. The *locus classicus* for a historical critique of Pliny’s self-representation as an innocent in Domitian’s regime is Syme 1991: 564–65. Contra Strunk 2013. For a close consideration of Pliny’s career together with his own often self-exculpatory allusions to it, see Whitton 2015.
fame that *historia* promises, he argues that the similarities as well as the differences between *oratio* and *historia* mean that he should not write both, for fear of mixing them up and confusing himself. Finally, Pliny discusses the disadvantages of writing both older and more recent history (the former is a boring matter of collating sources; the latter risks giving offense no matter what one writes), concluding collegially that Capito should tell him what to do “in case another good reason for hesitation and delay arises for me when I’m all ready to write” (*ne mihi iam scribere parato alia rursus cunctationis et morae iusta ratio nascatur* [§14].) The letter’s primary consideration, then, seems to be the relative merits of *historia* and *oratio* as Pliny weighs which literary activity is most likely to bring him literary fame—all prompted by the conventional and flattering implication, inherent in Capito’s suggestion, that Pliny’s significant political experience and literary talent should encourage him to do so.

However, two major puzzles present themselves even in this short summary of the letter. First, Pliny is not clear in his division and comparison of the two genres, referring to them ambiguously with the pronouns *haec* and *illa* and appending to each a confusing array of rhetorical terminology that does little to illuminate which genre each designates. Following this, Pliny himself calls humorous attention to the confusion he says he wishes to avoid:

Habet quidem oratio et historia multa communia, sed plura diversa in his ipsis, quae communia videntur. Narrat illa narrat haec, sed alter: 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; postremo alia verba alius sonus alia constructio. Nam plurimum refert, ut Thucydides ait, ktema sit an agonisma; quorum alterum oratio, alterum historia est. His ex causis non adducor ut duo dissimilia et hoc ipso diversa, quo maxima, confundam misceam et quasi iubae decent; ideoque interim veniam, ut ne a meis verbis recedam, advocandi peto. (9–11).

Oratory and history indeed have many things in common, but there are more differences in the very areas in which they seem similar. One narrates and so does the other, but differently: one treats base trivialities; the other, profound and exalted subjects; bones, muscles, and sinews more often befit the one; a kind of ornamentation and (as it were) crest are pleasing in the other; one sounds harsh, pointed and forceful, the other persuasive and even sweet. Finally, they use different vocabularies, tones, and constructions. For it makes a difference, as Thucydides says, whether it will be a possession or a contest piece: one is oratory; the other, history. For these reasons I am not inclined to confound and mix up two different things that diverge at the very place where each is greatest, in case I become swept away by the flood, if you will, and do here what I ought to do there. Therefore, to keep to my own words, I apply for an adjournment.
This extended description of the characteristics of oratio and historia has attracted scholarly interest particularly for its potential to illuminate Pliny’s conception of his own literary project; all studies of the passage tackle it as a problem of clarification in order to decipher his views on the two genres, which the terminology and structure of the passage obscure. Many studies try to understand the passage by restructuring it into two columns, sometimes even visually in the text of their argument, to identify correspondences between terms and distill his language into recognizable literary attitudes and conventions.5

The second puzzle is Pliny’s deferral of any definitive answer. Though initially he appears to deny Capito’s request the letter ends with an invitation to Capito to choose him a (historical) topic, and more emphasis on his own inclination to delay.6 Thus the letter obfuscates both Pliny’s views on literary output and his own investments in its reputation-building capacities, topics that were clearly important to him and that he addresses seriously in many of his letters.7 Why? Rather than seeking to clarify Pliny’s overt topic—the differences between oratio and historia—and argue for the letter as a confident contribution either to Pliny’s artful self-fashioning or assertion of deserved primacy in the literary canon, this paper instead understands 5.8 as a conscious exploration of both literary and ethical self-deficiency as a result of the tyranny of Domitian.8

Pliny’s ambiguous language in 5.8 maintains a tension between ideological aspirations for immortal literary fame and recognition of their impossibility given the deformations of language that are the legacy of the Domitianic era. The letter expresses the paradox of the post-Domitianic author seeking the consolidation of a literary self in a language that has nearly destroyed it.9 It therefore represents

5. For examples of the columnar approach, see Gambardella 1963: 58–59; Leeman 1963: 335; Cova 1975: 117; Marchesi 2008: 167. This methodology aims to tidy up what it sees, in Leeman’s most unfriendly light, as “the exasperating mess of [Pliny’s] literary judgments” (1963: 336); in other words the bias of older scholarship toward Pliny as a lesser literary talent assumes his attempt to articulate a clear and decisive literary judgment, but failure to manage it. Recent work reads the letter more holistically as a sophisticated expression of Pliny’s aim for literary greatness—his positive attempt to argue a place for himself in the literary canon (e.g. Marchesi 2008; Woodman 2012.) See also Marchesi’s (2008: 149) recognition of the letter as producing “an image of indecision” with examples beyond those I analyze in this essay. For a radical example of synthesizing a coherent self-portrait from the fragmented quality of Pliny’s letters, but without losing sight of the tension between the two, see Henderson 2002a (see especially xiii).

6. Morello 2003 gives the most extensive account of Pliny’s deferral as a conscious literary strategy. For its recognition, albeit as a flourish or interesting accident of Pliny’s discourse, see Marchesi 2008: 164 where it is “tantalizing;” Woodman 2012: 239; 241, where it is “surprising.” On Pliny’s hinting that he will follow Capito’s example and write exitus literature, see Marchesi 2008: 170.

7. E.g., 2.10, an admonishment to Octavius Rufus not to withhold publication of his verse and defer the fame it will bring him; 3.5, on his uncle’s prolific oeuvre; 3.21, on the death of Martial, with a reflection on the fame the poet achieved both for himself and for Pliny in a poem about him; 6.16 and 6.20 on history’s immortalizing capacities.

8. For Pliny’s positive efforts to make the case for his own genre, oratio, see Woodman 2012; for his implicit offer of the Letters as an alternative to historia see Ash 2003, Marchesi 2008: 148–50.

9. Cf. Tacitus A. 2. On the damage sustained, see Pliny’s Letters 1.5; 8.14; 9.13 (on his vindication of Helvidius, though here Pliny’s emphasis is his own success in doing so); 8.6 (on Pliny’s indignation at the Claudian Senate’s craven rhetoric in the decree of fifteen million sesterces to the freedman Pallas). See also Leach’s comments (1990: 16) on the “rhetorical conventions [that] had
the crux of his several overt reflections on the literary mediation of *gloria* and implicit ones on the rivalry with Tacitus, who chose the apparently more straightforward path toward it. Pliny’s self-conscious irony expresses this paradox, while his strategies of deferral emphasize the importance of conversation over decisive self-assertion in the attempt to secure both literary fame and a trustworthy discourse in the wake of tyranny.10

Letter 5.8 advances the idea of the dialogic literary relationship—such as one finds fully realized in letters, and to a lesser degree in *oratio*—as the preferred path to literary fame. Pliny initially emphasizes *oratio* in his excuse for not writing history: he says he hasn’t time both to write history and revise his speeches, which he feels he should do in order not to leave work unfinished.11 However the privileging of *oratio* quickly yields to the convoluted comparison with *historia* that obscures the characteristics of both genres. By the end of the letter Pliny appears ready to write *historia*, as if he has made the rhetorical mess he seeks to escape by sticking to one genre, and as a result lost sight of what that genre was. But the valediction (quoted more briefly above) reveals that the confusion was a neat tactic of delay, rhetorically designed to enhance the dialogism inherent in the genre of letters: *illud peto praesternas ad quod hortaris, eligasque materiam, ne mihi iam scribere parato alia rursus cunctationis et morae iusta ratio nascatur* (“I ask you to prepare the way for what you encourage me to do, and choose the topic so that another justifiable rationale for hesitation and delay doesn’t arise for me when I’m all ready to write,” §14). The valediction thus reveals Pliny’s true choice of genre to be letters, but this cannot be explicit in the letter itself without sacrificing the very dialogism to which he aspires. This dialogism also provides an ethical solution to the problems of language that trouble the Domitianic-era survivors, and that elude a “monologic” genre such as *historia*.12 As he explains in §§12–13, *historia* is impossible whether one wants to write about older or more recent times:

Tu tamen iam nunc cogita quae potissimum tempora aggrediar. Vetera et scripta alis? Parata inquisitio, sed onerosa collatio. Intacta et nova? Graves

previously sanctioned the performative fictionalization of character” leading to Pliny’s and Tacitus’ mistrust of the imperial government.

10. On Pliny’s deferrals and habit of “evasive display,” see Morello 2003, though she concludes from it that Pliny stakes a positive claim for himself in the literary world. For her, his evasions represent an interesting “tease” for his addressees, highlighting the author himself over the relationship with the other. In contrast, my emphasis in this paper is the latter.

11. On Pliny’s concern for finishing one’s work as a critical step toward achieving a long-lasting fame, see 5.5; 5.21.

12. For monologism versus dialogism in literature, see Bakhtin: “a monologically understood world is an objectified world, a world corresponding to a single and unified authorial consciousness” (1984: 9). Christopher B. Hays makes the point that Bakhtin’s theories were themselves articles of resistance to the political structure of his era: “Bakhtin was deeply interested in the ways in which literature affects one’s epistemology and ethics in the world beyond the page. As he says, the principles of monologism ‘go far beyond the boundaries of artistic creativity; they are the principles behind the entire ideological culture of recent times’” (2008: 61–62). Similarly, I argue that Pliny’s interest in dialogism constitutes a response to the politics of the Domitianic era.
Nevertheless, 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 among so many human vices more must be blamed than praised, 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.

The difficulties presented by each have in common the present circumstances in which they would be written. These circumstances are fraught with survivors’ awareness of their own potential implication in Domitian’s tyranny. At Agricola 45.1 Tacitus clearly assumes a burden of responsibility for the worst effects of that era, but readers can assume that his use of the plural “we” (in describing the passivity of those who stood by while Rusticus, Mauricus, and Helvidius were killed), refers not only to himself. Pliny by contrast seems to downplay his own involvement in that era of Domitian’s reign and emphasize a heroic resistance, or at least close association with the known senatorial opposition: his letters report speeches vindicating Helvidius, for which his addressee is demanding that he write an introduction; his successful prosecution of Baebius Massa; and, somewhat indirectly, his close personal ties with the family of Helvidius. Scholarship, both historical and literary, often follows Syme’s scathing critique in interpreting these letters as disingenuously masking the favor and advancement that Pliny actually received under Domitian. Such a view underpins Kirk Freudenberg’s analysis of the Letters as an example of the post-Domitianic desire to tell and hear stories of those who stood up to tyranny, and for authors to use them in the shaping of an identity purged of association with that regime.13 By contrast, Thomas Strunk argues that these hostile interpretations rest on Syme’s dating Pliny’s prefecture of the aerarium militare to 94–96, for which the evidence is uncertain, and his subsequent use of this inscription to discredit Pliny’s protestations of Domitian’s disfavor.14 Strunk’s own view, based on both historical and literary interpretations of the Letters, is that Pliny could not so easily get away with such a broad revision of his own actions. Instead, he appeals to a peer-audience comprising many elite men with a similar experience to his. They would recognize their own dilemma in Pliny’s accounts, as survivors of the Domitianic regime who also potentially faced charges either implicit or explicit of collaboratorship, but would not allow wholesale self-revision on the part of one of their group.15

13. See Freudenberg 2001: 215–34 for both Tacitus (in Agricola) and Pliny as both attempting to align themselves with those who resisted and suffered under Domitian.

14. See Strunk 2013: 89n.4 for bibliography of these interpretations suspicious of Pliny’s account.

15. On the difficulties of establishing collaboration merely by examining an individual’s public service record, see Strunk 2015.
Advancing Strunk’s interpretation, I argue that Pliny’s desire to position himself in as favorable a light as possible, along with the Letters’ clear expression of the hope for literary fame and immortality, does not militate against his simultaneous representation of the difficulties that attend both of these projects. The view of Pliny taken in more recent scholarship has emphasized the optimism and confidence of his self-portraiture; by contrast, I explore in this paper a self-consciously negative Pliny who doubts the possibilities for self-restoration in the post-tyrannical language bequeathed by Domitian. Understood in this way, the ironic deferrals of Letter 5.8 bear close similarities to the irony prized in Tacitean style as a mark of political acumen, but seldom recognized as a hallmark of Pliny’s oeuvre.

As all communication is suspect after an era of delations, and the moral ground compromised, so too is the claim to credible historical assessment. This problem particularly faces the historian of Pliny’s era working within the generic expectation that he can evaluate worthy exempla for his readers. Awareness of wrongdoing in the context of writing history comes up earlier in the letter, where it acts as a moment of hesitation in Pliny’s otherwise fulsome praise of the activity. In §2, a propos of writing historia, he says that the concern for, “longevity” is appropriate “especially in one who, conscious of no fault in himself, does not fear posterity’s memory of him” (eo praesertim qui nullius sibi conscius culpae posteritatis memoriam non reformidet). This statement subtly clouds the gloria history-writing is thought to afford. Second, he mentions in §5 that historia would be a good choice for him because of his uncle’s example and reflects on the honor of following in the footsteps of one’s forebears “provided that they led by a straight path” (si modo recto itinere praecesserint), here introducing a subtle doubt over his uncle’s rectum iter, “straight path,” that echoes the earlier phrasing in §2. The possibility of culpa, “blame,” in both the Elder Pliny and his nephew’s generation arises from their similar experiences of tyranny, and the evocation of the Elder is significant in this letter where Pliny theorizes through his own stylistic and generic choices an iter suitable after such an experience. Letter 5.8 reads as a critical response to comparisons that might be made between these choices; those of his illustrious uncle; and of his

16. For a (literally) haunting expression of collective culpa see 4.22, an account of a dinner at which Nerva was also present. The topic of conversation turns to one of the Domitianic informers; when Nerva wonders out loud what would have become of him if he had lived, one guest, Junius Mauricus, bluntly says “He’d be dining with us” (nobiscum cenaret). The letter doubly frames the negotiation of this culpa through dialogue, in the party guests’ conversation about the informers, and Pliny’s epistolographic account of it. In connection with the question of writing historia raised in 5.8, 4.22 raises the question of who at that table (understanding the guests to represent the senatorial class in general) has the moral authority to give an account of the past that others would trust? Mauricus, whose fortitude and truthfulness Pliny praises in the letter, is the one who frankly acknowledges that the moral corruption of the past is still at home in the present.

17. When she argues that Letter 5.8 considers the fame one receives as both author of, and actor in history, ultimately suggesting that Pliny sees the canonization of his work as the real hope for memorialization by posterity, Marchesi 2008: 155 interprets Pliny’s statement here as stressing his role as a historical actor. Certainly the logic of the statement suggests this, but in my interpretation, Pliny further considers the possible culpability of his own historical agency.
peer Tacitus. The critique also implicitly extends to his addressee Titinius Capito, at
the time of this letter the former secretary *ab epistulis* to Domitian, Nerva, and
Trajan and also a writer of *exitus* literature. As Freudenberg observes, Capito’s por-
trayal of himself as a champion of freedom-fighters—by erecting a statue to one and
writing about the deaths of others—diminishes in credibility when we (and Pliny)
consider his close administrative ties with Domitian.¹⁸

Pliny’s *Letter* 1.17 praises Capito’s request to Trajan to erect a statue in honor of
Lucius Silanus—a political victim of Nero—in terms that recall his praise of writing
*historia* in 5.8: Capito extends his own honor along with Silanus’ by erecting the
statue. This honor, as Freudenberg points out, inheres in resisting tyranny, a stance
with which Capito associates himself by honoring Silanus. *Letter* 8.12 describes
Pliny’s wish to attend a literary reading of Capito’s *exitus* writings, which again asso-
ciate Capito with the “freedom-fighters” who stood up to Nero and Domitian. Both
letters speak favorably of Capito’s character and talent; nevertheless, Freudenberg
argues that the fact of Capito’s close administrative connection to several *principes*
including Domitian detract from the credibility of his commitment to such resistance.
Freudenberg sees Pliny’s letters on the topic as second-order exhibitions of survivors’
tendencies to portray themselves in the heroic light of these “martyrs.”¹⁹ But these let-
ters in conjunction with 5.8 instead show Pliny’s more nuanced engagement with the
problem of survivor-status, both his own and Capito’s. The latter’s actions and words
reflect possible choices for Pliny too. However, while Freudenberg’s interpretation
of both Capito’s and Pliny’s motives is persuasive, in Pliny’s case the evidence of
5.8 suggests that his praise of Capito—and therefore his possible endorsement of
the effort to “rehabilitate” oneself from the taint of collaboration—need not show
the degree of hypocrisy that Freudenberg intimates. Capito’s suggestion that Pliny
write history proffers precisely the opportunity for rehabilitation that Freudenberg sees
in Capito’s *exitus* literature; but Pliny avoids it just as precisely with a self-conscious
rhetoric that dissects the *moral* problem of asserting one’s *culpa*-free status in this era
and advances instead the *ethical* solution of dialogic discourse as a way of both
reestablishing trustworthy communication and furthering one’s own reputation in
the bargain.²⁰

I have outlined in this section the major problems with which the question of
*historia* confronts Pliny: the culpability of the Domitianic survivor and the impasses
it creates for the project of memorialization of both self and others. I now follow the
letter’s own trajectory to argue that Pliny’s self-conscious literary strategies of ambi-
guity, deferral, and dialogue both critique the contemporary blocked state of public
discourse and offer a possible way to clear it. Section II analyzes the letter’s opening
and the problem of *culpa* in more depth. Here I interpret the problems Pliny raises

¹⁹. For the direct comparison between Capito and Pliny, see Freudenberg 2001: 229.
²⁰. Cf. Leach 1990: 20 on the comparison between artistic and literary portraiture in Pliny’s letter
7.33 as revealing “a new emphasis upon the judgment of the receiving audience as a function of ethi-
cal communication.”
with older and more recent historia as inhering in the objective discourse that historia demands but cannot credibly offer in this era of moral breakdown. Section III argues that Pliny uses Virgilian and Ennian quotations about the poet’s fame to demonstrate the progressive enervation of memorializing genres as power becomes more concentrated in one place, and the limitations this process places on the author’s ability to construct a discursive “I” strong enough to survive his physical death. Section IV treats the haec–illa conundrum that marks Pliny’s descriptions of oratio and historia, arguing for his deliberate confusion of the terms as a critique of conventional interpretations of genre and the fama they promise. I conclude by highlighting Pliny’s focus on dialogue and letters as both a vehicle for the fame he desires and an admission of his doubts over its soundness.

II. CULPA: THE FAULTY SUBJECT

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. Me autem nihil aeque ac diuturnitatis amor et cupidio sollicitat, res homine dignissima, eo praesertim qui nullius sibi conscius culpae posteritatis memoriam non reformidet.

You urge me to write history, and you are not the only one. Many have often advised me to do so, and I want to; not because I’m confident I would do it properly (you’d be rash to believe that unless you had experience), but because it seems to me an especially beautiful thing to save from oblivion those who deserve immortality, and to extend others’ reputation along with one’s own. Nothing bothers me as much as the love and desire for enduring fame, the most worthy thing for a human being, especially in one who conscious of no fault in himself does not fear posterity’s memory of him (§1–2).

Pliny calls historia a “beautiful thing” (pulchrum), which, together with amor et cupidio and the fact that they “bother” Pliny, emphasizes his strong desire for it. However, he also connects this desire with the perfection of the self. The self must have no flaw (culpa) in order not to be afraid of what posterity will think. Pliny twice deflects attention from his own subject position just when the critical questions of fame and fault arise: ego gives way to sua in the phrase “extending others’ reputation along with one’s own;” and the first-person me switches to third persons eo. . .qui. . .sibi in “Nothing bothers me. . .especially in one who. . .”. Particularly in the last phrase ego strongly expresses its desire for fame, but then yields to the third person and the hesitation that arises with the notion of culpa.21 In the first

21. Woodman 2012: 229 notes the change in pronoun, but his interest is in refuting Marchesi’s (2008: 154–55) argument for Pliny’s self-positioning as historical actor, rather than in the eclipse of the first-person subjective experience by the objective third person.
expression, the switch from first to third person de-emphasizes “I” and its belief in
the possibility of its own longevity; in the second, it stops short of asserting that
Pliny himself is free from culpa.

The shift between first and third persons elides Pliny’s personal experience. To
what extent are Pliny ("I"), Capito ("you"), “others,” and “one” blameless in the
eyes of history? At stake here is the question not only of what it would mean
for Pliny to write history, but more fundamentally for Pliny to write history.
Pliny and history have a history toward which culpa points, implicating not only
him, but also the other selves indicated by the shift to the third-person pronoun.
Marchesi calls no attention to the pronoun-shift but rather assumes that Pliny
thinks “[h]is record is clean, and he has nothing to worry about if readers of history
will receive an account of his life;”22 therefore seeing himself as a fit object for
someone else’s historia. Woodman, arguing for a modification of Marchesi’s view,
advances the idea of Pliny as a participatory writer of history. He notes that as such
Pliny implicates himself in the economy of potential blame, but makes no com-
ment on whether or not Pliny feels any sense of culpa that would prove an obstacle
to his good reputation.23 However, after this point, both within the discourse of the
letter and outside it, Pliny puts off the task of historia. Scholarship has come up
with various answers for why he would do this, ranging from his lack of talent
to the superabundance of it: in these readings the letters are either historia-“lite”
or historia-“plus.”24 The negative presence of historia inherent in his hesitation
has been ignored in favor of finding the substance of what Pliny substitutes for
it, but negativity plays an important role here. The core action of deferral that gov-
erns Pliny’s consideration of this topic points to a precarious dependence on its
addressee and a self-deconstruction. The precision with which Pliny complicates
the original request indicates the ethical concern with keeping the dialogue alive
rather than answering the question directly; it also strategically postpones the con-
frontation with the culpa that the idea of historia introduces. The association
between the two draws language into a tangled thicket that genre alone cannot
be precipitated in Pliny’s decision to publish in emulation of Tacitus’ publication of
the Histories; for a friendlier interpretation, see Ash 2003, where letters are able to accomplish similar
goals to historia without the expenditure of the effort. While too tangential to my own argument, I
would argue for letters as the subconscious of history: the dialogism that subtends Tacitean irony
and the difficulties of his language that often raise more questions than the narrative answers.

24. See Marchesi’s discussion of Pliny’s disclaimer that he is “not writing history” in Letter 1.1
as an example of negation-as-affirmation: in her terms, “[f]or Pliny historiography is the subconscious
of letters” (2008: 144–45). Thus she maintains the hierarchy of the two genres by making historiog-
raphy the repressed desire that somehow returns in Pliny’s letters, reframing the issue shortly afterward
in order to suggest that the letters “offer themselves as a viable, though subsidiary, alternative to
[works of history]” (148). She therefore emphasizes Pliny’s offering of oratory as a key challenger
to history-writing: historia-“plus.” For the implication that Pliny’s letters are historia-“lite,” see
Syme 1958: 98, on Pliny’s decision to publish in emulation of Tacitus’ publication of the
Histories; for a friendlier interpretation, see Ash 2003, where letters are able to accomplish similar
goals to historia without the expenditure of the effort. While too tangential to my own argument, I
would argue for letters as the subconscious of history: the dialogism that subtends Tacitean irony
and the difficulties of his language that often raise more questions than the narrative answers.
At §6 Pliny excuses himself from *historia* on the grounds that he wishes to revise his speeches, an activity which counts for him as a kind of revision of his personal history as an orator. Here too he expresses hesitation, remarking that, although he began his career young (at 19), only now does he begin, though still darkly, to grasp its requirements: *unodevicensimo aetatis anno dicere in foro coepi, et nunc demum quid praestare debeat orator, adhuc tamen per caliginem video* (§8). Thus both in *historia* where he professes a lack of expertise, and *oratio* where he implies the reverse, he underlines his uncertainty over his own power of self-expression. Within the generic rhetorical parameters of both *historia* and *oratio* this uncertainty expresses conventional modesty. In this context of this letter, however, where Pliny challenges the ability of conventional uses of language—such as genre and rhetorical figure—to promote a positive self-construction in the service of achieving immortal fame, this particular trope paradoxically reinforces what it usually reverses: Pliny means us to read literally its expression of self-deficiency rather than understand it as a figure of speech indicating authority. This reversal highlights the letter’s many playful qualities, which make an important contribution to its overall project of deferral and dialogism.²⁵

The subject in this letter confronts its own deficiency, its need for the other, obliquely through the shift in pronouns exemplified in this opening section. The multitude of pronouns with which Pliny begins 5.8 deflects attention from Pliny himself and toward his community. “I” is enfolded in a larger scheme that begins with “you” (*suades*) and ends with the third person “one’s own” (*sua*). Capito’s request takes for granted the means for achieving literary fame (writing history) as well as the self-sufficiency of the author, provided he has enough literary talent (presumably Capito thinks Pliny does). “You ought to write history” implies that both “you” and history-writing are self-explanatory entities whose cooperation has the greatest chance of success in the conventional endeavor of extending “your” reputation. However, in this opening section Pliny challenges the certainty of the “I” implied by the “you” to whom Capito addresses the flattering suggestion of writing history. Instead he embeds it within a list of the other persons: first “you,” then various third persons. Further, the logic that justifies history-writing, pivots on the dialogue between “you” and “me” that enfolds all persons and the key conventional values that bind them together: the idea that history-writing is a mark of excellence; the modesty with which one accepts praise or approaches the topic of one’s own excellence; the extending of worthy ones’ reputations into the future. Whereas in content the letter acknowledges conventional views about literary genre and its role in the transmission of fame, its opening strategy

²⁵. The phrase *pulchrum...videtur not pati occidere, quibus aeternitas debeatur; aliorum famam cum sua extendere* recalls Seneca’s Letter 21.3–5, which asserts the power of letters to immortalize both the writer and addressee. The allusion enhances Pliny’s covert argument for letters—rather than either *oratio* or *historia*—as the preferred medium for generating the *fama* he praises in this section. For Pliny’s frequent allusions to Seneca’s *Epistulae ad Lucilium*, see Marchesi 2008: 14–15. For the further allusion of phrase to Cicero’s letter to Lucreius (*Fam.* 5.12.6), see Leeman 1963: 333.
formally diffuses the “I” whose integrity is assumed as the basis for these views among all the persons, giving the interchange between “you” and “I” a primary role in the construction of the argument.

Where “I” asserts itself is in the phrase “I want to,” *ego volo*, with the first-person pronoun adding emphasis. But “I” follows this immediately with an expression of uncertainty, referring the thought immediately to “you.” The “I” who lacks confidence transitions to “you,” but also suspends the question of whether it believes it has enough experience; the rash one is “you” for making such a claim if it is baseless. Thus “I” maintains an ambiguous position between modesty and the hint that it might be *expertus*, “experienced,” while keeping in play an interchange that shares the burden of this weighty idea to write history between the first and second persons. Motivation or desire for writing, when it arises (*volo*), is immediately referred to the other. The pronoun-shifts in the passage contribute to the sense of instability in the “I,” the shared burden of guilt, and the sense that language fails at the point when the guilty subject might try to assert itself in more positive terms.

In §§4–5 Pliny gives another reason for wanting to write history:

Me vero ad hoc studium impellit domesticum quoque exemplum. 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.

Family example too drives me toward this pursuit. My uncle and father by adoption was really a devout history-writer. Moreover I find that the wise think it a most honorable thing to follow in the footsteps of the ancestors, provided that they beat a straight path.

The juxtaposition of *pater* with *historias* immediately associates the Elder Pliny with the *pater historiae* Herodotus, emphasizing the primacy of his authority. His attitude toward writing history is “religious,” connoting both serious effort and strict devotion to an ideal. Uncle Pliny, in this description, adhered to writing history as the kind of model literary activity that the Younger challenges in this letter. The Elder is “bound” to it, *religare*, as an act to which his society gives moral worth. But this kind of devotion is precisely what his nephew scrutinizes in this letter: as we shall see in his consideration of the different eras of history, both older and newer history turn out to be impossible projects. Instead Pliny suggests in 5.8 the unbinding of these attitudes toward particular genres in favor of a discursive model that incorporates others’ voices.

Moral correctness in the Elder’s attitude toward *historia* is echoed in Pliny’s rehearsal of the core Roman value that one should follow one’s ancestors’ example (“provided that they beat a straight path.”) Both imply a devotion to standards and narratively lead back to the limitation Pliny set earlier on the value of *historia* as an act of commemoration: adherence to these standards only applies if they are demonstrably good. In both cases the “provided that” clause sounds a note of doubt.
It might be that Pliny is only covering an obvious base here, but if it is so obvious, why say it (and why twice?) Together these two passages introduce doubt over conventional values as a complement to the self-as-absence that Pliny investigates in this letter. And just as in the earlier passage the pronoun switch from first to third person alerted us to an uncertainty over the blamelessness of “I,” here the proviso clause “if only...” hints at suspicion about the straightness of the Elder’s path. If writing history, from the perspective offered in 5.8, carries the burden of writing one’s own history, this has implications for Pliny’s uncle as well. Can we read here a quiet criticism of his uncle’s bondage to a particular genre norm that, given his own political circumstance, he too would have done well to question?26 What we might call the “negative dialectical” structure of 5.8, with its oscillations between polarities that never arrive at a third, sublated state, deconstructs the monumentalizing conventions to which his uncle certainly adhered. Its ironic orientation allows for a critique of both discourse and subject foreclosed by what Henderson describes as “Uncle Pliny’s manic notebooks of notes gleaned from manically gutted books.”27

The letter twice reflects on the merits or demerits of writing history. In §1, as we saw, Pliny rehearses its commemorative qualities; in §12 he describes the problems he sees with writing about both older and more recent eras. These sections explore the dialogic dimensions of the genre and conclude that in terms of authentic communication between self and other historia is an impossible genre:


Nevertheless you now think about the era with which I might best begin. 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 among 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.

27. Henderson 2002: 264. I use “foreclosed” advisedly here in order to allude to issues in the Elder’s language that bear comparison with the Lacanian concept of psychotic speech, where the term is introduced to describe the failure of the subject to enter properly into the Symbolic arena, due to the “foreclosure” of the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan 2007). This failure leads to delusional apprehensions of experience and disordered speech. For the Elder Pliny, briefly, the point of contact would have to do with the hallucinatory quality inherent in the sheer mass of stuff that forms the object of his discourse; a different study could argue for his work’s inability to integrate experience and symbolic sense, resulting in the heaping-up of objects without a clear narrative logic. This would be similar to the psychotic’s random associations; both forms of discourse bar critical self-reflection.
Throughout, the letter stresses the moralizing aspect of *historia* that confers *fama* upon those who deserve it, i.e., whose self-conduct has been exemplary. But the extreme culpability of recent history makes this discourse impossible. The symbolic economy of praise and blame has broken down to such a degree that their measure is no longer recognized: no amount of praise is enough, and any blame is too much. The “I” of *historia* has no way to relate to others in a medium whose currency is moral evaluation and whose logic is that of a “conjunctive two,” a model in which two entities retain separate, intelligible identities whose togetherness must be sought as the result of some cause. In the case of *historia* these are the subject of the discourse and his historical objects, who come together through the medium of the genre and for the sake of *fama*. But the cause in this case has broken down: there is no way to seek *fama* under the old system, and the two entities, subject and object, cannot recognize themselves as separate because both are guilty: the apartness of subject and object, or the writing self and the historical actors of his narrative, always a fiction, can no longer obtain. Letters, by contrast, allow for a disjunctive model in which the two must be recognized as both apart and together. Subject and object are acknowledged as separate but mutually constitutive: “a necessary relation between two mutually determining parts of a whole, neither of which can be what it is apart from the other.” The disjunctive model, also dialogic, reopens discourse as something forged relationally through experience with and of the other. The subject of this discourse is not in full control either of itself or its objects, but discovers itself in the position it takes up at any moment vis-à-vis these objects.


29. Here Pliny’s articulates the “Che Vuoi” (“What do you want from me?”) dilemma with which the other confronts the Lacanian subject (Lacan 2007). For Pliny the idea of writing recent history immediately introduces the problem of the other’s response, which *historia* has no or limited mechanisms for addressing. By contrast, letters can circumlocute the problem in many different ways; for example by introducing topics piecemeal and in non-narrative sequence; choosing the addressee with whom to discuss sensitive topics; framing sensitive topics in ways that diffuse the moral issues surrounding them without totally losing sight of them.


31. We might see in Tacitus’ *Hist.* 1.1.1–4 the suggestion that the reigns of Nerva and Trajan have made objectivity possible again (cf. Marincola 1997: 167). But the language of that passage lessens the transparency of the thought: the era of *rara felicitas* is still one where “it is allowed to think what you want and say what you think” (*rara temporum felicitate ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*). I call particular attention to Tacitus’s use here of the second person: *you* can think what you like and say it, but can I?


33. Here Ernesto Laclau’s definition of the subject as “the distance between the undecidable structure and the decision” (1996: 54) is helpful for seeing Pliny’s position. Laclau means the point at which a (for him political) structure meets its limit; where its own rules no longer make possible its continuation, and a decision not self-generated by the system must be taken. He understands the subject as coming to be in the moment between breakdown and re-equilibration (decision). In Pliny’s discussion of the impossibilities faced by historical discourse, which also clearly imply the political situation of the post-Domitianic era, we can see *litterae* and their subject in the gap between *historia*’s and imperial politics’ self-sustaining continuation and the *aporia* in which the trauma of Domitian has left them. The subject of Pliny’s epistolographical discourse is a negative subject, in contrast to the now-unsustainable
Historia about recent times is impossible because the parameters of the genre cannot admit the historical situation in which both author and actors discover themselves.\textsuperscript{34} But Pliny already introduces the problematic relation between subject and object in his short, dismissive argument about writing the historia of earlier eras. Earlier studies have seen in Pliny’s statement an admission of his own laziness; however, this interpretation misses the symmetry between the arguments for writing neither older nor more recent history that Pliny’s balanced rhetoric suggests.\textsuperscript{35} In both cases Pliny’s concern is the status of the subject vis-à-vis his material. The historian of older eras is so removed from his objects that he receives them second-hand and merely compares them; the “I” of such a historia assumes a totalizing perspective on a closed system, a heavy burden (onerosa collatio). The “I” of more recent historia has the opposite problem: his close proximity to his objects leaves no space for the translation of experience into meaningful discourse. In both cases “I” and its objects are barred from one another; in fact “I” even disappears when the idea of writing recent history emerges, where the person who suffers its impossibility is “you” (“if you praise you will be said to have been niggardly; if you blame, too excessive. . .”).\textsuperscript{36}

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[	extsuperscript{34}]{ Cf. also letter 9.27, where Pliny expresses his admiration for historia in the context of an account of a reading given by an unnamed historian whose work Pliny describes as verissimum (“highly accurate”). But the author breaks off his performance at the request of “someone’s” (cuiusdam) friends who fear that the remainder of the work may include the shameful behavior of this “someone.” Pliny remarks that, whether or not the author finishes the reading, the work will stand forever, and that the delay will only make people the more eager to read it. Thus historia in this letter is again shown to be an impossible genre in Pliny’s era, unless it submits to an economy of deferral thematically similar to the one Pliny constructs in 5.8. In both letters Pliny represents the desire generated by historia’s deferral as a potential enhancement to the author’s reputation. This unnamed author’s glory now resides in the dialogic relationship created by the demand that his historia’s absence creates, whereas its presence cannot be tolerated.}
\item[	extsuperscript{35}]{ Other studies argue that Pliny is either economically conservative with his time, or perhaps just lazy; cf. Gibson and Morello 2012: 86 on Pliny’s literary persona as “a man of natural desidia who tends to give way to pleasure even in his work;” Ash 2003: 224 on Pliny’s consideration of the “practical and economical use of his own and his readers’ time;” Leach 2003 on Pliny’s construction of the social significance of otium.}
\item[	extsuperscript{36}]{ Throughout the letter “you” points to interestingly ambiguous referents: Capito, Pliny himself as if transposed into the second person to muse on his first-person experience, and the larger community that would be expected to agree with the statements he makes. Here, in particular, the melding of these identities implies the shared responsibility of all persons for the dysfunction of the praise-blame economy. But it also raises the question of the degree to which the letter is truly dialogic, or whether, as Bal 1993 suggests in her title, first person and second person are really “same person,” i.e., “Pliny,” the writing subject, allowing himself to reflect the topic from the second-person perspective that the genre easily admits. Even if my argument is plausible—that this subject presents itself as deficient—in an infinite regression we can ask who is the subject who presents itself as deficient, and so on. However, in the absolute undecidability of “you” we can most clearly see the outline of the deficiency of “I”; where all persons imply one another, none can emerge as the master voice or the subject who knows both itself and others. The production of knowledge and self-knowledge that 5.8 investigates from the point of view of genre is shown to founder on the issue of culpability.}
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Historia, both of older and more recent times, is therefore an impossible genre if the writer wishes to acknowledge as truly as possible the self and other in the act of communication. These two entities are the bedrock of historia as well, as we see from Pliny’s conventional description in the opening section of the letter, but historia seeks rather to efface the lived relationship between the two in favor of the objectivity that buttresses the credibility that is its stock-in-trade. Older history presents little opportunity for dialogue, while the account of more recent events blocks the free interchange of dialogue. When recent history comes up, communication freezes into the polarities of (impossible) moral evaluation. This is not to say that letters lie outside the field of conventional mores, in such a way that Pliny remains completely neutral on the subject of good and bad behavior when it arises. Rather, it provides a frame in which the assessment of behavior is not represented as an objective enterprise. Even when Pliny seems to assume that his addressee will agree with him, the reestablishment of convention, praise, and blameworthiness arises in a space of negotiation.37 Similarly to Platonic dialogue, in which no theory or argument arises unmediated by the dialogue itself as well as its dramatic scene-setting, Pliny’s letters craft a situation in which convention meets its limit in the gap between the speaker and interlocutor. Whereas historia is governed by generic expectations, in the sense both that the genre is expected to do certain things and that it will express certain conventional moral ideas, letters run a greater risk of being misread.38 Thus, while Pliny may indeed use his letters as an innovative tool for self-presentation, as well as advancing the boundaries of the genre in an argument for its canon-worthiness, he also explores the limits of communication, and thereby friendship, in this post-tyrannical era.39 This exploration cannot take place as effectively in the context of history-writing, with its unified narrative and the assumption of full authority by the narrative voice.40

37. Marchesi’s 2008: 150 points out Pliny’s “epistolary version” of Tacitus’ eulogy of Verginius Rufus in Letter 2.1 as a “meditation on the nature of eulogies,” arguing that Pliny here obliquely confronts Tacitus’ Agricola in a critique of the orator’s shift toward historiography. In her view Pliny promotes an alternative, intimate view of Verginius that resists the “official appropriation” of his persona that the nascent historian presented in the public eulogy. The recovery of the affective presence of Verginius (and therefore, I would add, an important dimension of the moral evaluation implicit in eulogy) can only be accomplished in the dialogic space of the letter (196). In Marchesi’s view Letter 2.1 therefore implies a problem with historiography similar to the one I discuss here with reference to 5.8.

38. On the topic of “anxiety about the possibilities of miscarriage and ineffective communication” in letters, see König 2007: 261f. For the opposite view, the letter as “the perfect distillation of the self in the presence of the other, its works and gestures unaffected by...all the mishaps that interfere with communication,” see Fitzgerald 2007: 193.

39. Pliny’s argument for the canon-worthiness of his Letters is the principal focus of Marchesi’s (2008) study of the letter.

40. With Tacitus’ narrative, however, we get as close as possible to the narrator’s self-fragmentation or awareness of its own failing. The present essay represents a first exploration of a larger project about writing after the trauma of Domitian, in which Pliny’s and Tacitus’ work will be compared. Here, I can only gloss some similarities between the two: in particular Tacitus’ use of irony and ellipsis as a point of contact with Pliny’s techniques of deferral, which themselves constitute a kind of irony. Both have a stake in refiguring language in a way that allows for a sense of autonomy within a political system that obviates it. The stakes are not only the possibility of long-lasting fame,
Pliny’s call to “you” before and after this passage simultaneously signals the way out of the impasse and ironizes its own deferral of history-writing: *Tu tamen iam nunc cogita quae potissimum tempora aggrediar* (“Nevertheless you now think about the era with which I might best begin” [§12]) introduces the comparison between *historia* of older and more recent eras, while the valediction that follows again implicates Capito as mentioned above (*illud peto praesternas.* . . . §14). The argument that he must rewrite his speeches has vanished, but the letter does not end with Pliny agreeing to write history. Rather, the final gesture prevaricates in such a way as to sustain the dialogue. Formally the valediction suspends the subject at the edge of writing, an ironic gesture because of course Pliny already *has* been writing—the letter—but the letter is all “hesitation and delay.” The valediction is thus a *mise-en-abîme* of the letter as a whole that captures the point of Pliny’s project as a delay that fosters dialogue, namely the *Letters*. There is no explicit argument for epistolography, as there was for *oratio*, as an alternative to *historia*, because letters instead critique such discursive structures. The non-naming of letters together with the overt discussion of *oratio* represents the dialectic of blindness and insight that this letter in particular evokes.41 Pliny cannot name letters, or in fact any genre, as the one that will grant him fame, because the core of his discourse is the uncertainty over the status of the subject who writes it. Pliny’s language makes this uncertainty apparent even if his stated purposes do not. The self that *historia*, or any genre in its fixed definition, takes for granted is that which Pliny performatively opens up in the “non-genre” of letters.42 The longevity of the writing endeavor’s success hinges on achieved by creating an “I” or subject position strong enough to stand up to its necessary subjection by the princeps’ external power. More fundamentally they have to do with bare existence after the trauma of tyranny. The question for authors in general after Domitian would be the one Tacitus asks in tortured phrasing at *A.* 3.2: essentially, what about the fact that so many of us who survived spent 15 long years in silence? The implication of the question, expressed especially in his description of those who outlived Domitian as “survivors of ourselves,” is what is “I” remains after not being able to speak itself for so long? With what language can it be reconstituted?

41. “Blindness and insight” refers to the title of Paul de Man’s collection of essays on the paradoxes of literary language that betray its stated intentions; where “insight seems instead to have been gained from a negative movement that animates the critic’s thought, an unstated principle that leads his language away from its asserted stand. . . as if the very possibility of assertion had been put into question” (1971: 103).

42. On the idea of letters as “not a genre but all genres, literature itself” Derrida 1987: 48 is often cited (see e.g., Edwards 2005: 270; Gibson and Morrison 2007: 3). However, what goes unremarked is the connection with Platonic dialogue that Derrida invokes here with a quotation from Nietzsche, who understands it as “the absence of form and of style engendered by the mixture of all forms and of all styles.” The “letter” (for his own text adopts the format of the letter or postcard) in which Derrida gives this description of letters comprises a fragment of his much larger investigation of the reciprocity with the other that is the (highly tenuous) guarantor of the self, as the selves of Socrates and Plato are mutually constitutive. Interestingly, Derrida’s emphasis on the connection between letter and dialogue is not only the obvious aspect of reciprocal communication they share, but rather the “dialogue” between Socrates and Plato (captured in image on a postcard that Derrida finds in the Bodleian library, figuring Plato standing behind Socrates, who is writing) in which the origin point of Platonic discourse is indeterminate. Likewise Derrida sees in the letter an embodiment of the self as ongoing transmission, always subject to loss, misdelivery, etc., whose meaning arises as a process of co-creation with
imagining and representing a particular relationship between subject and others (objects of the discourse as well as its addressees) that retains its traction into the future, but Pliny does not authorize himself to assume anything about these relationships. The first step is to recognize the culpable subject and the trauma that shaped it.

III. CITATION

When the trouble of history/historia arises as culpa, the letter moves away from it to a series of Virgilian quotations about fame and the immortality it can bring: 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 (“Therefore day and night I think over whether ‘I might somehow raise myself from the earth’. This is enough for my prayer, above and beyond it would be ‘to fly as a victor through the mouths of men’; although o—: But what history alone seems to promise is enough” [§3].) These quotations illustrate the interdependence of confidence and doubt that characterize the letter as a whole: the confidence that an élite Roman man should express by choosing to write history, and the doubt that Pliny wishes to cast over that orthodox enterprise. Pliny traces here a genealogy of poetic self-proclamation from Ennius (whose epitaph Virgil paraphrases in the first quotation) through Virgil’s Georgics and Aeneid, to himself as he considers the question of achieving a similar kind of fama. He highlights as the difference between them the degree of certainty with which each asserts a poetic self, and this depends upon the degree of political autonomy each enjoys. The interplay of these quotations suspends the poetic voice between the assertion and critique of its own immortalizing force. It questions instead how well the imperial author alone can shape such a self, recognizing that in the circumstance of autocratic power the best chance for fame arrives through quotation or citation by another.

In quotation, as in the interchange with Capito that he highlights throughout the letter, Pliny enacts a dialogue that represents the interdependence of his own fame with that of his literary predecessors and current addressee. But the quotations he chooses also expose the problems of this interdependence: first, the other may simply not “read” you. Second, he may also have actual power over your life and death. As we shall see in the quotation from Virgil’s Georgics, Pliny reaches back to the inaugural father of imperial discourse to show how the literary self, his text, and his fame exist alongside the fame of the princeps they necessarily celebrate. Pliny has further experienced peril not only to the literary self but also the material,

the other. This is an important point for my argument about Pliny’s investigation of himself, through letters, as a self misplaced through trauma, but also through Capito’s suggestion that he write history.

43. Just as Pliny may be suggesting Capito has not understood the Letters as a more fitting attempt at memorialization than historia or he would not have made his request that Pliny switch genres.
historical body. If we follow Lacan’s dictum about desire being the desire of the other, for the imperial subject the ultimate desire expressed in the wish for an everlasting name is predicated on others who may be out to destroy it: Domitian himself, and peers who either actively seek one’s demise or do nothing to prevent it.44

Marchesi interprets this passage as Pliny’s projection of his own fame as a future writer of *historia*, nuanced by the modesty that the Virgilian intertexts provide. For her, the epigraphical focus of the quotations in conjunction with their subject matter—the assertion of immortal fame deriving from literary endeavor—illustrates Pliny’s ambivalence over who holds primary place in the quest for *fama*: the author of *historia* or its actor. This ambivalence is resolved in Pliny’s real interest, which is “neither heroic nor authorial endurance, but textual canonization.”45 Thus, in her interpretation the letter engages a strategy of deferral, as I suggest, but with the ultimate goal of asserting Pliny’s own canon-worthiness.46 Though recognizing a degree of ambiguity in Pliny’s presentation of himself through these quotations, her interpretation underlines Pliny’s self-assertion as a potential historian whose primary concern is nevertheless with securing the immortality of his text. In her view the whole *oeuvre* stages a sophisticated argument with poetic, historiographical, and epistolary intertexts in a competitive bid for canonicity, where the utility of letters is their ability to shape-shift between genres. In the ongoing and humorously deferential *querelle* with Tacitus, Marchesi locates this letter as an interrogation of genre, as I do, but within the context of Pliny’s positive bid to supersede both his literary predecessors and his rival-peer.

The loser in Marchesi’s careful examination of Pliny and genre is epistolography, whose chief significance turns out to be the wide arena it provides for Pliny’s *agon* with other literary modes. However, with these Virgilian quotations Pliny highlights the dialogism for which 5.8 covertly argues as the key both to literary

44. Lacan 2007: 343. To unpack this typically opaque expression more clearly in the context of Pliny’s *milieu*, the *Panegyricus* provides a useful intertext. Here the autonomy Pliny professes is integral to the praise he offers: much of the rhetorical force of the speech depends upon Pliny’s emphasis that (his) speech is now free, but Trajan is so good a ruler as to present hardly any need for a subject to exercise it. This paradoxical stance nicely illustrates the overlay of both resonances of the term “subject”: that of the discourse and of the political situation. The former’s self-assertion in declaring “I” meets its limit in the discursive situation—praise of power—that provides the ground of its existence. Similarly, but more directly than *Letter* 5.8, the speech performs the oxymoron of the speaking subject’s search for its own *gloria* by highlighting its other-dependent status in an arena where the stakes are high: *historia* exposes the subject’s *culpa*, and the *Pan.* suggests that it risks the emperor’s potentially life-threatening anger—if Trajan were a different sort of emperor. However, the *Pan.* also suggests the reverse: the emperor shows his goodness by acceding to certain behavioral protocols toward the senate. Thus both parties find immortal *fama* through the “desire of the other,” which in the context of the *Pan.*, and at the most fundamental level, is the desire to survive. For the *Pan.* as an attempt to shape the behaviors of both emperor and senate vis-à-vis one another, creating a new paradigm for freedom of speech, see Spielberg 2019 (in this issue) Connolly 2009.

45. Marchesi 2008: 162.

46. Though it would seem as if the question of canon-worthiness and authorial endurance come to much the same thing, Marchesi asserts that “in Pliny’s meditation the primary author/actor ambiguity evolves into, and is overshadowed by, an exploration of the stylistic questions inherent in his texts” (2008: 162).
and historical fame, and that is best achieved in his publication of his letters. This kind of dialogue is not only literary and intertextual but also deeply ethical, rooted in Pliny’s historical experience. It undermines attempts to see in the Letters Pliny’s establishment of a self apart from others, a thesis that underlies studies of his oeuvre that focus on his self-curatorship as a means to promote his own fame.\(^{47}\) However well these studies recognize Pliny’s “anxieties” or ambivalences, the ultimate focus is his attempt to distinguish himself in some way—to be “better than,” or at least “as good as.”\(^{48}\) Marchesi’s chapter title “The importance of being Secundus: Tacitus’s voice in Pliny’s letters” immediately captures her thesis that, though Pliny recognizes himself as secundus to Tacitus, he nevertheless in several letters reframes Tacitus’s own words (both those he wrote in letters to Pliny, and in his literary texts) in critical response to them.\(^{49}\) He thereby implies a place for himself that after a long span of time posterity will perhaps not see as so far distant from Tacitus’s own.\(^{50}\) In her interpretation the key aspect of dialogism in Pliny’s letters to Tacitus is that of citation: Pliny cites both Tacitus and Virgil in the attempt to frame a persona for himself over and against that of the historian. Dialogue/letters for Marchesi are chiefly a medium for Pliny to assert a “strong” self (as we see from her next chapter title: “Storming Historiography: Pliny’s voice in Tacitus’ text”), and the worthiness of his oeuvre for canonization.

However, while the oeuvre as a whole certainly shows Pliny’s emulous relationship with other authors, most notably Cicero and Tacitus, it also contextualizes this rivalry within a larger meditation on failure: the impossibility of a “strong self” apart from its citation by others.\(^{51}\) This situation is especially perilous for an author of a post-tyrannical era characterized by doubt over how to “read” anybody.

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47. On this theme, though with various foci, see Henderson 2003 and 2002a and 2002b; Ludolph 1997; Riggbsy 1995; Leach 1990.
48. Cf. Ludolph’s (1997) interpretation of the Letters as a means for Pliny to promote his own glory while maintaining the cover of modesty that the lowlier genre of epistolography affords.
51. In his investigations of the (mis)quotation “O my friends, there is no friend,” some version of which is first attributed to Aristotle in the Eudemian Ethics, Derrida (1997) argues that the true friend arrives both at the horizon of death and in forms that challenge the ordinary sense of the friend as that which is “one’s own” (from his exploration of the Greek philos). For him the friend is the one who bears witness to the self through citation, an idea for which the history of this misquotation of Aristotle provides the ground of exploration. True friendship according to Cicero, one of Derrida’s first citations, makes of the friend an exemplar—in Derrida’s emphasis an “ideal projection”—of the self who carries the hope of one’s own immortality as a kind of “citation” of oneself; through Cicero Derrida imagines the friend as the deliverer of the funeral eulogy that immortalizes as a kind of mirror of one’s own discourse, what one would have chosen to say about oneself. If he gets it wrong, what kind of a friend is he, and more importantly, what self then exists in the mis-citation? Yet this risky interaction is for Derrida the ground of the political: not, as Carl Schmitt has it, a field where the condition of the friend is the enemy, nor where the friend is “one’s own” (philos), but where friendship is being the other of the other. This is the field that Pliny explores in choosing epistolography as the medium for propagating his own name and reputation, in a milieu where culpa makes the boundary between self and other harder to establish. In this light Letter 5.8 becomes the programmatic statement on the inevitability of friends mistaking one another and being mis-taken.
Letters therefore represent a critical choice of genre: they allow for the author’s self-establishment within the whole literary field, as Marchesi suggests, but even more importantly in Pliny’s era they also convey the doubt that attaches to the author’s project of establishing a secure subject position. Importantly, Marchesi’s interest in letters as the preferred literary vehicle for Pliny’s own fame largely also remains within the frame of the genre, exploring the rich intertextual nuances its fluid parameters allow, and the possibilities for emulous expression it therefore widely permits. She argues that Pliny stakes his *fama* on letters because they allow for the widest display of literary expertise as well as *querelles* with other authors, and this is both a clever and innovative way for Pliny to insert himself into literary history. She explicitly tables the larger, outer question of the social and political function of such a choice, distancing herself from other studies that address it because in her view such “instrumental” analyses require hypothesizing an author in advance of his texts.52

However, letter 5.8 closely examines literary language in two genres whose real-life stakes are recognizably high in this era, and comments trenchantly on the very real reactions that *historia* elicits. Pliny does not therefore simply return to *oratio* as the preferred genre, but complicates the question further with his rhetoric of confusion (as I shall discuss further below). The permeability of the boundary between life and literature, and the ethical necessity for the author self-consciously to negotiate it, form the letter’s major concern. Pliny maintains an ambiguous position on the fame one achieves as author versus actor, as Marchesi persuasively argues, but not only, I would counter, to stress the primacy of the text in order to showcase its fitness for the literary canon. Rather 5.8 presents a double portrait of the materiality of the text, in its vision of the potential for dialogue to rebuild damaged discursive relations in society and politics, and the textuality of its historical material in the socially and politically dangerous hypersensitivity of the era to the nuances of language.53 Thus it is not a question of imagining an author anterior to his text (as Hoffer and Ludolph do), nor a text divorced from the material circumstances of its author and seeking only its own self-perpetuation (as Marchesi sees the *Letters*). While as she says “the survival for which Pliny the epistolographer designed his collection was not personal but textual” may be true in the sense that Pliny aims at literary immortality rather than the fame of his person, the survival of his person within its discursive milieu—the ability to construct an “I” at all—is critically important.54

Virgil’s words, and through them Ennius’ too, have a living presence in the letter that Pliny acknowledges even as their speech becomes his; thus Pliny accomplishes for them what they project with the phrase “to fly as victor through

53. A similar theoretical concern, as well as an emphasis on Pliny’s own difficulties negotiating between the desire for glory and awareness of the Domitianic past, subordinates Leach’s study of the “interrelationship of public and private personality” in Pliny’s literary self-portraiture (see especially her analysis of letter 1.8, on Pliny’s hesitations over the revision of a speech he gave to dedicate a library in his home town of Comum [1990: 28–31].)
54. Marchesi 2008: 5.
the mouths of men.” A metadiscourse on this pronouncement, 5.8 both enacts and critiques the dialogue necessary for the fulfillment of their projected aim. Here Pliny not only demonstrates the importance of citation as vehicle for, and proof of, literary immortality, giving to Ennius and Virgil what he obliquely requests from Capito by prolonging the dialogue. He also quotes texts that specifically highlight the overlapping of the literary and historical/material self. Thus, the Virgilian quotations examine the literary and historical selves in their interdependence, with particular interest in the autonomy they have over their own subjectivity. The first, from Virgil’s *Georgics* 3.8–9, itself quotes Ennius’s self-composed epitaph. The second, from *Aeneid* 5.195, represents Mnestheus’s wholehearted but only half-expressed, self-doubtful wish to win the boat race at Anchises’ funeral games. Pliny closes the section by referring back to *historia*, saying that he will content himself with “what *historia* almost alone seems to promise” (*sed hoc satis est, quod prope sola historia polliceri videtur*.) The logic here is paradoxical: the quotations express Pliny’s wish for fame but hesitancy over the possibility of achieving it; *sed hoc satis est* points to something else with which Pliny can possibly make do. However, what is *satis* turns out to be fame, though qualified as being something that *historia* “almost alone” can provide because it gives pleasure even if its eloquence falls short—unlike *oratio* and *carmina* which demand *summa eloquentia*. In fact Pliny is not only talking about *historia* here, but also the other genre to which the phrase “almost alone” opens the door: letters, which include precisely the *sermunculi* and *fabellae* (“chit-chat” and “storytelling”) with which he here characterizes *historia.*

Francesca Martelli discusses Ennius’s epitaph as a “touchstone for exploring how historical and literary-historical considerations circulate from one discursive sphere to the other.”56 She explores in detail, through the combined facts of Ennius’s literary status and his bust placed in the tomb of the Scipios, his poetic *imago* as a construct deriving from both these types of discourses; neither self-perpetuating through its own literary efforts nor dependent upon the fame of those it celebrates.57 Her analysis argues for the particular significance of Ennius’s presence in letter 5.8, where Pliny recognizes precisely for his own *imago* this interdependence of the literary self and the others it immortalizes. But in a further, self-conscious move (not evident in Ennius’s epitaph) Pliny considers simultaneously the relationship between the author and the history whose noteworthiness may carry him with it, and the immortalizing function of the *genre* of history versus oratory and letters; that is, he is thinking in terms of the historical function of literary style, or the inseparability of history from the language within which it takes place. Paradoxically, Pliny is thinking of himself as both a historical actor, in his capacity

55. See Leeman 1963: 335–36 for an interpretation of this passage focusing on aspects of *historia* that might correspond to Pliny’s description here, and attempting to reconcile this description with the apparently more elevated one that occurs in §9–11. Cf. also Woodman 2012: 232. My reading here opposes Marchesi’s (2008: 156), who interprets the passage (along with other sections of the letter) as an intimation that Pliny will write *historia* one day.
56. Martelli 2018: 70.
57. Martelli 2018.
as an author whose choice of genre inscribes a facet of his historicity; and an author, in his capacity as a historical actor whose relationships with historical others is fundamental to the construction of his literary self.

Ennius’s epitaph—“Let no one honor me with tears nor funeral lamentation. Why would he? I fly alive through the mouths of men” (nemo me lacrimis decoret nec funera fletu/faxit. cur? volito vivos per ora virum)—seals his life with the poetry he believes will keep his name alive beyond death. He makes a positive claim for a self that has become transmuted into poetic language. The “I” that flies is now immortalized in what it says, poetically, about itself. Ennius contrasts this with the death that others will perceive and therefore mourn, but he sees himself as alive in their mourning, in all the language with which others will evoke him into the future. In writing his epitaph, he imagines both his death and the renewal of his life through the future audience he imagines quoting his poetry. Ennius’s “I” takes itself for granted, to the point of overtly challenging, with the rhetorical question cur?, any notion that death would annihilate it. In his epitaph life is art, the historical coincides with the literary, and vice versa. Importantly for Pliny’s considerations in this letter, Ennius is also a history-writer. The literary “I” that immortalizes itself in his epitaph evokes also the preservation of others in just the way that Pliny brings up at the beginning of the letter, but in his epitaph Ennius speaks only of himself. His self-assurance provides the counterpoint to Pliny’s doubt, but also, as the first poetic/historical statement in Latin, an originary claim for literary genre as a source of fame. In the context of 5.8 the association of Ennius’s confidence with his status as a writer of history gives Pliny a foil for his own hesitation about the project.

Virgil’s formulation of Ennius’s bold claim is more circumspect. No longer the final statement of a life, Virgil’s borrowing instead asserts a new direction for his poetic theme: . . . temptanda via est, qua quoque possim/tollere humo victor virumque volitare per ora (“Now all the other themes are too well known. . . . I must try out a path by which I too may raise myself from earth and fly as victor through . . .”).

58. For the epigram, see Vahlen 1928: 215.

59. Ennius’s composition of his own epitaph speaks to his perception of posterity’s trustworthiness in citing him, thus proving to be the true friend of Derrida’s interpretation of Cicero Amic.: “I live in the present speaking of myself in the mouths of my friends, I already hear them speaking on the edge of my tomb. The Ciceronian variety of friendship would be the possibility of quoting myself in exemplary fashion, by signing the funeral oration in advance—. . .”; however the next part of Derrida’s sentence takes up the uncertainty of this perception, which would be Pliny’s stance in 5.8: “. . .the best of them, perhaps, but it is never certain that the friend will deliver it standing over my tomb when I am no longer among the living” (1997: 5). For Pliny’s specific exploration of this problem, see the letters about Verginius Rufus: 2.1, 6.10, 9.19. These consider the role of the epitaph as a vehicle for immortal /fama/. Verginius composed his own, but when Pliny visits his tomb ten years after his death, his heirs have still not erected his monument, and the epitaph remains unknown until Pliny’s citation of it in the letter (thus proving his own “true” friendship). See Marchesi 2008: 158–60 for an interpretation of these letters’ relevance to 5.8 as evidence of Pliny’s (ambiguous) favoring of literary fame over fame in the historical record.

60. See Lowrie 2009: 31n.29 and 142 for the “enactive, performative function” of monuments, for which poetic texts act as metaphors that “reanimate the dead within living minds.”
the mouths of men, “G. 3.8–9). Virgil talks about life in terms of it being long enough to create this new theme, and links the endeavor to the deification of Caesar:

> Primus ego in patriam mecum, modo vita supersit, Aonio rediens deducam vertice Musas; primus Idumaeeas referam tibi, Mantua, palmas, et viridi in campo templum de marmore ponam propter aquam. Tardis ingens ubi flexibus errat Mincius et tenera praetexit arundine ripas. In medio mihi Caesar erit templumque tenebit: illi victor ego et Tyrio conspectus in ostro centum quadriiugos agitabo ad flumina currus.

If life lasts I, first, returning to my country from the Aeonian peak shall bring back the Muses; I first, Mantua, shall bring you Idumaean palms, and on that green plain shall set a temple of marble by the water, where great Mincius wanders in lazy bends, and clothes his banks with slim reeds. In the middle for me will be Caesar, and he will own the temple. I, victor for him, conspicuous in Tyrian purple, shall drive a hundred four-horse chariots by the river (G.3.10–18).

Here Virgil’s poetic victory projects Caesar’s immortality first, in the temple that already signifies it, and his own as attendant on Caesar’s. Virgil’s “I” immortalizes itself through Caesar, whose honor is the occasion for the metaphor of the poet as conquering general displaying his prowess before and for Caesar. Ennius’s poetic “I” at the moment of death immediately projects its immortality as a singular entity that sees itself alive in citation “through the mouths of men.” Virgil passes through the medium of the poem and its principal object, Caesar, expressing hope, but not certainty, of finding the “path” by which it might achieve the lift-off that Ennius effortlessly bypasses. Ennius sees himself as already “fly[ing] through the mouths of men” in the present tense; Virgil “must try out a path” that first immortalizes Caesar and then himself.61

Pliny turns the positive assertions of both Ennius and Virgil into something much more tentative. “Day and night” he thinks about (cogito) achieving the first step toward immortality—raising himself above the ground—and says even that would be enough, though hinting at the desire for the full flight that his predecessors anticipate with more confidence. The coming-to-be of Virgil’s “I” involves a subjection foreign to Ennius, but by the time of Pliny’s writing all too familiar. In between is Virgil, who mediates Ennius’s unproblematic self-possession through the vision of a self in the possession of Caesar.62

61. On the Pindaric qualities of the proem as a means “to honor Octavian’s military victories” see Balot 1998: 85.
62. On political pessimism as characteristic of both Pliny and Virgil, see Strunk 2012: 179.
Pliny expresses diffidence in all three quotations: in the first two, where he accepts as enough “raising himself above the ground,” by contrast a lesser wish than “flying through the mouths of men;” and in the third through the hesitation of Mnestheus in *Aeneid* 5, “Although O—!” , a fragmentary utterance that cannot even fully express the wish. Thus the conversation about writing history becomes from the start a consideration of the bare possibility of capturing in language the desire for a complete self-presence, the magic formula also to burst the boundary of human mortality. The irony of 5.8, inherent in the expertise with which the letter represents the limit of expertise when it comes to the formation of a “full” (unflawed, complete, essential) subject, points to a contingent subject bound to experience and above all its addressee. It deconstructs the notion of genre by indicating the breaking points of *historia* but also poetry, and shows how within the system of literary language fame is the product of an ethical choice—the recognition of the other—as well as a literary one. This choice implies the limit where the system cannot both guarantee itself and the arising of the subject in the moment of decision to value the other. The stakes could not be higher, as it also entrusts the possibility of one of the highest aims, immortal *gloria*, to this potentially untrustworthy other. As we see in the exchange between Pliny and Capito, the “friend” with his well-meaning request misses the “Pliny” that exists in dialogue; he has cut short the conversation by telling Pliny to start speaking in the monological idiom of *historia*.

Pliny’s third quotation of Virgil (*quamquam o—!*) refers to the victory games for Anchises, during which a boat race takes place. Two of Aeneas’ men, Cloanthus and Mnestheus, compete closely as they near the finish. First Mnestheus makes a highly circumlocutory prayer: *Non iam prima peto Mnestheus, neque vincere certo; quamquam O!—sed superent, quibus hoc, Neptune, dedisti; extremos pudeat rediisse; hoc vincite, cives, et prohibete nefas* (“I, Mnestheus, do not seek first place, nor strive to be victorious; although O!— but let them overcome, Neptune, to whom you have granted it. It would be shameful to come in last; conquer this, comrades, and ward off infamy,” *Aen.* 5.194–97). Cloanthus by contrast expresses his desire to win by promising sacrifices to the gods, and he does win. Mnestheus’s faltering speech implies that the greatness of the hope defies articulation, and that even to come close to it takes it out of one’s grasp. *Quamquam O—!* in his speech is the moment where he would state his positive wish to win, but cannot. His expression is a classical case of Freudian

63. Fitzgerald’s (2007) argument that for Pliny “the letter’s the thing” contrasts the idea of letters as substitutes for absent events and conversations with that of “the letter as a distillation of the self in the presence of the other,” unaffected by the misinterpretations of regular conversation. In his view Pliny’s letters demonstrate their own self-sufficiency as vehicles for Pliny’s *gloria*: “the letter’s the thing” in the sense that it instantiates in form as well as content many of the social values and antagonisms of Pliny’s era—it stands both as a perfect distillation of the self and as a representative of the ambiguities that surround that self. Fitzgerald implies that as such the letters give Pliny a strong enough presence to compete for long-lasting *fama*; they have a “there-ness” that give them authority. This “there-ness” is a point of contact with my articulations of Pliny’s literary “I” or self as inseparable from its historical culpability; but whereas Fitzgerald sees a self-confident focus in Pliny’s letters, I argue for Pliny’s use of the genre to highlight suspicions and doubts over such a totalized self.
negation; “a way of taking cognizance of what is repressed; indeed it is already a lifting of the repression, though not, of course, an acceptance of what is repressed.”

Pliny’s quotation of Mnestheus reproduces the double-consciousness that wishes but doubts; like Mnestheus he calls on others who are conceived as co-creators of the ideological space: cives, in Mnestheus’s terminology; in Pliny’s, the idea of the letter’s recipient, in this case Capito, who conjures the ideal self and others that are the particular constructs of historia. Pliny and Mnestheus are self-expressed examples of the self-as-negativity or the absence of clear self-directing agency. Whereas Cloanthus focuses on the practical means for winning, establishing and trusting in an entirely conventional relationship with the other (the divine force), Mnestheus is caught up in a drama with his own desire: approaching, yielding, finally backtracking via a fragmentary utterance and a total withdrawal (leaving the outcome in Neptune’s hands). In his simple promise to pay rich sacrifices to the gods, Cloanthus leaves aside the drama that entangles Mnestheus’s ability to express himself. Mnestheus’s broken utterance captures the anxiety of the self facing by itself—“I, Mnestheus...”—the terror of the absolute: immortality or oblivion. His negative articulation of the desire to “be first” indicates that the idea of its realization is too much for him to bear. Mnestheus conceptualizes winning the race as an act that will make or break him; it is so momentous a thing that his language cannot capture it. He cannot say fully what he wants because it is nothing less than a totality of self.

As runner-up, Mnestheus receives a special war-shirt that Aeneas took from a Greek foe at Troy. The shirt, we are told, is so heavy that Mnestheus’s two servants can barely carry it, though the Greek had worn it easily; tradition weighs on its inheritors. A self-referential moment expressing Virgil’s impossible relationship to Homer, Mnestheus’s experience becomes in Pliny’s discourse a metaphor of mourning the impossibility of full self-presence in language, and therefore the loss of full control over one’s reputation with posterity. The overarching culpa lies in the language one inherits as an imperial subject, shaped by Virgil already as an expression of failure and doubt. The subject cannot carry his own prize, the signifier of his immortal fame, but through citation he “flies as a victor,” just as Pliny’s addressees will achieve immortality through their presence in his letters and his citation of their conversation. There is no going it alone; no language can get you to the fullness of your own presence even though, as Pliny says at the end of this section, “what history alone seems to promise is enough.” What historia “seems” conventionally to promise is the fullness of recognition by that

64. Freud 1925: 235.

65. Though Mnestheus is to be the aetiological father of the gens Memmius (Aen. 5.117). I thank John Henderson for mentioning to me that, as Pliny recalls fathers of epic historical discourse here—Ennius and Virgil—, we can perhaps also see here an echo of his own adopted father, progenitor of his discourse, whose example Pliny names in this letter as historiography. However, Uncle Pliny’s genre promiscuity—choices tailored by the different eras in which the works were written—importantly teaches Pliny about style as an intersection of the author’s two subjectivities—discursive and political. As Mnestheus is named in the Aeneid to give honor to the gens that follows, Pliny’s own father is an important example to him of the lability of the artistic self under the principate.
big other, posterity; but this illusion is based on a false separation of subject from object that Pliny will not ethically allow.

IV. **HAEC, ILLA, AND THE FLOOD OF LANGUAGE**

I have been arguing in general for understanding 5.8 as an exercise in negation, where Capito’s suggestion for Pliny’s positive self-reformulation as a writer of history confronts Pliny with the negative or deficient self that he senses as the core of post-Domitianic discourse. Following this interpretation I reframe the troubled *haec–illa* section as the crux of the letter, where the division and analysis of *historia* and *oratio* give the strongest appearance of a positive argument. But as the many studies that have attempted to untangle its logic together show, the balanced and apparently clear divisions made lexically by the pronouns in fact obscures the view of these two genres and leads to no conclusion about which Pliny will choose.66 The argument, like that of the letter as a whole, advances no particular agenda or conclusion. On the other hand, its ambiguous use of the pronouns aligns very well with the letter’s overall strategy to defer decisive action or meaning. Interpretations of the passage that try to make Pliny’s logic clearer by schematizing it into charts or columns reproduce the original misreading of Pliny that Capito makes when he suggests Pliny switch genres: both ask Pliny to write something other than what he actually *is* writing. Throughout the letter Pliny’s response is to foil the desire for clear-cut divisions of discourse that uphold a certain fantasy about subject–object relation. This section simultaneously reproduces and obstructs that desire in the antagonism between structural simplicity and terminological complexity.

In form the text here looks as if it should uphold the argument for dividing the two genres and for Pliny’s apparent choice of *oratio*. In content it dissolves them, concluding with a metaphor of mixture that signals the irony of Pliny’s analysis:

> 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 debo; ideoque interim veniam, ut ne a meis verbis recedam, advocandi peto.

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 (§11).

In Marchesi’s interpretation, the concluding flood metaphor is “inconsequential and even witty;” she recognizes the self-consciousness of Pliny’s metaphor of confusion,

66. For authors and their tables in the context of the argument that Pliny keeps or reverses the usual meaning of the pronouns, as well as her own table, see Marchesi 2008: 165–67. For a fuller summary of the positions taken in older studies of the letter, see Woodman 2012: 234–35.
but does not integrate it into her interpretation of the passage as a whole.\textsuperscript{67} What is the purpose of this highly wrought chaos? The flood metaphor, with the repetition expressed in \textit{confundam misceamque} ("[I am not inclined to] confuse and mix up") and the adverb \textit{quasi} ("as it were") all underline the defeat of language and its retreat into “recess.” Far from inconsequential, Pliny’s summary here expresses the kernel of his response to Capito in the letter as a whole: language itself is dangerously syncretistic.\textsuperscript{68} In the flood of rhetoric, one chooses one’s words somewhat arbitrarily; “somewhat” because the element of personal preference, natural talent and inclination, count for something. What ebbs away here is the convention to which Capito appeals in his request, and in its place Pliny substitutes himself, his own language (\textit{meis verbis}), embodied in his own particular choices of rhetoric, genre, and style.

Pliny would seem to be calling humorous attention to “his own words” as those of a speaker of \textit{oratio} in his use of the technical expression \textit{veniam. . .advocandi peto}, insisting upon his identity as an orator, and returning to the argument that he should revise his speeches rather than turn to \textit{historia}.\textsuperscript{69} But the expression is a contested one, as Woodman points out in his summary of the conflicting interpretations given it in the lexical entries on \textit{advocare} in \textit{OLD} and \textit{TLL}: for \textit{OLD} this is a “rare (and possibly unique) example of \textit{advocare} meaning “to make or secure an adjournment of a case,’” the interpretation with which Woodman agrees; whereas for \textit{TLL} it has the improbable meaning of “to summon,” which makes little sense in the context.\textsuperscript{70} For Woodman Pliny makes the return here to \textit{oratio} “since Pliny presents himself primarily as a lawyer throughout the letter.”\textsuperscript{71} But the unusual or even “unique” use of \textit{advocare} alludes to legal language without placing itself within the mainstream of that discourse. “Lawyer” and \textit{oratio} are two designations with which Pliny aligns himself while simultaneously resisting any rigid classification; Pliny emphasizes the choice of language rather than the identity with which it might conventionally be associated. More than returning to a fixed idea of himself as a writer of speeches, Pliny here intensifies the focus on irony and play in his language,

\textsuperscript{67} Marchesi 2008: 168. She calls attention several times both to the ambiguities of Pliny’s discussion and the purposefulness with which he creates them, but in the end her interpretation reverts to the older model that looks for Pliny’s meaning in the structure he uses to deploy the terms and the rhetorical history that helps to interpret them. Her interpretation simultaneously recognizes a self-conscious gesture in Pliny’s obfuscations and wants to sort them out, thereby averting the dangers of “syncretism,” i.e., the confusion that older scholarship believes Pliny creates in his analysis of these two genres.

\textsuperscript{68} For the terminology see Marchesi 2008: 165–66, where she describes Pliny’s survey of \textit{oratio} and \textit{historia} as a \textit{synkrisis} that “dangerously approaches syncretism.”

\textsuperscript{69} I thank one of the readers of this essay for the observation that Pliny also situates this letter between two others that have to do with legal matters. 5.7 discusses the rights of community versus those of individuals in the acceptance of inheritances, and 5.9—ironically after all the delay Pliny has created in 5.8—treats a delay in legal proceedings. The reader also points out to me that 5.7 ends with the assertion that letters, unlike face-to-face conversation, “are vulnerable to the ill-will of its interpreters” (\textit{epistula. . . malignitati interpretantium exponitur}). See above for my discussion of this problem with a dialogic genre such as letters.

\textsuperscript{70} Woodman 2012: 239n.33.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid: 239.
paradoxically using “his own words” (legal language) to make himself disappear (into “recess”). In this sentence “I” seeks its own absence at the same time as marking its presence in a language that is not, if OLD is correct about its rarity, on close inspection as familiar as it seems.

The ground on which his words fall might be “here” or “there” (the ambiguity of haec and illa reproduced in the adverbs ibi and hic); what matters is the interlocutor who receives them. Pliny in the next sentence turns back to “you”: Tu tamen iam nunc cogita quae potissimum tempora aggrediar. Following this injunction he introduces the problems inherent in both older and newer history discussed above. The haec–illa passage can bear all the interpretations given it to date as layers of sedimented meaning on which the ideology of genre in Pliny’s era rests. All of the attitudes they imply are present in Pliny’s text, but ironized through the action of deferral that opens onto a vision of language as mixture and intercommunication. Confusion here is a main scheme, rather than an unfortunate byproduct of Pliny’s lesser talent or an accidental one of his complex rhetorical analysis. Pliny’s attention is on the reader/s who try to sort it out; he wants their attention for as long as he can get it. In a letter that considers the possibilities of immortal fama that attend certain genres, the haec–illa passage acts as a Sta Viator, bringing readers to a standstill, and keeping them in dialogue with him, as they puzzle it out. In this aim it has proven very effective.

CONCLUSION

The problem underlying the attempt to secure everlasting fame is how to situate oneself in a language that others can “read,” which implies shared conventions of literary discourse such as the one Capito brings up in his suggestion that Pliny write history. Among other things historia signifies the greatness of its author (one thinks here of the adjective “magisterial” that Tacitus’ name now automatically evokes; or the admiration Pliny’s Letter 3.5 evinces for his uncle’s bibliography and writing habits.) But in 5.8 Pliny tackles the question of genre as Charles Martindale’s “metaphysical entity,” acknowledging the conventional wisdom about what historia can achieve for both author and object while simultaneously deconstructing it. In so doing he gets at the particularities of what it is to be a writing subject rather than simply falling in line with the generalities or assumptions inherent in a “congealed” notion of the effects of literary genre.

One important particularity is the historical era of his writing: the aftermath of a tyrannical regime that delivered serious shocks to language in the form of

72. See Marchesi for a description of Pliny’s strategy as “tantalizing” (2008: 164), but without further discussion for why he would make it so. See also her argument with Ussani, who she says “impose[s] regimentation where Pliny intended nuance” (165).

73. Martindale 1993: 15.

74. Ibid.
book-burning and other repressions of speech. If we take Tacitus’s *Agricola* as a credible testimony of that time, the atmosphere of fear and paranoia crushed discursive interchange between members of Domitian’s circle and locked them into a dyadic relationship with him alone, each creating meaning only through the one other.\(^{75}\) After such a time, as Tacitus also states, language must be reformulated, which also implies the relearning of the self in a new idiom. For Pliny, letters offer a literary testing ground for this reconfiguration of the self as survivor of itself, to paraphrase Tacitus’s description of himself and those who outlived Domitian.\(^{76}\) *Letter* 5.8 foregrounds the status of the writing subject as a problem for itself and therefore for the hope of establishing itself toward the future. Whereas other studies of the letter—and indeed the *oeuvre* as a whole—assume Pliny’s subjective agency as a foregone conclusion, the very fact of the letters themselves makes doubt over this agency a central feature of the *oeuvre*. Certainly the letters display aims and beliefs that belong squarely to the value system of his era, but Pliny’s self-expression as a subject formed within contemporary ideologies does not preclude his awareness of the precarious nature of this subjectivity. In this sense I see Pliny’s *Letters*, with 5.8 as programmatic, in Alan Singer’s description of the novel as “a disciplined self-consciousness about the self-problematizing features of narrative totality.”\(^{77}\) Rather than narrative totality and the fullness of self it projects, Pliny opts for a fragmentary discourse that acknowledges the deficiency of its “I”.

Pliny’s worry about the longevity of his reputation is one expression of a much larger, existential question that his *oeuvre* poses; namely, what kind of self emerges within these political circumstances? In calling to others, and in particular the “big Other” in the form of the *princeps*, as partners in the creation of himself, Pliny raises and explores the issue of the self within a relationship of power.\(^{78}\) His writing shows the struggle to understand and shape the possibilities for agency after the terrible passivity of the Domitianic era. The *Letters* ask us to consider “Pliny” as that which emerges from Pliny’s multifaceted advocacy, but also fear, for his own power. In his hope for a long-lasting reputation, a self-projection strong enough to survive oblivion, he also recognizes that he cannot do it alone. His work both celebrates human relationship, so diminished by the tyranny of Domitian, and mourns the omnipotent fantasy that one could exist without it.

75. *Ag.* 45.2. Domitian can be understood both as the imaginary other of a mirror-relationship that obtains in tyranny when senators and *princeps* engage in a mutually reinforcing visual relationship such as we also see described in Tacitus’ *Annals* 1.11–12; and within the symbolic register as the “big Other” represented by law and language. I would argue that these two “others” provide a general structure for understanding the logic of the ancient *topos* of the tyrant.

76. “Survivors of ourselves” (*nostri superstites*) *Ag.* 3.2.

77. For this and the formulation of subjective agency as “foregone conclusion,” see Singer 1993: 3.

78. In psychoanalytic theory the “big Other” generally refers to the symbolic order (language), and is purely virtual. I use the term here to underline the conditioning of imperial language by the figure of the *princeps* as a master signifier, whose effect nevertheless depends upon an imagined relationship between him and the writing subject.
The interaction of self and other constitutes the core of Pliny’s critique of *historia* and reveals the letter’s stakes to be much higher than literary debate. The dialogism of the letter’s literary form also implicates the addressee in a collective guilt that Pliny adduces as a root cause of the disruption to language in the period after Domitian. Pliny expresses in many letters the social, political, and juridical problems of the post-Domitianic era; scholarship has examined the degree of Pliny’s culpability both in terms of the facts of his career and his own psychological reactions to them, coming to various conclusions about his involvement in the worse aspects of Domitian’s principate and his honesty in facing the memory of that era. Rather than argue from a psychological perspective about Pliny’s possible “anxieties” or an “objective” historical one that judges his behavior on the available external evidence, I have grounded my analysis in the difficulties of argument and literary style of *Letter* 5.8, which I take as indicators of problems with language that the letter both instantiates and examines critically. The difficulties of this letter both are and are not within Pliny’s conscious control as he shapes a discourse around the interaction with another who may not even “read” him. Pliny’s choice of *litterae*, as opposed to other more conventionally recognized genres, moves post-tyrannical discourse more generally in the direction of an ethical rebuilding that requires the acknowledgment of *culpa* in both self and other. The very act of continual responding, the basis of *litterae*, is also a continual and self-conscious confrontation with the other whose presence raises the question of one’s own responsibility in this new era and for past deeds and relations. Further, it challenges the self as a knowable, self-sufficient entity, much less one that through its literary authority can establish its own monumentality in a conventionally exalted genre such as *historia*. The language with which to reestablish this responsibility, indeed the whole ethical ground, must be reforged in dialogue not only with the immediate “you” (Capito) but also future addressees.

The College of New Jersey
haynes@tcnj.edu

BIBLIOGRAPHY


