

## It is alive! Resignificance in Pliny's epistolary books

By Lucas Amaya

“Mixture is the letter, the epistle, which is not a genre but all genres, literature itself.” This quotation is what Derrida (1998, p. 48) says when remarking on some Nietzschean thoughts on Plato's style. Even more, such sentence embodies fully Epistolography, from the Sumerians to the Modern Western World: a pedagogical feature, a military and political communication tool, a religious way for the human voice to the ears of gods, the foundation of the modern novels, an obligation to a literate elite, a rhetorical instrument for communicating with the masses. One can write letters in prose or verse and embody any subject matter; they reach everyone, for they can travel through time and space. As said by the French thinker, letters can be all literature if we conceive literature as written pieces read by many persons in a specific community.

One may argue that letters may be only recognised as one part of a literary work, not a whole genre: Horace's letters are poetry; Seneca's letters are prosaic philosophical treatise; Cicero's letters are private communication we read as historical documents. In fact, until recent years, the idea of Ancient Epistolography as a literary genre was not entirely accepted, as most modern scholars considered it merely a medium for other genres<sup>1</sup>. There are few works discussing the nature of ancient epistolary collections (such as Altman, 1982, and Gibson, 2012), and even fewer on the consumption of ancient epistolary works (e.g., Marchesi, 2015). Our understanding of the composition and consumption processes of epistolary works in ancient Rome is limited. This limitation is closely linked to the modern and monodisciplinary need to categorize genres into precise, supposedly well-defined, closed boxes, which is quite narrow-minded. The occasional definitions found in the works of Aristotle, Horace, Longinus,

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant authors, such as Fhurmann (1985), Martin and Gaillard (1990), Conte (1999), Citroni (2006) and others, do not fully accept epistolography as a genre. Even though those literary manuals are somewhat overcome, they are regularly used at the undergraduate level, for their usefulness and the greatness of their authors in general. The perception of Ancient Epistolography has changed mainly due to Altman (1982) research on Roman Ancient Epistolography, which stands as a pillar to new research until this day.

Demetrius, and Quintilian indicate that the aristocratic perception and consumption of literature was different from our own. In effect, one can perceive more changes in the literary genres from Ancient Greece and Rome than in modern literary genres, as Candido (2006, p. 146-175)<sup>2</sup> argued.

When Pliny the Younger decided to publish a letter collection in the first decade of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, he did not recognise letters as a medium for another purpose, neither he was willing to publicise his private and public communication with friends and family and protégées.<sup>3</sup> In the very first letter of the collection, he puts forward his motivations for the collections while proposing some criteria: “Frequently you exhort me to gather and publish the letters I wrote with little more care. I have reunited them not observing the chronological order, for I was not composing a history, but in the order they were coming at my hand”.<sup>4</sup>

Many influential classicists<sup>5</sup> have detailed questions and answers about the role of this letter, and it seems safe to assert that it very likely may be a humoured artistic epistolary preface for an

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<sup>2</sup> The Brazilian professor says that the Romantism brought a vague idea of novelty, even though the works were not new in many senses, in opposition to the regular and repetitive literary classical schemes, which allows more innovation than the classical literary critics assume.

<sup>3</sup> We understand that to publish a letter is far different from publicising a letter in Rome. To publish a letter or any other work, would require literary and rhetorical polishment, proofreading and private reading for friends to critic before its publications. To publicise it was just to make them open access, which seems the case of Cicero letters after all.

<sup>4</sup> *Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. Collegi non seruatō temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus uenerat.* For the Latin text, we are using Zehnacker’s *Belles Lettres* edition (Pliny, 2009), which is the most recent one. All translations are ours.

<sup>5</sup> Sherwin-White (1968, p. 46-47, 50, 85) proposes the first letter as *proemium*, written after the others, and it was part of a much bigger publication, which would count the books I, II and III, perhaps even the book IV; Syme (1968) examines the letters as gathering of historical data, not a well-designed literary work; Murgia (1985; 181), states that the letter was certainly written after all the others and points it as a preface, similar to the preface on Quintilian’s *Institutiones Oratoria*; Marchesi (2008, p. 22-23, 27-29), brings forward the effects Pliny built up using the first letters of book I, as she compares it to Virgil’s literary strategies; Zehnacker (2009, p. 106), also points out the letter I.1 as a preface written after the book was complete, similar to other books at the time; Gibson (2012, p. 67-68) explains the innovation brought by Plinian epistolary books; Gibson and Morello (2015, p. 234-239) address the literary elements in the whole connection, in which the letter I.1 acts as a guiding opening, in opposition of the last letter, IX.40; Bodé (IN Marchesi, 2015, p. 42-44) examines the functionality of letter I.1 and its significance to the other books; Gibson and Whitton (2016, preface) present the long discussion on the (non) chronology of the letters based on the first letter of the first book. In sum, since Murgia, all scholars have paid more attention to the internal construction of books than its historiographic or autobiographic features.

epistolary book, as expected to any book published at the time. We say humoured because it is a letter working as an external preface of a letter collection, while, in turn, it is also an internal part of the same letter collection. In a way, it is an idea close to the Schödinger’s cat<sup>6</sup>, simultaneously being external and internal to the book, until the reader decides if the letter is part of the book or it is not.

The letter is not a similar preface as those from Martial or Statius’ books<sup>7</sup>, which were published just before Pliny’s entrepreneurship<sup>8</sup>, for it is part of the book itself. Even though we may read it apart from the rest, all the letters can be attached to the book or separately read, as they were initially composed for other reasons than the collection. This double mechanism is unique in Latin literature, as there is no literary book in which an external letter is a preface and an integral component of the book itself. The other letter collections published before do not have an epistolary preface, and the books that have an epistolary preface are not letter collections.

Nevertheless, such a letter poorly explains the Plinian project, as it only says it is not a history book, and, in turn, it is composed of letters better written than others. It makes more sense when we read it along with the second letter of the ninth book:

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<sup>6</sup> A principle of quantum mechanics established by Erwin Schrödinger in 1935, who said that if you put a cat in a chamber with radioactive substances in a small quantity until you open the chamber, the cat is both dead and alive, as both states are superposed until one is no longer factual.

<sup>7</sup> It was a regular, almost mandatory, practice to have a letter of presentation for any book published, which could be written by the author or by a commentator or friend with literary background. See Jason (1964) and Pagán (2010)

<sup>8</sup> The usage of the term here recalls Pliny’s words on booksellers and his social and political bet on letters to achieve his immortality. On this matter, see Gibson and Morello (2015, p. 234-264)

You act so nicely, as you demand not only loads of letters, but they must be the longest as well. I have been economical in sending them, partly because I was afraid you were overloaded with your duties, partly because I myself was deeply drawn by some fruitless affairs, which suck up and spit out my intellectual strength. Furthermore, no decent subject to write has come to my hand. My condition is different from that of Marcus Tullius Cicero, whose example you point me to. He had the finest talent matched by the richness and relevance of the subjects. Even while I am silent, you perceive well how strictly enclosed we are. Unless I choose to send you scholarly letters, or as I will call them, letters penned in the study room. However, I think there is nothing less suitable when I recall your weapons, your camp, the horn, the tuba, the dust, the sweat, the sun.<sup>9</sup>

Pliny states that the epistolary undertaking sees its end in this piece, for the author is no longer willing to write nor has the proper time. It is the opposite of what we see in the first letter when Pliny is anxious to embrace the task. The letter indicates a self-consciousness of a major literary project, unlike Cicero or Seneca’s epistolary works, whose influence Pliny supposedly rejects.<sup>10</sup> Even though this information is only found in the final book, it can be applied to the entire collection. No trace of significant historical events is found in the letters as we read in the Ciceronian letters. The few critical events discussed in the letters are partially given, displaying only Pliny’s angle, which likely happened way before Pliny’s epistolary work. In addition, there is no single letter presenting pure philosophical topics.<sup>11</sup> The letters are ordinary and uneventful,

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<sup>9</sup> *Facis iucunde quod non solum plurimas epistulas meas, uerum etiam longissimas flagitas; in quibus parciore fui, partim quia tuas occupationes uerebar, partim quia ipse multum distringebar plerumque frigidis negotiis quae simul et auocant animum et comminuunt. Praeterea nec materia plura scribendi dabatur. 2 Neque enim eadem nostra condicio quae M. Tulli, ad cuius exemplum nos uocas. Illi enim et copiosissimum ingenium et par ingenio quae uarietas rerum, quae magnitudo largissime suppetebat; 3 nos quam angustis terminis claudamur etiam tacente me perspicias, nisi forte uolumus scholasticas tibi atque, ut ita dicam, umbraticas litteras mittere. 4 Sed nihil minus aptum arbitramur, cum arma uestra, cum castra, cum denique cornua, tubas, sudorem, puluerem, soles cogitamus.*

<sup>10</sup> Even though Pliny does not make any direct references to Ovid’s letters, it seems that *Epistulae ex Ponto* and *Epistulae Heroidum* were a significant influence, if not to Pliny, to create the habit of consuming epistolary books composed as a unity, a term brilliantly applied by Altman (1982, p. 169-174).

<sup>11</sup> The letter IX.2 is well examined by Gibson and Whitton (2016, p. 135-137). In this matter, we disagree from Marchesi (2008, p. 218-230), who establishes correlations between Cicero and Pliny’s epistolary project. We understand that Cicero’s project was to publicize models to official communication, with little literary refinement. Moreover, we do not know if the Ciceronian letters were circulating as a gathering in Pliny’s time, so any assumption is based on a fragile and subjective notion of Cicero’s epistolary gathering.

occasionally crude, at least the way many are used to read them. The events are only a recognisable background for Pliny’s self-portrayal, as if he were on the shoulders of a monster he created, spotted at the top of a hill.

The similarity between those letters is substantial. Both opening verbal construction, *frequenter hortatus es* and *facis iucunde quod (...) flagitas*, bring forward the polite but persistent requests for well-written, numerous and long letters. As in the first one, Pliny says he will grant the friend’s wishes; in the last, he denies it, whereas the public urge for his epistles is still strong. Likewise, the first letter projects the collection’s future, as the latter points to the past (*in quibus parrior fui*), specifically the previous book, the shortest one compared to books VI, VII and IX.<sup>12</sup> In that case, as two guards on the top of a mountain overseeing the valley in the middle, both letters are on the extreme sides of the collection. They aim at its centre, looking over all the books.

On the other hand, the investigations on the composition dates of the letters done by Mommsen (IN Gibson and Morello, 2015, and Marchesi, 2015), Sherwin-White (1968), Syme (1958, 1991), and more recently Winsbury (2015) failed somehow.<sup>13</sup> The letters have no dating, and even in those letters that bring forward a datable event, there is no cue of the composition date, let alone the publication date.<sup>14</sup> Pliny inevitably kept some letters to publish later than others. The epistolary background is not chronological, for Pliny is true to his words, *non seruato temporis ordine*.

Pliny lived critical changes in the political scene and met significant historical figures<sup>15</sup>, but little or nothing did he talk about them. The exception is his close friends, protégées, patrons, and the roles he played in one episode or another. Murgia (1985, p. 191-200) finds more

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<sup>12</sup> Each book has 34, 33, 24 and 40 letters respectively.

<sup>13</sup> Regularly the referenced authors are rectified by new evidence and studies. We do not extinguish the brightness of their studies and their relevance, for it is impossible. However, it is mandatory to revisit the dating issue for its pointlessness.

<sup>14</sup> We cannot forget that Pliny’s presumed audience already knew all the events before they read or listened to the letters. They do not need the letters to get informed; they need the letters to know Pliny’s angles on some matters, or any new analysis, if it gets that far. In fact, as a literary project, the events are just background for a rhetorical presentation or a display of poetic technic, as well the self-promotion.

<sup>15</sup> On that matter, see Syme (1991).

indications of dates of the letters in emulations and paraphrases than in datable events, for the letters’ composition date does not influence their publication date. The American scholar also rejects the compulsion of putting stamps with months and years on the letters. Furthermore, as Bodel (IN Marchesi, 2015, p. 14-18) described, if we read the letters worried by the time of composition, we lose sight of the collection itself.

In such a way, the letters I.1 and IX.2 explain what we are not going to find in the collection or, in other words, what we should not bother to look at. Thus, we get the reading instructions at the beginning and the end. That leads us to question why we receive these directions in the last book. As Gibson (IN Marchesi, 2015, p. 185-186) says, it is not dark yet, for the last book is not the end. There is no end, as the collection works cyclically. In the last book, Pliny invites his audience to restart the reading, an audience now possessing information gathered throughout the collection. As it goes from Dawn to Dusk, the night for the Plinian collection is not perpetual, and the audience starts a fresh and new reading when going back to letter I.1.

We may perceive new features Pliny used in a second reading, features we overlooked during the first reading. Letter I.2, e.g., discusses the Plinian style on forensic discourses and his influences. Still, it is vital to stress to which degree the letter speaks about the epistolary style used in the collection. The beginning of the letter is a key to understanding Pliny’s epistolary project:

For I predict you are going to be late, I show you the book I promised in the previous letters. I ask of you, read and amend it according to your customs, moreover because it seems to me, I never wrote anything with the same zeal.<sup>16</sup>

Nothing indicates a forensic discourse in the first section of this letter, and it keeps the same ethos we found in the previous one. First, Pliny accepts the challenge of gathering letters and publishing them. Just after that, he excuses himself for being delayed in delivering a book. The sentence is *librum quem prioribus epistulis promiseram*, and the only previous letter is the one talking about the epistolary collection. Moreover, ζήλω (diligence, zeal) reverberates the *paulo*

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<sup>16</sup> *Quia tardiozem aduentum tuum prospicio, librum quem prioribus epistulis promiseram exhibeo. Hunc rogo ex consuetudine tua et legas et emendes, eo magis quod nihil ante peraeque eodem ζήλω scripsisse uideor*

*curatius* we read in the first letter. If we read them for the second time, it seems more appropriate to say the letter I.2 refers to the epistolary collection rather than to any forensic discourse.

One letter may lose some of its original meaning while reverberating another one, for it acquires the meaning of the letters before and after. As initially said, letters are the literature *per se*, even the cradle for modern novels.<sup>17</sup> So, let us read the Plinian collection through a metaphor: the figure of the monster created by Victor Frankenstein, written by Mary Shelley. The 19<sup>th</sup> century novel brings up the newly discovered role of chemical elements in the human body.<sup>18</sup> It presents a vital discussion on the limits of humankind as a divine creator and as a filth corruptor of life. We learn from Shelley about Victor Frankenstein, a great student who discovers the primary source of life after reading some medieval alchemists and being a notorious pupil of a chemistry professor. To prove it, he gathers parts of different corpses, stitches them together and creates a being for whom, in the cinema, everyone screamed with Colin Clive “it’s alive! It’s moving!”<sup>19</sup> This interpretation, thus, takes the idea of self-representation and political endeavour well-established by Henderson (2001) and puts it into the fields of consumption and reception of literary works, actions that are not static; they vary according to the calculated moves of Pliny’s statue.

Following the proposed metaphor, Pliny’s literary scheme is similar to Victor Frankenstein’s experiment. He gathered limbs from different corpses and put them together, giving a different meaning to those pieces of dead bodies. In fact, Pliny himself, in the letter II.5.11-12, tells us that:

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<sup>17</sup> In that matter, see Altman (1987), Ceccareli (2013), Rosenmeyer (2001), Rosenmeyer, Hodkinson and Bracke (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Shelley’s book does not tell what those elements are. However, the movie “Frankenstein” directed by James Whale, released in 1931, shows that what triggers life on the monster’s body is electricity.

<sup>19</sup> The actor who first interpreted Victor Frankenstein, in the 1931 movie. The famous sentence cannot be found in the book, even though it is regularly recognised as part of the story.

“For indeed, if you were to examine a loose head or some other part of a statue, you would not be able to discern from that part alone the harmony and proportion of the whole statue; however, you could still judge whether that part itself was sufficiently elegant. And the reason why books of first principles are circulated is no different: it is believed that some part, even without the others, can be complete in itself.”<sup>20</sup>

We perceive a hand or an arm in a certain way when attached to a specific body, in Frankenstein’s creature, or statue, as in Pliny’s proposed metaphor, because of the shapes and colours surrounding it. However, when transplanting that limb to another body or an artistic representation of it, one made of different parts from many corpses, they look distinct from the original by referencing each other in colour, size, skin type, scars, etc. Similarly, Pliny also takes his letters out of context, edits them, and puts them all together, giving them new life. In Pliny’s case, the mysterious substance to bring them back to life is the act of publishing and the act of consuming.

It is the case of letters I.1 e I.2, as the beginning of the second letter seems to provide meaning not only to the letter it opens but also to the letter before. Initially, both *epistulae* probably were not composed simultaneously, nor are they addressed to the same person, nor do they have the same subject. Nonetheless, Pliny makes them sound like one piece for a brief moment by sewing them into the collection in those specific positions. Hence, when his audience consumes the epistolary book, they become alive, they become something else. It is also the case of the letters I.1 and X.2, reverberating each other as an electric stream passes throughout the human body from head to toe to regain life.<sup>21</sup>

The letters I.3 and I.4 exhibit political and social objectives, for they use the same features we have seen in the previous ones. These letters advertise Pliny’s influence in the north of the

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<sup>20</sup> *Etenim, si auulsum statuae caput aut membrum aliquod inspiceres, non tu quidem ex illo posses congruentiam aequalitatemque deprendere, posses tamen iudicare, an id ipsum satis elegans esset; 12 nec alia ex causa principiorum libri circumferuntur, quam quia existimatur pars aliqua etiam sine ceteris esse perfecta.*

<sup>21</sup> In Merry Shelley’s book, the substance that gives life to the creature is not revealed. Electricity was not yet controlled by human beings, and the first power station in England was established in 1882, almost 60 years after the book.



Italian Peninsula, and his connection to families and people who lead the political and societal scenario. Underscoring his political prowess in the beginning helps Pliny to build up authority and any scene needed to one or another literary strategy. The first one presents Pliny’s homeland, Comum, a Transpadane Gaul city with no political background in Rome nor a vital role in the Empire.<sup>22</sup> It was mandatory to describe it minutely and even advertise its beauty and values since his audience might not know the region. The second letter is about the Tuscan properties of his mother-in-law, Pompeia Celerina, where he had influence and power.<sup>23</sup> If we read them apart, the first is a request for information about his homeland, and the second is about Pliny’s gratefulness for hospitality. However, if read in the context Pliny inserts them, the letters bring forward Pliny’s power up north Rome. As both letters are in the first book’s opening, it seems Pliny is presenting himself and justifying his political power. Consequently, this pair of letters sounds like a single piece boosting himself politically.

Therefore, the letter-writer ripped the letters out from a particular context, and he stitched them with other ones, creating new possibilities for reading. In that sense, both the date of composition and the date of publication do not matter, for the letters are long gone from their original epistolary exchange and are part of a new and monstrous body. The construction of such a body is not random in any case. Pliny cautiously places each letter in a sequence to trigger literary effects and provoke his audience, mainly if the letters were serially heard, not read in silence.<sup>24</sup>

One can read or listen to the letters one by one and find a particular meaning. We suggest that it may not be fruitful since it relies on a subjective analysis. Most of the letters’ addressees

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<sup>22</sup> Only once the city is quoted in Catullus’ poem 35, and Livy’s *Ab Vrbe Condita* XXXIII.36. For the rest we ignore the history of Comum.

<sup>23</sup> According to Sherwin-White (1968, p. 92), “Pompeia Celerina is the mother of presumably his second wife, who died in 96-97. She is now married to Bittius Proculus”.

<sup>24</sup> The matter of reading in silence and in solitude or hearing slaves reading out in the company of others is debatable. However, we intend to use here the perception given to Pliny in his own letters, as he says he heard the letters of a wife’s friend (I.16), and he also had a slave specialised in reciting comedy (VIII.1), for instance. For a more detailed discussion on the matter, see Johnson and Parker (2009), Edmunds (2001) and Markus (2000).

are unknown. We partially comprehend their subjects, for they were ripped from their initial contexts. Nevertheless, if we look at the letters not as lonely pieces somehow gathered together, but as part of a well-designed literary project, each letter’s meaning relies on the letter before, after, and its position within the book. It changes how we read them to the point that we have an utterly new epistolary work. No doubt, we will fail consistently in getting nuances, jokes, and external references to authors we do not have access to. However, if we choose to ignore the book’s consistency and how it is sewn together, are we reading it in the first place?

We can observe how Pliny works the space within the books to create a sense of time. As we said, the dates of composition or publication do not matter to Pliny’s project, but within the book, the position of letters creates the perception of simultaneity, establishing two possibilities: “shortly after” the conversation and “long after.” For instance, the letters VII.7 and VII.8 cover Pliny’s intentions to introduce two of his friends, Saturninus and Priscus. The proposed scene simulates a live introduction as if they were shaking hands before Pliny’s audience while he praises the new camaraderie. Notwithstanding, there is some lack of time between them, as we comprehend from Pliny’s words in the second letter, “I cannot express how delightful it is to me our friend Saturninus sending me a letter after letter in order to praise you.”<sup>25</sup> Hence, despite the time lapse between one letter and the other, Pliny brings them as if they were a real-time conversation.<sup>26</sup>

We can point out a similar context in the letters VII.16 and VII.32, both to his grandfather-in-law, Fabatus, the first to introduce a friend, Calestrius Tiro, and the second to thank and praise Fabatus’ hospitality to Calestrius. The first one creates the feeling of the reunion of three men; the second puts forward the weight of Pliny’s advice, even when Pliny counsels a solid local politician and an aged landowner as his grandfather-in-law. Some time passed between the

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<sup>25</sup> *Exprimere non possum, quam iucundum sit mihi quod Saturninus noster summas tibi apud me gratias aliis super alias epistulis agit.*

<sup>26</sup> The only other case with subsequential letters covering the same matter is the pair VIII.10 and VIII.11, about Pliny’s wife’s health and miscarriage, which make sense to be together within the book. All the other letters about the same subject are far within the book or even in separate books.

letters, but this time has a proper measure: 15 letters within the book. Such ingenious architecture gives movement to Pliny’s letters as if they were running fast and strong throughout Italy. However, instead of seeking love and support from its creator, as the creature does in Shelley’s novel, it gathers applause and fame for the creator.

Other pairs distant within the book seem to foster multiple literary strategies. Letters VI.4 and VI.7, addressed to his last wife, Calpurnia, exhibit an enthusiastic couple apart due to the wife’s disease. This pair is unique in many ways, but mainly because it is the only one in which Pliny shows deep affection in a theatrical image: a lover holding the letters of his dear beloved wife as if they were herself.<sup>27</sup> The distance between these letters represents the arduous will for fast communication to mitigate the feeling of the beloved’s absence. Thereby, Pliny manipulates the sense of time and personal need by orchestrating the position of letters within the book.

Pliny also uses strategies to stitch up not one book but the collection itself: letters that unite the collection as if they were sewing threads to the isolated books if we keep the metaphor initially proposed. There is no better example than the Bithynian novel, if we can call it that: letters IV.9, V.20, VI.5 and VI.13, to Cornelius Ursus, and VII.6 and VII.10 to Macrinus. Thus, almost half of the books are linked somehow to narratives covering primarily or secondly the Bithynians against Pliny’s friend Varenus.

The first Bythinian letter to Cornelius Ursus talks about Julius Bassus, as the Bithynians are only sideshows.<sup>28</sup> The only direct reference to the Bithynians is the following, “called by Nerva,

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<sup>27</sup> You write that you are being affected by my absence. You have me through my scrolls, and frequently, you put them upon my barely warm side of the bed. I am happy that you are missing me and that you find relief in this kind of comfort. On the other hand, I myself read your letters over and over again, and I hold them in my hands again and again, as if they were new. However, in the end, I am fired up by the desire of you. For if a person’s letters have so much pleasantness, imagine how much sweetness is in the actual conversation. (*Scribis te absentia mea non mediocriter adfici unumque habere solacium, quod pro me libellos meos teneas, saepe etiam in uestigio meo colloces. 2 Gratum est quod nos requiris, gratum quod his fomentis adquiescis; in uicem ego epistulas tuas lectito atque identidem in manus quasi nouas sumo; sed eo magis ad desiderium tui accendor. 3 Nam cuius litterae tantum habent suauitatis, huius sermonibus quantum dulcedinis inest!*)

<sup>28</sup> Julius Bassus has delivered a forensic speech these days, a man who is known for his suffering and misfortunes. Under the ruling of Emperor Vespasianus, he was accused by two private citizens... (*Causam per hos dies dixit Iulius Bassus, homo laboriosus et aduersis suis clarus. Accusatus est sub Vespasiano a privatis duobus...*)

he was appointed to Bithynia province, and from there he returned as the culprit”<sup>29</sup>. In effect, the letter predominantly focuses on the orators who got involved in the cause of Julius Bassus. At the end of letter IV.9, we get the suture yarn we must follow to see how Pliny attaches together the members of his literary creation. “In the meantime, you will have this letter as a preface, and you are going to wait for the complete and laden oration. You will wait for a while, for the ongoing proofreading of such a matter cannot be light or fast.”<sup>30</sup> If we read this letter alone, we understand that this letter is a precursor to an oration to be published soon, probably already published when the epistolary collection was at hand. Contrariwise, if we read it within the collection, the letter is a prequel to a sequence of letters sewn tightly into the collection.

Pliny employs Greek words in certain circumstances, mainly when he needs to create scars to connect one letter to another, as we can see in the case of letter IV.9.<sup>31</sup> We may present as an example the letters II.11 and II.12, to his friend Arrianus, display that same idea: *Λιτούργιον* (small duty)<sup>32</sup> opens the second letter of the pair, as it refers to the end of the previous letter, “You have the city matters; in turn, you must write the country matters. How are your shrubs, your grapevine, your cornfield, your sheep? In sum, if you do not write me an equally long letter, there is no reason for you to wait for but a very brief letter.”<sup>33</sup> After Arrinus ignore the request for letters, Pliny uses the Greek term *Λιτούργιον*, which draws attention to the lack of letters from his addressee. The Greek word indicates that Pliny only wants to give a quick note due to the lack of communication from his friend. In that way, Pliny uses isolated Greek words to suture the arteries to allow a new bloodstream throughout the letters.

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<sup>29</sup> *Reuocatus a Nerua sortitusque Bithyniam rediit reus. IV.9.2*

<sup>30</sup> *Habebis banc interim epistulam ut πρόδρομον, expectabis orationem plenam onustamque, expectabis diu, neque enim leuiter et cursim ut de re tanta retractanda est.*

<sup>31</sup> πρόδρομον (prequel, precursor, preface)

<sup>32</sup> The word *Λιτούργιον* is challenging. Zehnacker (2009, p. 53) lists two variations, which can change slightly the meaning of the word. Besides *Λιτούργιον*, there is also *λειτ*. The problem it brings is that the first one had a sense of criminal or judicial activity, while the second only implies a liturgical act performed in any societal sphere. While Zehnacker chooses *Λιτούργιον*, he draws attention that in some point both words had somewhat identical meaning, which is questionable.

<sup>33</sup> *Habes res urbanas; inuicem rusticas scribe. Quid arbusculae tuae, quid uineae, quid segetes agunt, quid oues delicatissimae? In summa, nisi aequae longam epistulam reddis, non est quod postea nisi breuissimam expectes.*

Stitched the veins, the second letter of the Bithynians saga is the letter V.20. After a concise introduction of the Asian people in the previous letter, Pliny brings them back, “*Iterum Bithyni!*”. It forces the audience to remember the last letter about the Bithynians in the previous book amid the reading or hearing of this new one. Notwithstanding, the letter does not discuss the foreign nation and its people. It is like the first one, as it discusses who spoke on a cause that barely touches Minor Asia on each side. Thus, we must ask, what role do the Bithynians play in Pliny’s collection? Keeping Frankstein’s metaphor in mind, it seems a surgical glue, one used to stick parts so far apart that only a solid and memorable name (the name of a frequently appellat region governed by Consuls or Pro-Consuls) would do.

At the end of this letter, we read:

I will not explain in this letter why it was fair, so you yearn for the written speech. For what if Homer says is true: ‘more truthful ovations from men a song receives when it is poured recently into their ears.’ I will arrange that I do not harvest prematurely through the loquaciousness of this letter the grace and flower of novelty, which is primarily recommends that that short discourse.<sup>34</sup>

The first thing to draw attention to is the Greek passage, a Homeric quotation. The context is similar to the ending of the letter IV.9, as it preannounces an oration to come. Pliny’s audience likely knows the case Pliny is revisiting. It would not be surprising if the oration were already published. Thus, as we propose, the letter is announcing another letter on the matter. Pliny is preparing the connection necessary in both ends – the end of one letter and the beginning of the other, as a surgeon does before sewing limbs that were somehow apart. This process of resignificance of the letters is what makes them feel alive.

The Bithynian letters from the next book, VI.5 and VI.13, seem different at the first read-through. The letter VI.5 does not recall the Bithynians, it links itself to the letter V.20 through

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<sup>34</sup> *Quare iustam, non sum epistula exsecutus, ut desideres actionem. Nam, si uerum est Homericum illud: “τὴν γὰρ αἰοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσ’ ἄνθρωποι, ἢ τις ἀκούοντεςσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται,” prouidendum est mihi ne gratiam nouitatis et florem, quae oratiunculam illam uel maxime commendat, epistulae loquacitate praecerpam.*

Varenus, “I wrote long ago that it was considered legal Varenus call the witness he had.”<sup>35</sup> First, it is necessary to say that Pliny uses the plus perfect not as a secondary action that precedes the main action but to create a sense of a distant past, in this case, the last book. In addition, after a short account of the forensic dispute that succeeded Varenus’ case, Pliny ends the letter again without putting forward his speech. In fact, letter VI.5 sounds more like gossip about two friends tampering with a senatorial debate. In a way, the letter becomes a quick side story from non-vital characters. We can read it as a bridge for the letter that would close the Bithynian narrative, at least from Ursus’ perspective.

The last letter about the Bithyans to Ursus is the letter VI.13, which begins:

Have you seen, by any chance, someone more laborious and driven than my friend Varenus? What he had achieved with the highest efforts he had to defend and to apply for again. The Bithynians have dared to undermine and weaken the *Senatus Consultum* and incriminate it in his absence.<sup>36</sup>

The introduction communicates many allusions, but mostly it emulates letter I.5<sup>37</sup>, about Regulus, now defending a friend instead of attacking an enemy. The reference to his first book indicates Pliny’s great literary success, putting him forward as an example to prose writers. Just after the reference to a previous letter, come the Bithynians.<sup>38</sup> Pliny puts an end to the shenanigans the people from Asia Minor brought upon good senators. Instead of orators and legal counsels taking turns, Pliny describes how the Senate gets through the complaints and accusations the Bithynians had made.

At the end of the letter, the book-maker, as Marchesi (2015) calls Pliny, creates an advertisement, a similar ending to the letters in books IV and V, “You, nonetheless, rate how

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<sup>35</sup> *Scripseram tenuisse Varenum ut sibi euocare testes liceret.*

<sup>36</sup> *Vmquamne uidisti quemquam tam laboriosum et exercitum quam Varenum meum? Cui quod summa contentione impetrauerat defendendum et quasi rursus petendum fuit. Bithyni senatus consultum apud consules carpere ac labefactare sunt ausi atque etiam absenti principi criminari.*

<sup>37</sup> Have you seen someone shier and humbler than Marcus Regulos after Domitian’s Death? (*Vidistine quemquam M. Regulo timidiorum humiliorem post Domitiani mortem?*)

<sup>38</sup> On Pliny’s references, the work of Murgia (1985) still the most significant source.

much is ahead of us in this very battle, whose prelude and preparation has already created so much tension.”<sup>39</sup> Although there are no mentions of any speech, the words *praelusio* and *praecursio* echo the idea given at the end of the letters IV.9 and V.20, mainly through the word *praelusio*<sup>40</sup>, which suggests an artistic and dramatic performance given before the main act. This prelude is linked to the role-playing done by orators on the Forum described by Pliny in these four letters. As expected from any great Roman writer, Pliny has surgical precision in the choice of words, as he puts himself as a commentator of such an orator’s gameplay.

The last two letters concerning the Bithynians are addressed to Macrinus, whose identity is obscure. They are in the seventh book of the collection, letters VII.6 and VII.10. The first one is considerably long, the second a terse note. The addresses’ switch is vital, as it indicates the end of one section, one limb is already attached to the body, and now Pliny has to finish it with two side letters. The opening of the letter VII.6 draws the matter to the audience:

An impressive and rare matter happened to Varenus, and faltering hitherto, if I may say it. It is said the Bithynians dropped their accusations since they feared it was incomplete. “It is said”, do I say? The province legate came; he brought the council’s decree to Caesar; and brought it to us, Varenus’ attorneys.<sup>41</sup>

Again, we have the duality Varenus against the Bithynians, and Pliny continues the narrative from where he left, but this time it is different. As far as Pliny has heard, the process developed in a surprising way. Since this letter has a distinct addressee, the case starts over, but not from scratch, so Pliny must give the new elements to justify the letter. The province brings a decree to

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<sup>39</sup> *Tu tamen aestima quantum nos in ipsa pugna certaminis maneat, cuius quasi praelusio atque praecursio has contentiones excitauit.*

<sup>40</sup> *Praelusio* has three morphemes: *prae* (before), *lud* (public performance of some sort) and *io* (action or movement). The morpheme *lud*, when added to the last morpheme *io*, creates *lusio* as a single morpheme, with the sibilant of the final *d*. Consequently, the words portray the vivid gameplay of orators in front of an audience. Cf. Ernout and Meillet (1994).

<sup>41</sup> *Rara et notabilis res Vareno contigit, sit licet adhuc dubia. Bithyni accusationem eius ut temere incobatam omisisse narrantur. ‘Narrantur’ dico? Adest prouinciae legatus, attulit decretum concilii ad Caesarem, attulit ad multos principes uiros, attulit etiam ad nos Vareni aduocatos.*

change its course, Pliny brings a fresh letter to its audience. It is a new limb, equal to the others, which gives the impression of wholeness, even though it comes from a separate source.

It extends the Bithynian narrative, as the sewing of body parts extended the arms and legs of Frankenstein’s creature.<sup>42</sup> The Bithynians are the yarn suture keeping this member made by the letters together, albeit this letter is far from those addressed to Cornelius Ursus, which presents a rhetorician’s stage show. Now, Pliny has a role in the event as an omniscient first-person narrator – a role he regularly plays in his letters.

Such multifaceted limb made by Pliny’s scattered letters to two distinct addressees is notorious for its cohesiveness. It becomes evident in the last letter about the Bithynians:

I believe you want to know the rest of the story from Varenus and the Bithynians. When I find the first piece of something, I myself want to bring together this first piece to its last part, as if they were independent. The cause was carried by Polyaeus on one side by Magnus on the other. Having finished each part’s speaking turn, Caesar said, “neither side will complain about some delay. It is my duty to investigate the will of the province.” In the meantime, Varenus grew stronger. Indeed, it is uncertain if he is rightly accused, or even if he is being accused! It remains to hope that the province does not favour again what it allegedly has given up and be sorry about its decision to be sorry. Farewell.<sup>43</sup>

Now the last piece is attached. We do not know how it ends; Pliny’s presumed the audience had known it before the letter. In the first place, it was not Pliny’s intention to tell the historical account from the beginning to its end. The initial and final parts of the Bithynian narratives are not in his collection. In fact, such letters are the middle parts of a newborn body, with new functions and new meanings. Even this last letter seems a middle part of the story, as Pliny does

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<sup>42</sup> Even though Mary Shelley does not describe the creature, we read between lines that the creature’s body is not harmonious, for the hands, arms and legs do not match a natural sized human. The image of a body made of pieces is taken from the 1931 movie.

<sup>43</sup> *Quia ipse, cum prima cognoui, iungere extrema quasi auulsa cupio, te quoque existimo uelle de Vareno et Bithynis reliqua cognoscere. 2 Acta causa hinc a Polyaeo, inde a Magno. Finitis actionibus Caesar “Neutra” inquit “pars de mora queretur; erit mihi curae explorare prouinciae uoluntatem.” 3 Multum interim Varenus tulit. Etenim quam dubium est an merito accusetur, qui an omnino accusetur incertum est! Superest ne rursus prouinciae quod damnasse dicitur placeat, agatque paenitentiam paenitentiae suae. Vale.*



not end the matter. he intends to keep his audience in suspense to wait for the words of Caesar since the facts were probably widely known when the collection came out<sup>44</sup>. The literary strategy is flawless.

Plinian letters are parts of long-dead epistolary exchanges, stripped, washed, and sewed together. Therefore, Pliny would not bring any new information or report new and relevant matters. Otherwise, his literacy would not correctly be on the central spot. In addition, it could bring unnecessary political and social challenges or cause problems for its writer. To set up this creature of his, Pliny uses polished pieces drawn from once live conversations; he kills them and, by combining them, creates his masterpiece. The book-maker frequently takes more than one piece from each conversation, creating a sense of continuity within and throughout the books. The flexibility and stretching of the letters and the books give them a lettered strength far from that seen in Cicero or Seneca’s collection. That is possible due to merging different parts from varied contexts, a similar effect achieved by Victor Frankenstein in his creature’s flexibility and strength.

The pairs of letters within the books foster time, space, and motion; they can lengthen the audience’s perception of how long the epistolary events last, of where Pliny was, and where he went from and through, as we showed. Pliny used all his literary resources as chemical formulas and electricity to bring those perished letters into life. Thus, each book is a member composed of small pieces that bring new meanings to each other and to themselves in that fresh and lively context. In addition to the internal rhetorical and literary features applied to each letter, the *ordo* proposed by Pliny, as we showed here, matters to the reading of the letters themselves and the

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<sup>44</sup> The fact that Pliny would be appointed Governor at Bithynia in the end of his life could be a mere coincidence. However, it opens the door to question when, why and how Pliny published his epistolary books. If we understand that the Bithynian cases were unimportant events to Pliny and to Rome, and that the most famous cases Pliny took part were not connected to these letters, one can argue with certain safety that these letters may indicate that Pliny published his epistolary books during his rulership in Bithynia or after that. However, that would force other interpretations on Pliny’s date of death and the meaning of the collection itself. Therefore, like Frankenstein’s creature bursting doors and windows, this article invites researchers and scholars to rethink Pliny’s work and his life.

book they are located into. However, a limb cannot be alive detached from a body, so the epistolary books only are coherent if they are sewed together. The Bithynian narrative is one of the most transparent examples of how Pliny attaches the books and forces his audience to see an integral collection, not a sporadic epistolary exchange published in a pell-mell way.

In that sense, the Plinian epistolary collection portrays what we see in Frankenstein’s movie: a creature with legs and arms longer and more robust than the bodies it is made of; it changes, learns, lives, and evolves as we read it. Furthermore, the creature is the master of its creator, as Plinian letters dictate how we see Pliny and what we think of him; all we know about Pliny comes mostly through his letters<sup>45</sup>, just like the creatures on the ship travelling through the north pole. The book-maker created more than just books or a statue, for it is alive!

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<sup>45</sup> On Pliny’s life and political and literary propaganda of himself, see Henderson (2002), Winsbury (2015) and Gibson (2020).

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