Leafing through Pliny with Sidonius


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Abstract

The programmatic opening letter 1.1 of Sidonius Apollinaris’ correspondence is clearly inspired by the opening letter of Pliny the Younger’s correspondence. This article, however, argues that it can only be fully understood when read against a combination of Pliny’s letters 1.1, 1.2, and 1.5. Plin. Ep. 1.2 raises the issue of editing and publishing speeches, which Sidonius explicitly applies to bringing out a letter collection, as well as the eminently important discussion of a literary canon in which Cicero plays a crucial role for both authors. In Sidonius’ opening letter, Cicero’s appearance is cloaked in a strangely farcical guise which, however, becomes transparent once read against the foil of Plin. Ep. 1.5. Cicero then appears as a symbol of non-conformist behaviour which is at the basis of Sidonius’ editorial project.

Keywords

Sidonius Apollinaris – Pliny the Younger – Cicero – correspondence – satire – prose intertextuality

The opening letter of Sidonius Apollinaris’ correspondence is generally acknowledged as a manifesto signposting the origin and structure of the letter collection as well as its intended place in the tradition of epistolography—starting off the studied act of self-representation which is the correspondence. It is also common understanding that it is modelled on the opening letter of
the *Epistles* of Pliny the Younger. On closer inspection, however, Sidonius’ letter contains elements that are not accounted for by Pliny’s first letter alone. I would suggest that the full impact of Sidonius’ cover letter can only be grasped when reading on in Pliny, taking into account his letter 1.2, and coming across some decisive cues in 1.5 for the point which Sidonius most wants to make. My contention is that Sidonius makes a political statement wrapped up in a literary discussion and driven home by means of a satirical charade.

Elements of satire and invective as well as a broad array of all kinds of humour play an important role in Sidonius’ work. They range from light-hearted banter (for instance, the invitation to come and stay in *Ep.* 8.12) via condescending irony (towards the socially inferior in *Ep.* 7.2 and the barbarian in *Carm.* 12) to virulent invective (the parasite in *Ep.* 3.13, the informers in 5.7, and the traitor in 2.1 and 5.13). There is a marked preference for the extreme and the grotesque, verging on what Mikhail Bakhtin has baptised the “carnivalesque” to design sociocomic genres like the Menippean satire, which manifest a critical attitude towards established norms through boldly fantastic exaggerations.

Often, a critical (political) message seems to lurk below the innocent surface as, for instance, in *Ep.* 5.5 to Syagrius who has learnt Burgundian: Sidonius pokes fun at him, seemingly full of admiration, but the hidden background is the possibility of collusion. Book 1, in particular, is rich in satirical pieces with political overtones, especially *Ep.* 1.8 taking aim at Ravenna as the opposite of Rome, and 1.11 which is a satire about a satire at court, fun and death menace in one. My understanding of Sidonius’ opening letter is that it has a satirical vignette at its core which explains all the rest, and that this is linked to his reading of Pliny.

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1 Recent studies include: on the structure of the letter collection, with special attention to the tradition of Pliny and Symmachus, Gibson 2011; 2013a; 2013b; 2020, 389-391; for the correspondence as self-representation, Hanaghan 2019, 18-57; on the history of senatorial letter-writing, Sogno 2014 and White 2018.

2 See Dentith 1995, 63-84.


Let us first review the conventional case for the debt of Sidonius’ opening letter to Pliny’s. Here is Sidonius:

Sidonius Constantio suo salutem.

1 Diu praecipis, domine maior, summa suadendi auctoritate, sicut es in his quae deliberabuntur consiliosissimus, ut, si quae mihi litterae paulo politiores varia occasione fluxerunt, prout eas causa persona tempus elicuit, omnes retractatis exemplaribus enucleatisque uno volumine includam, Quinti Symmachi rotunditatem, Gai Plinii disciplinam maturitatemque vestigiis praesumptiosis insecuturus. 2 nam de Marco Tullio silere me in stilo epistulari melius puto, quem nec Iulius Titianus sub nominibus inlustrium feminarum digna similitudine expressit. propert quod illum ceteri quique Frontonianorum utpote consecutaneum aemulati, cur veteransom dicendi genus imitaretur, oratorum simiam nuncupaverunt. quibus omnibus ego immane dictu est quantum semper iudicio meo cesserim quantumque servandam singulis pronuntiaverim temporum suorum meritorumque praerogativam. 3 sed scilicet tibi parui tuaeque examinationi has non recensendas (hoc enim parum est) sed defaecandas, ut aiunt, limandasque commisi, sciens te immodicum esse fautorem non studiorum modo verum etiam studiosorum. quam ob rem nos nunc perquam haesitabundos in hoc deinceps famae pelagus impellis. 4 porro autem super huiusmodi opusculo tutius conticueramus, contenti versuum felicius quam peritius editorum opinione, de qua mihi iam pridem in portu iudicii publici post lividorum latratuum Scyllas enavigatas sufficientis gloriae ancora sedet. sed si et hisce deliramentis genuinum molarem invidia non fixerit, actutum tibi a nobis volumina numerosiora percopiosis scaturrientia sermocinationibus multiplicabuntur. vale.4

Sidonius to his friend Constantius, greetings.

1 My dear lord, with all the right you have to influence since you are such an expert in the question about to be discussed, you have long urged me to bring together in one volume, after revising and clarifying any copies I may have, the more finished of those occasional letters which

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4 Sidon. Ep. 1.1. Latin text: Loyen 1970; in section 1, however, I prefer reading \textit{fluxerunt} instead of \textit{fluxerint} with the majority of manuscripts, and in 2 \textit{me in stilo epistulari}, again with the majority of manuscripts as against Wilamowitz’s transposition. The translations of Sidonius’ letters 1.1 and 1.2 are loosely grafted on Dalton 1915.
this or that affair, person, or situation have drawn from me: I am to set presumptuous foot where Symmachus with his smoothness, and Pliny with his mastery and richness have gone before. 2 About Cicero I had obviously best be silent when it comes to letter-writing: not even Julius Titianus, in his Letters of Famous Women, could adequately reproduce that model; for this attempt, all Fronto’s other followers, unsurprisingly spiteful towards their colleague, called him ‘ape of orators’ because he allegedly tried to imitate a worn-out style. I have always, in my opinion, fallen awfully short of all of these men and have consistently claimed the pre-eminence of each of them individually on account of their seniority and achievements. 3 But of course I do what you want: I submit these letters for your examination, not merely to revise, for that is insufficient, but to clear of dregs, as the phrase goes, and to polish. I know your boundless enthusiasm as a patron not only of literature but also of literati: this now makes you launch me, despite my fears, upon this sea of ambition ahead. 4 It would have been safer, though, for me to keep silent about a petty work like this, content with the reception of my poems, which good luck surely helped to recognition rather than skill of mine. This success has long been to me an anchor cast in the haven of public approval after sailing past all Scyllas with their envious barking. But if the grinding tooth of jealousy also spares these extravagances of mine, volume shall immediately follow upon volume, from me to you, all brimful with my most copious flow of correspondence. All best.

And here is Pliny’s opening move:

C. Plinius Septicio ⟨Claro⟩ suo s.

Frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. collegi non servato temporis ordine—neque enim historiam componebam—, sed ut quaeque in manus venerat. superest ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii. ita enim fiet, ut eas quae adhuc neglectae iacent requiram et si quas addidero non supprimam. vale.5

Gaius Plinius to his friend Septicius Clarus, greetings.

You have often urged me to collect and publish any letters of mine which were composed with some care. I have now made a collection, not keeping to the original order as I was not writing history, but taking them

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as they came to my hand. It remains for you not to regret having made the suggestion and for me not to regret following it; for then I shall set about recovering any letters which have hitherto been put away and forgotten, and I shall not suppress any which I may write in future. All best.

At first sight, Sidonius’ letter strikes one as a blown-up version of Pliny’s. It faithfully reproduces the elements of repeated request (diu praecipis < frequenter hortatus es), of selecting and publishing (uno volumine includam < colligerem publicaremque) a varied collection (varia occasione < non servato temporis ordine) of the most sophisticated letters (si quae mihi litterae paulo politiores... fluxerunt < si quas paulo curatius scripsissem), of cautiously complying with the request (parui; examinationi; haesitabundos < collegi; ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii), and of adding more letters in the future (volumina numerosiora... multiplicabuntur < ut... si quas addidero non supprimam).

While this firmly links Sidonius’ undertaking to the Plinian model of a varied and expandable selection of carefully wrought letters, on closer inspection, Sidonius’ cover letter also contains significant elements that are absent from Pliny: (1) Pliny says nothing about his literary pedigree, whereas Sidonius is explicit about Symmachus, Pliny, and Cicero with a certain Titianus in his wake, and (2) Pliny does not dwell on anything concerning copy-editing and circulation, which for Sidonius, by contrast, is a matter of deep concern, especially the threat of hostile criticism.

Determining the precise impact for Sidonius of these elements of literary pedigree, editing and criticism is no easy task, as evidenced by the inconclusive discussions so far of the significance of Symmachus and Pliny, of Cicero (going all the way back to Petrarch who suspected an irrisio Ciceronis), and of Titianus and the Frontonians, and, on the other hand, of spiteful criticism—beyond it being a literary commonplace. It helps if we realise that Sidonius must have read on in his Pliny and also used Ep. 1.2 for his cover letter.

2 Reading On in Pliny: Ep. 1.2

Here is Pliny’s second letter:

C. Plinius ⟨Maturo⟩ Arriano suo s.

1 Quia tardiorem adventum tuum prospicio, librum quem prioribus epistulis promiseram exhibeo. hunc rogo ex consuetudine tua et legas et emendes, eo magis quod nihil ante peraeque eodem ζηλω scripsisse

6 See next section with n. 22.
videor. 2 temptavi enim imitari Demosthenen semper tuum, Calvum nuper meum, dumtaxat figuris orationis; nam vim tantorum virorum, ‘pauci quos aequus ...’ assequi possunt. 3 nec materia ipsa huic—vereor ne improbe dicam—aemulationi repugnavit: erat enim prope tota in contentione dicendi, quod me longae desidia evidendem excitavit, si modo is sum ego qui excitari possim. 4 non tamen omnino Marci nostri ληκύθους fugimus, quotiens paulum itinere decedere non intempestivis amoenitatis admonebamur: acres enim esse non tristes volebamus. 5 nec est quod putes me sub hac exceptione veniam postulare. nam quo magis intendam limam tuam, confitebor et ipsum me et contubernales ab editione non abhorrere, si modo tu fortasse errori nostro album cal- culum adieceris. 6 est enim plane aliquid edendum—atque utinam hoc potissimum quod paratum est! audis desidiae votum—edendum autem ex pluribus causis, maxime quod libelli quos emisimus dicuntur in mani- bus esse, quamvis iam gratiam novitatis exuerint; nisi tamen auribus nostris bibliopolae blandiuntur. sed sane blandiantur, dum per hoc mendacium nobis studia nostra commendent. vale.7

Gaius Plinius to his friend Maturus Arrianus, greetings. 1 I see that your arrival is going to be later than expected, so I am sending you the speech which I promised you in my last letter. Please read and correct it as you always do, and the more so because I don’t think I have written before with quite so much élan. 2 I have tried to model myself on Demosthenes, as you always do, and this time on Calvus too, though only in figures of speech; for the fire of great men like these can only be caught by ‘the favoured few’. 3 If I may venture to say so, the subject-matter actually encouraged my ambitious effort; for I had to fight my way most of the time, and this shook me out of my usual lazy habits, as far as anything can shake up a man like me. 4 However, I didn’t altogether abandon the panache of our master Cicero whenever I felt like making a pleasant deviation from my main path, for I wanted to be to-the-point, not pedantic. 5 You must not think that I am asking you to be indulgent to my experiment. To sharpen your critical powers I must confess that my friends and I are thinking of publishing it, if only you cast your vote for the proposal, mistaken though it may be. 6 I must publish something, and I only hope and pray that the most suitable thing is what is ready now—there’s laziness for you! But I want to publish for several reasons, and above all because the books which I have already sent out into the

world are still said to find readers although they have lost the charm of
novelty. Of course, the booksellers may be flattering me; well, let them,
as long as their deception makes me think well of my own work. All best.

This letter fulfils the essential function of “setting the stage” for Pliny’s collection, as Chris Whitton has called it, outlining the “ethics of imitatio”, where imitatio is more than a literary game: it is about authorial personality.8 I would argue that Sidonius’ opening letter works in exactly the same way, revealing the existential stakes for himself in the collection by means of imitatio.

Pieces begin to fall into place as Sidonius appears to apply to the fine-tuning of his book of letters what Pliny expects his addressee to do with a speech he sends him.9 This is first apparent for the editing phase by the addressee: hunc [librum] rogo ... et legas et emendas (1) and limam tuam (5), which in Sidonius leads to the complex examinationi ... recensendas ... defaecandas ... limandasque (3). The explicit trait-d’union is lima, ‘filing’, ‘fine-tuning’, exceptionally for both authors applied to the work of the copy-editor instead of the author.10 Sidonius’ formulation is more emphatic, especially when he adds the graphic defaecandas, ‘to be cleared’, like a sewer. Indeed, he loves realistic metaphors,11 but the emphasis is meaningful, as we will see. Therefore Tore Janson, while usefully listing the commonplace of ‘help with corrections’ in prefaces, may have missed something essential when he reduces this passage to “strong and unusual words ... in order to strengthen a trite theme”.12

The second similarity is the attention to literary example bound up with both editorial projects. Sidonius comes up with Symmachus and Pliny, making a special case for Cicero, mirroring Pliny who says he modelled himself

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8 Whitton 2019, 20: “Setting the Stage”; ibid. 60-68 “The Ethics of imitatio”; ibid. 60: “Ancient imitation was a game with high ethical stakes. Artistic mimesis meant imitating both life and other art”.

9 Enlarging on this, Roy Gibson wrote to me per e-litteras: “I see here a pattern of Sidonius making explicit what Pliny tended to leave unsaid, but which was perhaps well understood: Pliny’s insistence on the constant revision of other works before publication is a strong hint that his letters have been revised before publication. But Sidonius takes that hint and, going one better, makes it explicit.” At Gibson 2020, 377 with n. 35, he makes a related point; see also Sogno 2014, 217-218. For Pliny’s speech, probably De Helvidi ultione, see Sherwin White 1966, 86, and for the reason why it is not explicitly identified here, Gibson and Morello 2012, 28.

10 The addition of book 8 to the collection is again marked out by ‘the labour of correction’ expected from the commissioner: Sidon. Ep. 8.16.1 correctionis labor. Incidentally, the commissioner there is different from the overall dedicatee, Constantius, which is rare and reminds of a similar division in Quintilian’s Institutio oratoria; see van Dam 2008, 18.

11 See Gualandri 1979, 105-142; van Waarden 2010, 57.

12 Janson 1964, 141-143; quotation on p. 142.
on Demosthenes and Calvus, with Cicero in a special position.\textsuperscript{13} Imitating Symmachus and Pliny—Sidonius intimates—is an act of bravado (\textit{vestigiis praesumptuosis insecuturis}), imitating Demosthenes and Calvus—in the case of Pliny—is granted only to the few (\textit{pauci quos aequus}).\textsuperscript{14} Both also specify their particular debt to each of these models separately. Pliny distinguishes between Demosthenes (\textit{semper tuum}, ‘your great favourite’) and Calvus (\textit{nuper meum}, ‘my recent discovery’), the more balanced austere style and the jejune Atticist option,\textsuperscript{15} while Sidonius looks to Symmachus and Pliny, probably implying that this concerns both the style and the construction of the letter collection.\textsuperscript{16} The meaning of the respective qualifications—\textit{rotunditas} for Symmachus, \textit{disciplina} and \textit{maturitas} for Pliny—is not easy to grasp given Sidonius’ predilection for creativity at word level in form, sound, and rhythm which outweights his concern for terminological accuracy.\textsuperscript{17} As I will argue elsewhere in due detail,\textsuperscript{18} I interpret \textit{rotunditas} as characterising Symmachus’ polished and efficient style of (letter-)writing, ‘smoothness’,\textsuperscript{19} and \textit{disciplina maturitasque} as defining Pliny’s formal complexity and fuller substance, ‘mastery and richness’—one and two nouns respectively to graphically illustrate the difference. In this, like Demosthenes and Calvus, Pliny and Symmachus are not opposites but rather the intermediary and the austere stylistic variants in a range that is distinguished from opulence.\textsuperscript{20}

Now we come to Cicero. In both Pliny and Sidonius he takes a place apart or rather—surprisingly—somewhat aside. Despite these being programmatic

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\begin{itemize}
  \item For Cicero’s influence on Pliny, see Marchesi 2008, 218-226.
  \item Pliny alludes to Verg. A. 6.129-130: \textit{pauci, quos aequus amavit / Iuppiter}, ‘few whom Jove in his kindness favoured. See Marchesi’s take on this quotation in the next section. Sidonius pays the same compliment elsewhere (Sidon. Ep. 4.3.10) to Claudianus Mamertus: \textit{te … pauci, quos aequus amavit, imitabitur}, ‘only the happy few will be able to imitate you’.
  \item For a more detailed discussion, see Sherwin White 1966, 86-90; Gibson and Morello 2012, 84-85.
  \item Explicitly so in Sidon. Ep. 9.1.1: \textit{addis et causas, quibus hic liber nonus octo superiorum voluminibus accrescat: eo quod Gaius Secundus, cuius nos orbitas sequi hoc opere pronuntias, paribus titulis opus epistulare determinet} (‘you add some reasons why this ninth book should be annexed to the eight earlier ones, pointing out that Gaius Secundus, whose tracks you declare me to be following in this work, completes his collection of letters in the same number of parts’; tr. Anderson 1965).
  \item See Gualandri 1979, 143-181; van Waarden 2010, 55-59; Wolff 2020b, 397-405.
  \item In a projected commentary, \textit{Sidonius Apollinarius: Selected Letters}; see below acknowledgments.
  \item \textit{Rotunditas} is, in fact, close to \textit{brevitas}, Symmachus’ hallmark in letter-writing, for which see Sogno 2014, 211.
  \item Macr. Sat. 5.1.7, indeed, subsumes them under the same stylistic register of \textit{pingue et floridum}, opposed, among others, to Cicero’s \textit{copiosum}; see Kelly 2013, 261-262.
\end{itemize}
letters, the iconic orator only gets a sideways glance, which is different from what both authors are going to say elsewhere. In Pliny, he is staged for the rather more Asiatic flourishes that Pliny says he will permit himself for relaxation. Pliny poses as serious and restrained, suggesting that these flourishes (λήκυθοι, Lat. *ampullae*) essentially are something from his past, whereas his actual credo elsewhere is essentially the Quintilianic one of applying all three styles of oratory in accordance with the situation, and even of taking risks. Sidonius bypasses Cicero in such a radical way that he was misunderstood by none less than Petrarch: he says it is obviously best for him not to speak about Cicero (*nam de Marco Tullio silere melius puto*). This *praeteritio* out of an overdose of respect for the unattainable master is so strong that one expects an extremely pertinent argument to follow. What one gets instead is a piece of gossip about a certain Julius Titianus and his *Letters of Famous Women*, and how he was decried for his stylistic backwardness as the ‘ape of orators’ by his modernistic contemporaries. This anticlimax at a vital point in the letter, and in the opening letter of the collection at that, means that Sidonius was either completely lost or had a very good reason for making us think so. My contention is that he did have a very good reason, as I will argue in the section on Pliny’s *Ep.* 1.5 below. Meanwhile, it is clear from what Sidonius elsewhere says about Cicero that Cicero—typically matched with Demosthenes—belongs to the generalised canon of established prose authors, whereas Symmachus and Pliny are now being fitted into this pantheon—and Sidonius himself along with them. His accolade for his predecessors in the trade is explicit, lavish,

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22 The *cause célèbre* of the *irrisio Ciceronis*: in *Fam.* 1.1.32, Petrarch lashes out at Sidonius for laughing at Cicero (this passage occurs only in the second, not in the first nor in the final version of the *Epistulae familiares*). Angelo Poliziano, in the introductory letter to his correspondence, modelled on Sidon. *Ep.* 1.1, toned down this criticism without altogether rejecting it. Evidently, Cicero was so sensitive a topic in the stylistic debate among humanists that misunderstandings could easily arise (see Hernández Lobato 2014, 43-51). Jean Savaron, in his 1599 edition of Sidonius, came up with what is no doubt the correct interpretation.

23 Cf. Sal. *Jug.* 19.2: *nam de Carthagine silere melius puto quam parum dicere* (‘[while Hippo, Hadrumetum and other Phoenician outposts were successful] as to Carthage, I think it is better to be silent rather than say too little’).

24 *Ep.* 2.10.5 and 8.10.3 show that Sidonius associates Cicero with Hortensius, Pliny, Apuleius and Symmachus in the former case for studious reading, and with Fronto and Pliny in the latter for eminent oratory which at times surpasses even itself (for instance, Pliny with the Panegyric on Trajan). For the issue of literary authority and creative originality in late
and slightly over the top. Like Pliny, who stressed the near inimitability of the great of the past, Sidonius magnifies the qualitative distance between them and himself, and extols their status as the foremost exponents of their times: *quibus omnibus ego immane dictu est quantum iudicio meo cesserim*, and what follows. What should not escape us is the formulation: *immane dictu est quantum*, ‘awfully much’, is rare and emphatic, to the point of being at times a comic hyperbole. We can think of it as an allusion to Pliny’s unfinished quotation of Vergil (*pauci quos aequus ...*), which is ‘huge’ because of Vergil and hence ‘dead difficult’ to finish, or else simply as an exaggerated, posh punchline to this section on the orators. Whatever the case, something is lurking here.

The third similarity, after the request for critical reading and the recurrence to tradition, is the ‘publication’/dissemination of the literary work (*editio*). Pliny lays the foundation: copy-editing the speech in question is essential because expectations are high as earlier speeches have sold well (*libelli quos emisimus ... in manibus esse*), or so his booksellers say (*bibliopolae ... studia nostra commendent*). Sidonius issues an even more poignant statement: his past success with poetry (*versuum ... opinione*) makes the renewed risk of failure with his letters all the more daunting. What he fears, and paints in the bleakest colours, is crossing the ‘sea of fame’ (*famae pelagus*) where jealous monsters bark and bite (*lividorum latratuum Scyllas; molarem invidia ... fixerit*). Compared to Pliny, the stakes are heightened from the benign stress of delivering a bestseller to the uncanny danger deriving from the jealousy of malevolent critics. For the modern reader there is the pitfall of defusing Sidonius’ poignant utterance as the next level of mannerist handling of commonplaces. It is striking that this is not the normal application of the sea metaphor for literary activity in the first place: normally, the danger is in the writing and the safe haven is reached when the work is finished; here, however, it is turned towards the stage of publication. Sidonius is evidently preoccupied with the
reactions to his book of letters and with repercussions from hostile quarters.\textsuperscript{29} This motif later also accompanies both additional instalments, books 8 and 9,\textsuperscript{30} and there, too, should be judged for the substance that might be hidden under the surface of the commonplace. I have argued elsewhere\textsuperscript{31} that the ‘envelope’ of amicitia which contains the correspondence, with its constant bargaining for goodwill, transcends mere politeness by conveying the correspondence’s essential trait of instability and the elusivity of the present between an idealised past and an uncertain future. In the same paradoxical way, the ‘envelope’ of the accidental topos of criticism might well turn out to be essential: the metaphor is the message.

I would invite the reader now to take one more step to solve the open ends that were left by the above discussion. If my claim that Sidonius’ letter 1.1 is inspired by Pliny’s letters 1.1 and 1.2 for ‘setting the stage’ makes sense,\textsuperscript{32} it is a logical but slightly more complex move to extend the range of Plinian letters involved even further and take 1.5 on board. I imagine Sidonius opening his Pliny and leafing through the first letters for inspiration for his own opening statement and being struck by 1.5 for its similarity to his own situation. But before we see if this works there is another possibility that has to be considered, for where are 1.3 and 1.4?

3 How about Plin. \textit{Ep.} 1.3 and 1.4?

Two scholars have made a fascinating case, on different grounds, for Pliny’s \textit{Ep.} 1, 2 and 3 belonging closely together. In 1997, Matthias Ludolph was among the first to advocate a meaningful coherence in Pliny’s correspondence.\textsuperscript{33} He develops the thesis that books 1-9 of Pliny’s letters form a meticulously stylised ensemble aimed at self-presentation within the boundaries set by imperial autocracy. He singles out book 1, letters 1-8 as the particularly refined upbeat to the work, the “Paradebriefe”, divided into two parts: 1-3 (theme ‘publishing a literary work’, the fruit of \textit{otium} and \textit{studia}: letter 1 states this theme, 2 deepens it by means of an example, 3 reveals its purpose: to make something \textit{quod sit perpetuo tuum}, ‘to be yours for all time’, transcending individual life) and 4-8

\textsuperscript{29} For the topos, see Janson 1964, 142. Köhler 1995, 117 is too reductionist when she rejects Loyen 1970, 3 n. 4 (“Sidoine était très sensible à la critique: il se plaint souvent de ses détracteurs”) on the ground of this commonplace character alone.
\textsuperscript{30} See \textit{Ep.} 8.1.2 and 9.16.3 (\textit{Carm.} 41.9-16).
\textsuperscript{31} Van Waarden 2020a.
\textsuperscript{32} See previous section, first paragraph with Chris Whitton’s argument.
\textsuperscript{33} Ludolph 1997.
(a nested series in which 6 on *otium* is surrounded by 5 and 7 on *negotium*, and these in their turn by 4 and 8 on Pliny’s *virtutes*). In Ludolph’s view, letters 1-3 represent what Pliny had most at heart and what he intended to do in his collection, while 4-8 add complementary elements.

In her 2008 study of the “poetics of allusion” in Pliny’s letters, Ilaria Marchesi similarly advocates the coherence of 1.1-3 as “a closely joined met-aliterary triptych”, though from the different viewpoint of intertextuality between letters 2 and 3. She links the quotation from Vergil *A. 6.129* (*pauci quos aequus …*) in 1.2.2 to the phrase *hoc sit negotium tuum hoc otium, hic labor haec quies* in 1.3.3, which she thinks develops the first half-line of *A. 6.129* (*hoc opus hic labor*). The modesty of letter 1, ostensibly stressing the collection’s casual and haphazard character, is qualified by the profession in 2 and 3 of its careful disposition and serious intent, bolstered by none less than Vergil.

Looking at Sidonius’ letter through Ludolph’s lens, one could be tempted to detect a certain similarity with Pliny’s 1.3 in Sidonius insisting on *fama* and *gloria*. However, the Plinian context is completely different from what Sidonius is doing. Pliny’s letter is a concise evocation of *villa* life in praise of *otium* as the condition for creating the one thing one can really own and which survives its creator: a work of literature. Sidonius, on the other hand, is entirely concentrated on the strife for recognition in his lifetime. *Villa* life and literary *otium* are absent here and kept back later to fill an entire book in book 2. Sidonius book 1, if anything, is about *negotium*.

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34 Ludolph 1997, 92-98.
35 Marchesi 2008.
37 The theme of being read and admired posthumously is certainly not absent from Sidonius, but it is seldom dominant and never takes the form of *perpetuo tuum*. Bringing the collection to a close in *Carm.* 41 (letter 9.16.3), he comes up with his ‘lasting statue’, *statuam perennem*, in Trajan’s forum (1. 25) in true Horatian fashion. In *Ep.* 8.2.3, it says about himself: *aliquid scribere adsuetis quoque venturi legere possint elaborantibus* (‘writing regularly and producing something that posterity can read’). In 8.4.2, he addresses Consentius who, through his poems, *apud aequaevos gratiam tuam, famam apud posteros ampliaribus* (‘will enhance your influence with your contemporaries and your fame with posterity’), to round off, in section 3, with the words that for him personally as a bishop: *modo tempus est seria legi, seria scribi deque perpetua vita potius quam memoria cogitari nimiumque meminisse nostra post mortem nun opuscula sed opera pensanda* (‘now it is time for serious reading and serious writing; one should think about life eternal rather than posthumous renown, and never forget that after death it will be our deeds, not our screeds, that will be weighed in the balance’; tr. Anderson 1965).
38 For this complementarity of books 1 and 2, see Hanaghan 2019, 20-23. For the second book as a book of *otium*, see especially Hindermann 2020 and her forthcoming commentary of this book.
As to Marchesi, Sidonius does not seem to be aware of such a ‘triptych’ as he completely ignores Pliny’s split allusion to Vergil. The *hoc opus hic labor* part does not occur here nor anywhere in his work, and the *pauci quos aequus* bit, which returns in *Ep. 4.3.10*, is by now probably proverbial.\(^{39}\)

I am convinced that we must search in a different direction. Sidonius is not triggered by *otium* or by Vergil, but rather by Cicero. Pliny’s letters 1.2 and 1.5 are the first two items of the ‘Cicero cycle’, one of the thematic strands in the collection explored by Roy Gibson and Ruth Morello for Pliny’s emulation of Cicero.\(^ {40}\) That is what was in Sidonius’ mind. And that is why he skips 1.3 and 1.4.


As such, the link between Pliny’s *Ep. 1.5* and Sidonius’ *Ep. 1.1* was recognised long ago, as early as the first commented edition from 1498 by the Bolognese humanist Giambattista Pio, who signalled the pejorative phrase *simia* + genitive, ‘ape/imitator of …’, in both letters as well as its only other occurrence, in the *Historia Augusta* (see below). Ernst Robert Curtius adduced the triplet in his *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, in an excursus on the ape as metaphor, and other scholars duly followed suit.\(^ {41}\) Only recently, however, did Michael Hanaghan, in an article entitled ‘Micro Allusions to Pliny and Virgil in Sidonius’s Programmatic Epistles’, take up the challenge to interpret the similarities in both letters as meaningful allusions, forming “part of Sidonius’s intricate display of *paideia*, aimed at ensuring his status among his contemporaries and posterity, as he tries to position his epistolary undertaking in the canon of classical literature”.\(^ {42}\) Hanaghan starts out from two points of similarity: (1) a rival being disparaged with the term *simia*, and (2) a controversy about literary *aemulatio* with eminent predecessors, Cicero in particular.\(^ {43}\) For him, the message which Sidonius eventually imparts is that *aemulatio* is not an indication of literary inability, and literary boldness should be encouraged, although Cicero remains inimitable.\(^ {44}\) As will become apparent, I share Hanaghan’s

\(^{39}\) See above n. 14 and Amherdt 2001, 165.

\(^{40}\) Gibson and Morello 2012, 83-87 and 296.

\(^{41}\) Curtius 1953, 539; see also Köhler 1995, 110-111; Condorelli 2004, 601.

\(^{42}\) Hanaghan 2017 (quotation at p. 252).

\(^{43}\) He duly notes a third, telling but non-essential similarity: the adjective *haesitabundus* which is only found in these two letters (*Plin. Ep. 1.5.13*, *Sidon. Ep. 1.1.3*; listed in Geisler 1887, 353, elaborated upon by Syme 1980).

\(^{44}\) Hanaghan 2017, 254-255.
focus on these similarities, while taking a rather different view on how they actually work and on their purport. Sidonius does more than formulate a polite literary programme in a sophisticated way. Rather, he uses the disguise of farce and the power of satire to carve out a place for the essentially polemical nature of his letter collection, symbolised by Cicero. It is the strangeness and maladjustment of his *Ep. 1.1* that should strike us above all.\(^{45}\)

In *Ep. 1.5*, Pliny introduces his *bête noire*, colleague and antagonist, the court orator Marcus Aquilius Regulus, steeped in the murky waters of criminal prosecution since the days of Nero.\(^{46}\) Reading this letter with Sidonius’ letter in mind, we are struck by the following elements:

- sect. 2: Pliny’s friend Rusticus Arulenus was reviled by Regulus as ‘ape of the Stoics’ (*Stoicorum simiam*),\(^{47}\) which corresponds with Sidon. *Ep. 1.1.2*, *oratorum simiam*, applied to Titianus by ‘all Fronto’s other followers’
- sect. 11-13: Regulus confessed to his malign intentions when he once said about Pliny’s co-advocate Satrius Rufus: *Satrius Rufus, cui non est cum Cicerone aemulatio et qui contentus est eloquentia saeculi nostri* (*‘Satrius Rufus, who makes no attempt to copy Cicero, and is satisfied with the standard of oratory today’*). Pliny retorted that he would rather take this as a compliment: *Est enim ... mihi cum Cicerone aemulatio, nec sum contentus eloquentia saeculi nostri; nam stultissimum credo ad imitandum non optima quaeque proponere* (*‘Personally, I do try to copy Cicero and am not satisfied with today’s standards. It seems to me foolish not to aim at the highest’*).\(^{48}\) This corresponds with Sidon. *Ep. 1.1.2* for the imitation of Cicero by Titianus, the distorted *aemulatio* manifest in the Frontonians when they criticise Titianus for copying a worn-out style (*veternosum dicendi genus*),\(^{49}\) and, conversely, Sidonius’ deepest respect for the old masters and for the quality standards which they set (*temporum suorum meritorumque praerogativam*).\(^{50}\)

Surprisingly, both elements take us back to the enigmatic passage in Sidonius about Titianus and Cicero’s stature. With Hanaghan, I would argue that they

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\(^{45}\) On a side note, it is worth considering whether the strangeness of the programmatic opening poem of the *Carmina minora*, *Carm*. 9, can in any way be explained along similar lines of polemical non-conformism.


\(^{47}\) See Hoffer 1999, 70-71.

\(^{48}\) See Hoffer 1999, 83-86.

\(^{49}\) The phrase *veternosum dicendi genus* is a slur in the mouth of the Frontonians but a badge of honour to Sidonius’ mind (*pace Sogno 2014, 216-217 with n. 77*).

\(^{50}\) Echoed in *Ep*. 4.3.1: *si me decursorum ad hoc aevi temporum praerogativa non obruat* (*‘if the privileged position of the generations before our time did not overawe me’*, tr. Anderson 1965).
are the clue to its solution. First something about Titianus for context. Iulius Titianus was a Gallic rhetor and antiquarian from the early third century, tutor at the court of Maximinus Thrax, ending up as itinerant provincial schoolmaster, author of a *Geography* and a prose paraphrase of Aesop’s *Fables*, an epistolary theorist with a talent for imitation evinced—according to Sidonius—by a *Letters of Illustrious Women* in the style of Cicero’s correspondence; all of his work is lost; his profile must be patched together from a series of largely unconnected and sometimes dubious references. His nickname is also found in the Life of the Two Maximini in the *Historia Augusta* 27.5 (*dictus est simia temporis sui, quod cuncta esset imitatus*, ‘he was called the ape of his times because he copied everything’).51 This battle of ‘ancients and moderns’ in which he was purportedly involved concerns the stylistic preferences of an age of ‘Frontonians’, archaising mannerists nominally associated with Fronto, not necessarily his pupils, as Leofranc Holford-Strevens has pointed out.52 A jack-of-all-trades, Titianus had a weak spot for Cicero’s classic style, Sidonius argues. Titianus surprisingly displayed this not in a piece of oratory but in atypical letters by fictitious women writers, not of lower-class women in the burlesque vein of the Second Sophistic53 but tending towards the elegiac genre of, for instance, Ovid’s *Heroides*. To add to the confusion, the Frontonians swooped in on this oddity and had a good time bashing their colleague. If this is what Sidonius mustered to bring out his admiration for Cicero, he definitely came up with a farcical scene matching Gulliver and the Lilliputians. What could be the use of this? Do we not expect a serious *exemplum* in a serious opening letter? Instead of offering elusive epigones, Sidonius could have adduced Fronto himself whom, indeed, he elsewhere ranks among the finest orators with Cicero and Pliny, and who had been dubbed ‘not the second but the other glory of Roman eloquence’.54 Moreover, Sidonius’ own position in stylistic matters is

53 Compare, for instance, Alciphron’s fictitious courtesan letters (Rosenmeyer 2001, 262).
54 Sidon. *Ep.* 8.10.3 (see also 4.3.1 and 8.3.3); *Paneg.* 8[5].14.2 (from a Gallic milieu, 297 CE): *Romanae eloquentiae non secundum sed alterum decus*; see Holford-Strevens 2003, 131-132 with n. 5, and cf. White 2018 for his place among the senatorial letter writers. Fronto himself actually valued Cicero’s letters more than his speeches for their attention to the right word (Fronto *Ant.* 3.10.1, p. 104.12-14 vdH, and *M. Caes.* 4.3.3, p. 57.5-18 vdH; for his ambivalence towards Cicero, see especially van den Hout ad *M. Caes.* 1.9.4, p. 20.4) but it is uncertain if, and to what extent, Sidonius ever set eyes on his writings (van den Hout...
ambiguous as he pairs admiration for the inimitable Cicero with a linguistic practice which owes much—directly or indirectly—to Fronto and Apuleius.55

The beginning of an answer is here in plain sight: we should understand that Titianus is Sidonius’ own caricatural self, waylaid by his critics in the guise of the Frontonians.56 Like Titianus, Sidonius is reaching for the past and held back by modernity. For both, Cicero is the stable nec plus ultra while the present is marked by conflict. Mocking—and hiding—himself, Sidonius develops a first-rate farcical vignette.

This farce only gets its full poignancy once we link it to Pliny’s fifth letter. It should be clear that being a Stoicorum simia was anything but funny. Under emperors like Nero and Domitian, adhering to Stoic doctrine was synonymous with opposition and equivalent to a death sentence as for the famous Thrasea Paetus and for Regulus’ victim Rusticus Arulenus.57 And the distinction between cum Cicerone aemulatio and eloquentia saeculi nostri was likewise a political litmus test, contra or pro the regime: Satrius Rufus remained on the safe side of ‘contemporary oratory’ and Pliny can only confess to his cum Cicerone aemulatio in this letter after the regime change for the better under Trajan. This is the big thing which struck Sidonius in this letter, which he applied to himself, and which he expects his readers to realise: loyalty to the style of the past instead of acquiescing in modernity is a risky but necessary act of political non-conformism.58 The statement which he is about to make in publishing his epistles is an existential one—and it is existential through being literary. The single-minded devotion to the linguistic and literary aimed at perfecting self-expression which pervades Roman educational history,59 intensified, if possible, in late antiquity to the point of gradually becoming the sole

1999, xi; Mathisen 2020, 33 signals a gap in Sidonius’ historical memory between the early second and the late fourth centuries).

56  Much as Hanaghan 2017, 254 has it: “Implicitly then Sidonius has made the followers of Fronto echo Regulus, and has thus rebuked them by the comparison with the delator Regulus. He rejects their criticism of Julius Titianus, who instead ought to be praised for his literary boldness.” The picture becomes less one-dimensional, however, if we acknowledge the layer of caricature and hide-and-seek in it, to say nothing of the political poignancy on top of the literary commonplace of cum Cicerone aemulatio which follows.
57  For Thrasea Paetus and Rusticus Arulenus, see Sherwin White 1966, 95.
58  Being unzeitgemäß—at least in his epistolographical persona—is his core strategy; his opponents would do the opposite: see the opportunistic schemer par excellence, Gnatho, tempora praesentia colens, praeterita carpens, futura fastidiens (‘a devotee of the present, a carper at the past, and a scorners of the future’, Ep. 3.13.2).
59  See Kenney 1982, 6.
marker of nobility in Sidonius’ circumstances,60 inevitably makes the correct word in the correct place into far more than that: it represents the right action at the right moment. The medium is indeed the message. What Sidonius says is this: like this freaky Titianus, my ultimate solidarity is with Cicero, that is, with a past that bears the hallmark of genuine Romanness against all social and political rot; like Cicero, I am in the middle of turmoil (in concrete terms: the deadlock after the failure to stabilise Gallic interests in Rome, 469/470 CE, and/or the turnaround after the Visigothic take-over, 476/477 CE depending on whether we assign Ep. 1.1 to the publication of book 1 or of books 1-7; see below); like his letters, mine bear witness to our struggle for survival.61 The horde of little Frontonians, meanwhile, like as many dwarfs attacking a giant, distort true aemulatio, which is cum Cicerone aemulatio, into its hateful counterpart: spitefulness originating in not being able to rise above the level of contemporary conformism.62

Sidonius knows that publishing his letters is not a walk in the park; it is a controversial decision, to say the least. No wonder, as it is ultimately an instrument in the struggle for personal, class, and political dominance. The way to get this unfailingly but safely across is making it into a farce, and more than that when it is loaded with the dark force of Pliny’s Ep. 1.5. We have as good a

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60 Sidon. Ep. 8.2.2: solum erit posthac nobilitatis indicium litteras nosse.
61 My conclusions tally with those of Tabea Meurer who, in a chapter entitled “Wie Cicero leiden”, makes Cicero into a historical figurehead for Sidonius’ correspondence (Meurer 2019, 215-232). Sidonius was certainly aware of Cicero’s struggles as witnessed by Ep. 8.1.2 where he compares his own problems with antagonists (vituperones) to Cicero’s with Antonius (derogatores). Hanaghan 2019, 14-15 would consider some ‘inadvertent similarities’. Christiana Sogno’s assertion in Sogno 2014, 220 that Sidonius and other senatorial letter writers elevated Cicero’s letters to an inimitable status in order to be able to freely redefine their own projects, seems to me to neglect Cicero’s moral importance to Sidonius; White 2018 is illuminating in stressing the importance precisely of Cicero’s correspondence as a template for projecting the ethos and values of the senatorial class for Pliny, Fronto, Symmachus, and Sidonius.
62 Compare the same petty mentality in the Atticorum imitatores described in Quint. Inst. 12.10.14, carping away at ‘the sun’ Cicero because they cannot stand his light. I do not understand Hanaghan 2017, 254, who tries to create an opposition between aemulatio as ‘wholesale copying’ and imitatio which provides greater scope for creativity in reworking models. It founders on Pliny’s confession (Ep. 1.5.12): est ... mihi cum Cicerone aemulatio, which cannot but be positive, and is explained in the next sentence: nam stultissimum credo ad imitandum non optima quaeque proponere (‘it seems to me foolish not to choose the very best models for imitation’); see Conte and Most 2012: “Ancient discussions of imitation urge emulation and rivalry (ζῆλος), not servile dependence”. Imitatio (μίμησις) is the generic word, while aemulatio specifically indicates the element of going one better; in both our contexts, creating an artificial opposition blurs the sense.
piece of satire here as any in Sidonius. Provoking laughter is an excellent way of influencing an audience without showing your hand, as Quintilian knew.

If this is a feasible solution to the Cicero and Titianus problem, I can be brief about the concluding section of the letter. The masked targeting of opponents in the form of satire dovetails with the conclusion of the letter where the traditional application of the sea metaphor is shifted from writing itself to the reactions it elicits. The jealous barking and biting of the seamesters at Sidonius’ earlier poetry had only just subsided, with his poetical vessel safely in port, when it is certain to start with renewed energy at the publication of his letters. In the same inextricable mix as suggested above, this criticism covers language, in the pedantic way any conscientious grammarian or spoiled audience would do, as much as it affects the victim’s person and intentions.

By thus obliquely professing his adherence to tradition and exposing his opportunistic opponents, Sidonius deploys the strategy of *obscuritas* and coded communication characteristic of a number of late antique writers. And the rest is cautious silence: *de Marco Tullio silere melius puto*. In this way, *Ep.* 1.1 is the perfect cover letter for a correspondence in which factionalism and resistance, and their inherent risks, play a key role. The ‘edition’ of books 1-7 in 476/477 hinges on this very theme; we only need to remember *Ep.* 4.22.5, *periculose vera dicuntur*, ‘it is dangerous to say the truth’, and the conclusion *Ep.* 7.18.3, *numquam me toleraturum animi servitutem*, ‘I’ll never tolerate servility of spirit’. One could even argue in favour of an initial one-book collection from 469/470 in defence of the Visigothic solution to Gaul’s problems headed by *Ep.* 1.1, on the argument that the satire of *Ep.* 1.1 and the

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63 See the introduction above.
64 Quint. *Inst.* 6.3.
65 For the sea metaphor, see Janson 1964, 146-147; for Sidonius in particular, Hanaghan 2017, 255-261.
66 For the idea, cf. Hor. *Carm.* 4.3.16: *et iam dente minus mordeor invido* (‘and now I’m less often bitten by envious teeth’).
67 A beautiful example of the latter is Apul. *Fl.* 9, where the orator supposes that one of his malevolent critics (*quis ... ex illis invisoribus malignus*) may be present in the audience, the kind of people who disparage others for lack of talent (*qui meliores obtrectare malint quam imitari*). Apart from that, he says to his hearers, you yourself are no less critical of my every word (*meum vero unumquodque dictum acriter examinatis*), punishing every *soleocismum* and *syllabam barbare pronuntiatam*. See also Winterbottom 1982, 35.
68 Cf. Conte and Most 2012: “Typically, ancient literary theory ... tends to view systematic issues like tradition and genre in interpersonal, binary, and hence moralistic terms”.
70 Simultaneously with the completed book of poetry: thus the attractive reconstruction of Delaplace 2015, 245-246; see van Waarden 2020b, 20-21.
satire against Majorian, which gets full focus in the book’s final letter 1.11, form a perfect frame.\textsuperscript{71}

5 Conclusions

Heading the letter collection and guiding the readers’ expectations, letter 1.1 musters all possible energy to walk the tightrope between promoting an ambitious authorial programme and making sure the risks are manageable.

It can only be fully understood when read against a combination of Pliny’s letters 1.1, 1.2, and 1.5. Pliny’s \textit{Ep.} 1.2 brings up the issue of editing and publishing speeches which Sidonius explicitly applies to putting out a letter collection, as well as the eminently important discussion of a literary canon in which for both authors Cicero plays a crucial role. In Sidonius’ opening letter, Cicero’s appearance is cloaked in a strangely farcical guise which, however, becomes transparent once read against the foil of Pliny’s \textit{Ep.} 1.5. Cicero then appears as a symbol of non-conformist behaviour which is at the basis of Sidonius’ editorial project.

Incidentally, satire here emerges as a structuring constituent of Sidonius’ epistolary strategy. Combined with a diversity of research already done on satire, and humour in general, in Sidonius, this calls for a systematic study of all forms of the Bakhtinian ‘carnivalesque’ in his work.

The methodical upshot is also that prose intertextuality can work in an associative and combinatory way, the author ‘leafing’ through larger portions of their (mental) archive and coming up with a text that invites the reader to do the same. Prose intertextuality, indeed, is “a larger than local phenomenon”, in the words of Ilaria Marchesi.\textsuperscript{72} Sidonius the letter writer leafing through his Pliny, and other models, cannot but have other nice surprises in store.

\textsuperscript{71} For the problem of the successive publication of the instalments of the correspondence, see Harries 1994, 740; Köhler 1995, 8-9; Amherdt 2001, 27-30; van Waarden 2010, 8-10; Mathisen 2013; Gibson 2013a and 2020; Kelly 2020, 185-193. Kelly, l.c. 193 argues that the single volume referred to in \textit{Ep.} 1.1 must be Books 1-7 and that, “if Book 1 was published separately, it was almost certainly without the current opening letter, which responds very closely to \textit{Ep.} 7.18 in its contents”. I would give this another thought in light of the above.

\textsuperscript{72} Marchesi 2013, 117. Don Fowler importantly directed intertextual criticism beyond poetry to “prose, subliterary and non-literary texts” (Fowler 2000, 128).
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