CHAPTER NINE

PLINY AND THE ENCYCLOPAEDIC ADDRESSEE

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The epistolary Preface to Pliny’s *Natural History* is a complex hybrid in which Pliny lightheartedly introduces his earnest compilation of such interesting facts as he has rescued from the obscurity of rare or specialist works; it offers both defence of Pliny’s previous works (especially the *Dubius Sermo*) and explanation of the new work’s function as a ‘votive offering’ to his addressee. It is the proem for the *HN* as a whole, and an honorific address to its imperial dedicatee (HN pref. 1), but it is also a cover letter more specifically for the table of contents which fills Book 1 (HN pref. 33).1

To open a scientific work with an epistolary preface had good precedents; such a practice seems to have become standard in Hellenistic scientific writings from Archimedes onwards, and epistolary writing itself had an important traditional function in the very dissemination of scientific knowledge, much of which was transmitted by letter.2 There had been recent precedent for the combination of prefatory epistle with table of contents, too, in the much shorter work of Scribonius Largus on medicinal *Compounds*, and in the last sentence of his preface Pliny himself points to the work of Valerius Soranus as a model. Such introductory material can function as a kind of ‘user’s manual’, providing background information, suggesting reading methods, defending a writer’s controversial approach, and shaping in advance the reader’s attitude to the work.3 The dense prose of Pliny’s prefatory epistle, however, describes and defines both his work and its addressee in unexpected ways, and the writer adopts—even parades—a frivolity of tone which seems on the face of it ill-suited to either.

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1 On tables of contents in ancient compendia and ‘reference’ works see Riggsby (2007).
2 Langslow (2007). On the development of epistolary prefaces in the Hellenistic period, see Janson (1964) 19–21. On the increasing use of such prefaces in multiple genres under the Flavians, see Janson (1964) 106–112.
Like all good ancient proems, Pliny’s Preface announces in its first words the nature and title of the work: *libros naturalis historiae* (1):

Libros Naturalis Historiae, nouicium Camenis Quiritium tuorum opus, natos apud me proxima fetura licentiore epistula narrare constitui tibi, iucundissime Imperator; sit enim haec tui praefatio, uerissima, dum maximi consensescit in patre, namque tu solebas nugas esse aliquid meas putare, ut obiter emolliam Catullum conterraneum meum (agnoscis et hoc castrense uerbum): ille enim, ut scis, permutatis prioribus syllabis duriusculum se fecit quam uolebat existimari a Veraniolis suis et Fabullis.

Most Delightful Commander (let this opening address, a supremely truthful one, be yours, while that of ‘Most Eminent’ grows to old age with your father)—I have decided to tell you, in a somewhat unrestrained letter, about the young born in the latest brood at my place, my books of Natural History (a novel work for the Italian Muses of your Roman citizens)—‘for my trifling efforts you always thought were worth something’—to give a passing touch of softness to my ‘oppo’ (you recognize even this army term) Catullus (for he, as you know, by interchanging the first syllables made himself a little harsher than he wanted to be considered by his ‘darling Veraniuses and Fabulluses’).4

Readers expected the opening words of ancient works to convey genre and subject matter clearly,5 and Pliny’s opening words are blunt and apparently unassuming (indeed he will defend the plainness of his title at *HN* pref. 24–26), but they are also particularly apt: given that the *HN* claims to salvage interesting material from 2000 other works which few readers consult any more (*HN* pref. 17), it is a book about books (*libros*) as much as it is a set of books of *Natural History*.6

Thereafter, however, much of the preface seems an exercise in playful misdirection and occasionally even wanton mis-description of the work it accompanies, as Pliny plays with generic expectations from the outset, building in numerous surprises in his selection and application of vocabulary, images and allusions. Even the noun *praefatio* is first used to denote not the dedicatory letter but rather the honorific opening epithet (*iucundissime*) for the dedicatee—the work itself, important though it is,

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4 Translations of Pliny’s text are taken or adapted from Rackham’s Loeb edition. For discussion of this opening passage, and its relationship with its Catullan model, see also Gibson in this volume.
5 Earl (1972) 843.
6 Cf. Sinclair (2003) 279, 284. The accompanying Book 1, in particular, of course, will look like a summary ‘narrative’ of all the other books. On *narrare*, see Naas in this volume.