CHAPTER TEN

ENCYCLOPAEDIC EXEMPLARITY IN PLINY THE ELDER

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Enquire Within Upon Everything: not the Elder Pliny’s motto, but the tempting title of a Victorian best-seller. Here, home hints jostle with legal advice; fascinating facts are side by side with handy directions. Information and anecdote, precept and practical instruction cluster in a mass: organisation is not wholly lacking, but the work’s charm lies largely in its odd juxtapositions. This one-volume household handbook is recognisably the remote progeny of the encyclopaedic mode, the late-born heir of Pliny’s Naturalis Historia, his 37-volume enquiry into nature. The appeal of the later, lesser work resembles that of its great predecessor. In both, that which is manifold and complex in character is compelled into order—of a kind—by the art of its compiler; the reader is informed, instructed, and allowed both to wander and to wonder.

Digression, antithesis and swift transitions from one classificatory mode to another characterise Pliny’s organisational practice. But as well as this illogical logic of his, familiar modes of argument and illustration are given a new twist. The present paper aims to investigate how Pliny employs one particular literary device, the historical exemplum, to direct and to tease his reader. Pliny’s exemplarity will prove to have a playful aspect as well as a serious one.

The Praefatio

The very first words of Pliny’s work embody dedication, title and authorial assertion (HN pref. 1):

Plinius Secundus Vespasiano Caesari suo, salve. Libros Naturalis Historiae, nouicium Camenis Quiritium tuorum opus natos apud me …

ME TO YOU, TITUS, begins the preface; THESE: the books of natural history—in short, THIS: a package of five Latin words, the implications of which cannot be unpacked into as few words of English: new, muses,

Romans, work, born. Claims to novelty, high art, Romanness, effort, and
some share in parenthood\(^2\) are compressed in this short summation. And
the final words of the work address Nature herself, as Pliny, child and
Roman, seeks his parent’s favour for his endeavour (\textit{HN} 37.205):

\begin{quote}
Salve, parens rerum omnium Natura, teque nobis Quiritium solis cele-
bratam esse numeris omnibus tuis, fave.
\end{quote}

Hail, Nature, parent of all things, account yourself celebrated in all your
aspects by me, alone of Romans; be favourable.

In between, what? Everything (or nearly everything), for what is there
that is not nature? Of course, the \textit{praefatio} goes on for a very good
deal longer than those first seventeen words cited above: its thirty-three
sections are briefly paraphrased here.

With seeming modesty, the \textit{praefatio} begins (1–11) with \textit{YOU}, Titus:
your rank, father, family, achievements, talents; also you as soldier, com-
panion, old mate, judge and jury of this work, arbiter, reader—or at least,
dedicatee (for the real readers are just ordinary people, farmers and arti-
sans).\(^3\) Throughout this \textit{YOU} section, however, is the constant cry of ‘Me,
me, \textit{ME}!’: companion, old mate, contractor, defendant, author. So: \textit{ME
TO YOU}.

Then \textit{THE WORK}: what it’s \textit{not}, and (still) \textit{ME}: what \textit{I’m not}: not
(very) talented; and the work? well, not very interesting: no digressions,
speeches, conversations, remarkable happenings or unusual occurrences
\begin{quote}
\textit{neque \ldots excessus aut orationes sermones aut casus mirabiles uel
euentus uarios}, \textit{HN} pref. 12,
\end{quote}
nothing enjoyable to relate or pleasant to
the reader (\textit{HN} pref. 13).

\begin{quote}
steralis materia,\(^4\) rerum natura, hoc est utia, narratur.
\end{quote}

Barren stuff, the nature of things, that is, life, is told.

Just \textit{Life, the universe and everything}, in fact. Nothing much. At any
rate, it is a \textit{NEW} venture (\textit{HN} pref. 14–15), yet not full of new subject
matter; and it is a difficult one. It is useful not pleasurable, the product
of leisure and night-watches, not of official working hours—for life is
being awake: \textit{uita uigilia est} (\textit{HN} pref. 18). A few figures: 2000 volumes
read, 20,000 facts, 100 authors: all this now contained in 36 volumes
\begin{quote}
(\textit{HN} pref. 17). My other works? History? been there, done that; done you
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Ker (2004) 232 translates thus: ‘“born” in [my] household.’ On the preface, see also
Damon, Gibson and above all Morello in this volume.}
\footnote{Citroni Marchetti (1991) 15–17, Citroni Marchetti (2005b), 50–51.}
\footnote{Accepting Detlefsen’s text here rather than that of the Budé edition.}
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