

## BOOK REVIEW

*Pliny the Younger: Epistles Book II.* By CHRISTOPHER WHITTON. Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xiii + 328. Paper, \$34.99. ISBN 978-0-521-18727-5.

This new commentary on the second book of Pliny the Younger's monumental prose work bears the title *Epistles*. The preference of this word to the usual *Letters* has programmatic significance. A letter is "approachable, 'real', casual"; an epistle is "distant, literary, canonical" (5, n. 23); hence Christopher Whitton's stated goal to engage with these works "not just as document but (also) as literature" (vii). In addition, *Epistles* construed as a singular (5) suggests an artfully designed whole worthy of literary analysis in units larger than the individual letter: hence Whitton's daring choice to comment on a full book of letters rather than a selection. Pliny, who yearned guilelessly for literary fame (cf. e.g. 5.8.1), would surely be pleased by this sensitive, circumspect and learned commentary, which gives his qualities as a writer especially careful consideration.

Two commentaries by A.N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny* (1966) and *Fifty Letters of Pliny* (1967), are identified by Whitton as his nearest antecedents (1). While not approaching the breadth of the former, Whitton resists "the anthologizing urge" of the latter by treating Book Two in its entirety. The stylistic register is from the outset far more scholarly than the laconic and sometime lacunose introduction and adversaria of Sherwin-White's terse anthology. A particular strength of Whitton's introductory materials is the lengthy discussion of the sequence of books and of letters within this particular book (11–20). A critical theme of this discussion is the equipoise between Pliny's characteristic "aura of self-satisfaction" (10)—certainly his default mode of autobiographical expression—and the tincture of negativity and gloom that suffuses the letters of Book Two (8, 17 and 20). Pliny achieves this chiaroscuro through subtle variety and in concert with a number of oppositions: long and short, serious and light, at work and at leisure *et cetera* (13). Whitton convincingly traces a number of still more elaborate and suggestive patterns of arrangement, both within Book Two and within the work as a whole (13–20).

The Latinist patient enough to read in order the twenty letters of Book Two will indeed, through Whitton's careful guidance, be rewarded with a richer understanding of how artfully Pliny edited and arranged his epistolary autobiography. A synopsis of the contents of individual letters is beyond the scope of this review, but Whitton's aforementioned discussion is highly recommended, as are the italicized synopses in the commentary section. In any case, a linear summary of the book gives an imperfect impression of its alluvial structure, which flows as if from the confluence of two mighty and practically meta-epistolary letters, 2.11 and 2.17. The former is a celebration of *negotium*, specifically Pliny's starring role as a prosecutor in the spectacular corruption trial of Marius Priscus. The latter describes in picturesque and exhaustive detail Pliny's beloved Laurentine villa, the locus of the author's treasured *otium*.

The twin themes, in constant flux and conflict, flow out into a broad floodplain, with the lesser letters ultimately deriving much of their propulsive force and tension from distant headwaters. Pliny weighs the glories of the senatorial life (2.1, 2.7) against the purity of the sophist's (2.3); he happily plays the man of letters (2.5, 2.10, 2.19) while complaining of unpleasant social and professional realities (2.6, 2.12, 2.14, 2.20). Rural *otium* revives his flagging spirits (2.2, 2.8), but estates themselves can be burdensome (2.15, 2.17.24). Branching off still further are letters where Pliny dutifully and usually genially discharges mundane obligations: giving advice about wills and legacies (2.4, 2.16), canvassing for a favored candidate (2.9), commending one friend to another (2.13), securing a tutor (2.18). Through it all, he presents himself as magnanimous but modest, wise but agreeably unsure of himself on occasion.

Whitton's circumspection and diligence as a commentator expertly shows the way toward such a synoptic view. As a rule, he is thorough and exacting, and his approach to Pliny's text does not lack in sensitivity, seriousness or philological acumen. Attention to detail is a strong suit, and the notes bristle with references to secondary sources and parallel passages. As a concession to those in need of linguistic help, "longer notes are graded" (41)—which means, in practice, that passages, even if they are not especially challenging, are often translated in full before being commented upon. Thus, for instance, we are given a full translation of *dicit semper ex tempore, sed tamquam diu scripserit* (2.3.1, cf. note on page 91), where a few hints might suffice. Instructors of intermediate Latin may find this editorial decision doubly misguided: some students will quickly learn to look first to the back for the translation but otherwise to ignore the notes, which are mostly aimed at a more sophisticated audience.

This is not, however, primarily a commentary for sixth-formers and undergraduates (as were earlier numbers of the series); the notes and other adjuncts are probably best suited for the very advanced student who is looking for a thorough and up-to-date introduction to Pliny and especially to his qualities as a prose stylist. The scholar and the teacher will likewise derive much benefit from Whitton's exhaustive research and documentation. Such audiences will welcome, as I did, this learned and refreshing edition of a fascinating and underappreciated text.

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