Can Pliny be one of the muses? How Pliny could support scholarly writing

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Notetaking and the Interpretative and Writing Processes

The schematic figure below shows how Pliny can be used as a reference model for notes and other resources serves the purposes of supporting the development of an interpretation, and suggests how it could support taking this interpretation and turning it into a published text. The figure represents the state of things when a user is well along in her/his use of Pliny. Things progress from left to right — starting with reading, proceeding through interpretation-building in the middle, and then progressing to writing on the right.

- To the left — in the area labelled “Reading” — we see an area representing 3 textual sources (the grey boxes that have been read and annotated). The annotation notes – which contain the reader’s response to the materials s/he has read — appear in the diagram as little turquoise boxes and are anchored to bits of the article as annotations.
- In the middle “Interpretation” section we see the ideas that arise in the user’s mind structured into a series of concepts. Relevant notes from the reading that appear left in the first column appear again with the ideas in the second column. The notes that are attached to the ideas (in the turquoise boxes) are combined with notes that the Pliny user newly creates when thinking about other ideas.
- In the right section “Writing” we see the notes and concepts being used — presented perhaps — in two papers. Here the concepts and materials organized in the interpretative step have to be first assembled, then ordered so that they form a coherent presentation of the researcher’s ideas.

A prototype outliner in Pliny

There are benefits to integrating an outliner tool into the Pliny model: it can then maintain connections to the interpretative materials, and back to the original reading.

- The figure above shows the beginnings of a prototype outliner, built to explore how the process of taking a 2D map into an ordered hierarchy of text might work.
- The central panel represents the items that make up the presentation, ordered and interconnected.
- Each item is a Pliny note, or some other kind of Pliny resource.
- The hierarchy can be initially generated automatically from the 2D representation of the issues like the one to the left of this text.
- Items in it can be re-ordered by drag and drop.
- New items can be inserted (to provide, say, transitional text that is needed in the argument, but did not appear in the 2D representation).
- Note the area to the right. It is a kind of scratch area: things placed there are not a part of the presentation formed in the central panel, but represent ideas that come to the user that may affect the presentation at some point.

Thinking about the act of writing

Much scholarly literary-critical thinking is centered on the reader rather than the writer (Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser etc.).

- My purpose in this work is really more pragmatic than this thinking anyhow.

Perhaps research on the teaching of academic writing would be more helpful.

- The Linda Flowers 1988 article “The Construction of Purpose in Writing and Reading” seems to touch on relevant issues and raised questions of purpose in writing, and role of rhetoric that I found helpful.
- Her “web of purpose” model for the author struck me as having parallels with the 2D web that a user of Pliny could create, and if so, perhaps connects particularly well with how Pliny is designed already.
- What else should I be reading?