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PLINY THE YOUNGER

(*ca.* A.D. 61–*ca.* 112)

PLINY THE YOUNGER occupies a unique niche in the pantheon of Latin literature as the undisputed master of a minor but vigorous genre, the composition of literary epistles. His letters were not the diverse daily correspondence of a master of prose style, as were those of Cicero, nor were they disguised essays on topics of intellectual interest, as were those of Seneca. They were true literary epistles, that is, they were real letters to his friends that were composed with unusual care and then, with even greater care, polished up for publication and presented to the world in nine artfully arranged books at intervals in the first decade of the second century.

This unusual tension between life and art imparts a rare character to the correspondence. Pliny is most often, and rightly, seen primarily as the mirror of a prosperous, stable, and somewhat dull society in the days of the high empire, the successor of Statius and Martial as social commentator, and a model of upper-class conformity in thought and expression. Yet he is also just as much of an artist as his poet contemporaries, and his art colors real life every bit as much as does theirs, and far less obviously. At a glance, Pliny's letters offer a detailed landscape of Roman society, a full record of the affairs and concerns of a decent, conventional, and highly educated gentleman viewed through a nicely applied literary varnish. But on closer inspection they reform themselves into a complex and calculated self-portrait of the artist, the autobiography in fragments of an individual who was in many ways rather untypical of his age. Repeatedly this latter picture reveals the artistry of the former. Pliny was a man profoundly concerned with winning eternal fame, and the literary epistle was his carefully chosen vehicle.

CAREER

Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus was born either in A.D. 61 or 62, being (as he himself tells us) in his eighteenth year when he was an eyewitness to the great eruption of Mt. Vesuvius on 24 August 79. Both his father (a Caecilius) and his mother (a Plinia) came from leading families in the flourishing municipality of Comum (modern Como), in the delightful lake region of northern Italy, a vigorous area on the cultural frontier between Italy and Gaul that had long supplied Rome with a succession of its greatest writers and that was now beginning to produce a series of statesmen. Pliny was thus born into the right class, the right place, and the right time; and this conjunction of circumstances was little affected by the early death of his father: his education was undertaken by a loving mother; he was at some point adopted by his famous uncle the elder Pliny, an omnivorous polymath and a tireless servant of the emperors; and his career was energetically promoted by a band of powerful senior senators.

There can have been little doubt that a youth with Pliny's background and connections was destined for a career as a Roman senator. Sometime in the early 80's he filled two essential preliminary posts, serving as a minor magistrate *(decemvir stlitibus iudicandis)* in charge of the centumviral court that was to be so important to him as the scene of his greatest forensic triumphs, and as a junior officer *(tribunus militum)* of a legion stationed in Syria, where he first demonstrated his financial skills and where he made useful contacts with the world of Greek intellectuals. In the late 80's he held the first office that admitted him to the Senate, the quaestorship, serving in fact as one of the emperor's assistants, a good sign of Domitian's favor. Then, after another necessary junior office (the tribunate of the people) and at about the time of his emergence as one of the leading advocates at Rome, Pliny held his first senior magistracy, the praetorship, in 93.

Now came the crucial years between praetorship and the height of a man's ambition, the consulship. For those lucky enough to make the transition there were several possible routes, usually involving command of one of the emperor's legions and one of his provinces. Pliny, however, took a highly unusual route, serving in succession as prefect of the military treasury and prefect of the public treasury *(aerarium Saturni)* at Rome, and then acceding before his fortieth birthday to a suffect (substitute) consulship in the autumn of 100. After the consulship there was a pause in his career, with none of the great provincial commands, but rather the important if unexciting curatorship of the Tiber's banks and riverbed and of the city ~~Rome's~~ sewers, and after some delay he won an eminent priesthood, an augurship. Finally, about ten years after his consulship, there came a special appointment by the emperor Trajan to the governorship of the eastern province of Pontus and Bithynia, which extended over at least three calendar years (109–111, 110–112, or 111–113). Then all record of him in his lifetime ceases, and it is commonly assumed that Pliny died while in the East. He was certainly dead before the death of Trajan in 117.

Even in its bare bones Pliny's public career supplies essential background to the stylized world of the correspondence. For a start, he immediately stands out as an unusually talented senator who rose swiftly to the top by very unorthodox means, without ever leaving Rome to govern a province. More important, the career acts as a corrective. The Pliny presented in the letters is above all the man of culture who begrudges any moments not spent in learned intercourse or in retreat with his books and his writing tablets. Nevertheless, it has been pointed out that to the world at large his image would have been as much that of the lawyer who had risen to the top through his outstanding oratorical skills, and that of a financial expert who checked the accounts of local troops while a young military tribune, who passed through both state treasuries en route to the consulship, and who died while struggling valiantly with the chaotic finances of a large oriental province. That was the image he set out to correct with the publication of his letters. Similarly, the Pliny of the letters is a brave and decent man who narrowly avoids destruction in the bloody final years of the tyrant Domitian (81–96) and who thereafter loses few opportunities to praise the new golden age of Trajan. Yet only by subtle misrepresentation or repression of facts can he disguise a career that flourished under Domitian, and it is only the occasional sigh for better days or the unsuccessful bid for patronage that reveals a certain dissatisfaction with life under Trajan. We must always, then, be wary of accepting any of Pliny's assertions as the unvarnished truth.

WORKS

From a lifetime spent in writing, three of Pliny's works have survived, of which only nine books of the letters have any claim to literary

value. Of the other two, one is the so-called *Panegyricus* of Trajan, which is in fact a speech of thanks *(gratiarum actio)* to the emperor delivered in the Senate by Pliny during his consulship in September 100. This massive and tedious text, which is a much expanded version of the oration actually delivered, will tire the most tireless student. Dealing with the crimes of Domitian and the glories of Trajan, the orator abandons himself to an orgy of technical virtuosity, unleashing a host of repetitive platitudes, reveling in the flood and variety of words, triumphantly deploying all the devices of formal rhetoric. As literature the piece has little attraction for modern taste, but for the historian it presents nuggets of considerable importance buried within the mass of verbiage: precise and valuable references to events and attitudes of the early years of Trajan's reign. The oration is above all a superb piece of propaganda, showing off the virtues of the new golden age, particularly in contrast with the Domitianic terror, and it coincides remarkably in its themes and its emphases with those exhibited on coins and public inscriptions. Equally important, it is a good reflection of what people wanted in a good ruler and feared in a bad one, for, as Pliny pointed out early on (4.1), it was through such speeches of thanks that good princes recognized their own deeds and evil ones learned what they ought to do. As such it became a model for all such productions, and it survives today not in any manuscript of Pliny's letters but as the first of *XII panegyrici latini*, the remainder of which date from the days of the later Roman Empire.

The letters themselves are presented in ten books, nine of them containing those elegant occasional pieces that Pliny carefully revised for publication. The tenth book is substantially different, comprising primarily the official correspondence between Pliny and Trajan while Pliny was serving as the emperor's legate in the East, although a few stray exchanges from an earlier period have been added to them. They were surely published after Pliny's death. The style of these official communications—some seventy-four letters from Pliny with fifty-one of the emperor's replies—is attractively clear and simple, literate yet without the careful polish that distinguishes the other nine books. Their historical value is immense, full of detail about the workings of imperial government and the rich social and economic life of a turbulent eastern province. To take but a sample run of ten exchanges in the middle of the book, we hear in turn about the problems of moving an ancient temple to accommodate a new forum at Nicomedia, about Pliny's gratitude for the transfer of a relative by marriage to his province, about loyal celebrations of the anniversary of the emperor's accession, about the feasibility of lowering interest rates to encourage borrowing of excess public monies, about local feuds and the recognition of annulled acts by previous governors, about a philosopher's claim for exemption from jury duty (supported by a sheaf of documents), about the problems of building a canal between lake and river at Nicomedia, about the reception of an embassy from the king of the Bosporus and his feud with an imperial servant, about the public maintenance of those exposed at birth and subsequently rescued, about the moving of mortal remains, and about the siting of a new public bath at Prusa on the ruins of a house willed to a former emperor. The aggregate of such detail is priceless, the gem of the collection being undoubtedly the famous exchange (10.96–97) on how to deal with the Christians, which constitutes one of the very few major documents on the history of the early church. And, most pleasantly, a picture accumulates throughout book 10 of Pliny as a hard-working, conscientious, intelligent, and humane administrator.

It is, however, on the first nine books of letters that Pliny's reputation rests. It has long been realized that these 247 letters represent an innovation in Latin literature, with no real antecedents in either prose or verse epistolography, and equally that their true predecessors are in the collections of short poems by Statius

(his *Silvae*) and by Martial. They are truly occasional pieces in the strict sense of the word and thus admirably suited to the letter form of daily life, as each epistle deals with a particular topic of interest and each book displays a pleasing variety of subjects.

The broad characteristics of the correspondence have been well set out by A. N. Sherwin-White in the indispensable introduction to his commentary on the correspondence. One cardinal rule is that whenever possible each letter should deal with one theme only. When more than one is included there is almost always some attempt, however artificial, to link them, and extraneous material beyond standard inquiries after health and the like has generally been excised. Furthermore, brevity is an important consideration, a quality, like the unity of each letter, that Pliny shares with the poets. There are certainly exceptions, such as the long set-piece descriptions of his villas, or the historical narrations of his uncle's death and the eruption of Vesuvius, but by and large each epistle is neatly developed without an excess of unnecessary detail and rounded off with an aphorism or an opinion—though Pliny was of course delighted when a correspondent requested longer letters. Moreover, while he is not bound by meter and the conventions of poetry, he does impose a certain amount of form on the letters beyond the customary. Thus (again to follow Sherwin-White) there are several standardized openings, along the lines of "You ask that," "I am delighted that," "An amazing thing has happened," or "I have received your delightful letter and . . . ," or else he plunges into his subject without introduction beyond a general remark or an aphorism. All of this goes to underline the very literary nature of this particular correspondence.

Pliny's prose style is clear, graceful, and elegant, and it is obvious that he took considerable trouble over it. Surprisingly in a man who had so much to say about the writing of poetry and orations, he expresses few opinions on the art of epistolography; but then of course the letters would speak for themselves. Just once, in a letter of advice to a young friend (7.9.8), does he allude to the style demanded by an epistle: it must be *pressus purusque*, concise and unadorned. There is certainly much effective writing in the letters that obeys this injunction with clear vocabulary and simple syntax, but usually (as with so much of ancient literature) the constriction of form is taken as a challenge to virtuosity. Pliny reacts with elaborate and highly effective devices, employing a colorful variety of vocabulary, syntax, and subject matter, and keeping a careful observance of prose rhythm, with an eye to the elegant balance of words, phrases, and clauses.

Moreover, style and its variations are a great deal determined by what kind of epistle is intended, and again Sherwin-White has defined the different categories, eight in number, most of which had been developed by previous classical authors: narratives of public affairs, both contemporary and historical, anecdotal or from personal involvement; character sketches of both living and dead; matters of patronage, particularly *litterae commendaticiae* (letters of recommendation); advice, including praise and blame; domestic affairs; literary matters; description; and courtesy. Each automatically entails certain stylistic requirements. Thus, historical narratives call for a rhythm alternating concise assertion with more elegant reflection and comment. Scenic pieces carry more than a touch of poetic vocabulary and elaborate description of detail. Conversely, the form and content of the letter of recommendation are so rigidly circumscribed by conventions of praise for the subject's abilities, family, wealth, and so forth, that Pliny can do little to vary them, however warm his feelings; while letters on literary subjects (and particularly on the writing of poetry) tend to be didactic and argumentative, and therefore full of special pleading and elaborate dissections of individual themes. On the whole, such a rich mixture of style and theme achieves the intended effect of constantly diverting the reader, alternately amusing and instructing, juxtaposing scandal with erudite disquisition or high politics with remarks on the

grape harvest, each subject carefully treated in the appropriate fashion.

HERO AND VILLAIN: TWO CHARACTER SKETCHES

To comprehend the world presented by Pliny's letters, which span the period A.D. 96–108, it is necessary first to look briefly at its past. Naturally the writer cannot avoid reference to history, be it in the guise of formal historical narrative on the death of his uncle or his own involvement in senatorial trials, or be it in set homilies on the arrogance of imperial freedmen or the decline of oratory. Yet the immediate past has a special urgency. The correspondence begins in the reign of a weak old man, the emperor Nerva (96–98), and it continues through the first decade of an imperial general, Trajan (98–117). Before then the world had been governed for fifteen years by the emperor Domitian who, after his assassination in September 96, was branded at once and for all time as a bloodthirsty tyrant. Within months the first letters of book 1 were written, and Pliny naturally joined in excoriation of the late "reign of terror." The bad old days crop up regularly in later books, even in the last one, where Pliny recalls enthusiastically and at length his hounding of a wicked man who had flourished under the tyrant (9.13).

That his actions and opinions did not reflect the prevailing climate, Pliny himself admits. Many would have preferred to forget the past and their own part in it: *Salvi simus qui supersumus* (Let us be safe, we who survive) was their watchword. In fact there was little danger, and Pliny's efforts came to naught. He realized, without bitterness, that despite the fall and rise of monarchs, the ruling class carried on. When the emperor Nerva wondered what one of Domitian's more vicious cronies would be doing now, if he were still alive, a fellow banqueter replied without hesitation, "He would be dining with us" (4.22.6). Pliny succinctly stated the reward for writing the history of recent times: grave displeasure and little thanks. So he refrained from such composition, and he stopped short of prosecution. His comments on Domitian in the letters and the panegyric accordingly stick to general attacks. When the emperor's associates are named, they are all but one conveniently dead. However genuine his outrage may have been, behind it lay a strong element of self-preservation.

The proper presentation of the author's own past actions was a matter of great delicacy. The present could be carefully shaped and presented in the letters, but for those who had acquiesced and flourished under a regime that had sent braver men to death or exile, there was a problem of justification. Pliny's friend Tacitus affected bluff indifference, confessing that his own career had been much advanced by Domitian and then saying no more about it: his history of the times would be unprejudiced by either love or hatred. In fact, he had already submitted his own apologia in the guise of a life of his father-in-law, Agricola, a highly tendentious biography purporting to demonstrate that good men could flourish even under bad emperors. Pliny tried to reshape his own past more directly, relying on the twin arts of insinuation and omission. According to him, it was a miracle that he survived at all, as bolts of lightning hurled by that robber and butcher Domitian struck down so many of his friends around him (3.11.3, an image repeated from *Panegyricus* 90.5). He daringly lent money and comfort to a philosopher who had been banished from the city, his forensic activities kept him in peril, his successful rise to high office was voluntarily delayed in silent protest. In short, he came to be hated by the worst of tyrants, and there were clear signs of his impending doom; indeed he was close to being prosecuted, for an informer had lodged an accusation against him. All of this is an artistic retouching of the past: the only legal brief that might have injured him had been pressed upon him by the Senate; the friends who were killed—the so-called Stoic opposition to Domitian—turn out rather to have been acquaintances whose relatives were cul-

tivated after their martyrdom; and the signs of impending doom visible in 93 were no more tangible three years later.

Pliny was not killed, nor did he suffer in any way; indeed Domitian did not hate him at all, and here the art of omission enters. In 93 Pliny was praetor, and in that year he courted danger by prosecuting a powerful senator and protecting an expelled philosopher; in 98 he was appointed prefect of the treasury of Saturn after attacking his predecessor, a creature of Domitian's, and from there he passed quickly to the consulship. His career suffered under Domitian, he tells us, and he was in great danger: this can refer only to the years between his praetorship and Domitian's death, 93–96. Yet during this period he held (as we know from an honorific inscription) the triennial prefecture of the military treasury; that is, he prospered in the last years of Domitian. Every other office from the quaestorship upward is recalled with pleasure in the letters, usually more than once: this is the one office he never mentions. The past has been carefully rewritten. Pliny is the sole hero of the correspondence, and his smooth self-portrait must always be examined with care.

Similarly, there is only one villain, and it is not Domitian: he is brought in only for standard abuse and then not too frequently, for detailed personal reminiscence might arouse the reader's curiosity about Pliny's relations with the dead butcher. The real villain, the only man who is dragged in (often on the flimsiest pretexts) for unmitigated vituperation is Marcus Aquillius Regulus. This monster was, in Pliny's memorable phrase, "a rich intriguer, cultivated by many, feared by more" (*locuples factiosus, curatur a multis, timetur a pluribus*). This characterization appears in one of the earlier letters (1.5.15), wherein Pliny recalls a passage at arms with Regulus in the first months after Domitian's murder. Regulus, whose crimes (we are told) were no less under Domitian than they had been under Nero, only better concealed, had helped to prosecute Arulenus Rusticus and had attacked Herennius Senecio, both of them victims of Domitian's and friends of Pliny's. Moreover, during a court battle in which they had appeared on opposite sides under Domitian, Regulus had attempted to betray Pliny into a choice between abusing a friend and flirting with treason, while on another occasion he had sneered at Pliny in court for emulating the eloquence of Cicero without great success. For all these past iniquities Regulus tried to make amends under the new regime, and he was careful not to invite Pliny to a recitation of his speech against Arulenus. In another famous letter (2.20.7), Pliny pillories Regulus as the master of *captatio*, the art of hunting inheritances and legacies. In one case Regulus won the favor of a dying woman by persuading her that she was going to live, in another he urged the doctors to keep a man alive long enough to sign the will and then upbraided them for prolonging his agony, and in a third he pressured a lady into bequeathing to him the clothes on her back.

By such shameful deeds, Pliny adds, Regulus raised himself from a poor and mean background to an eminence of amazing wealth, and so Pliny goes on with never a good word. Regulus it was who induced others to propose a light sentence for a rascally former proconsul of Africa prosecuted by Tacitus and Pliny; Regulus who spoiled his son in life and mourned him in death so excessively, and who sought to marry again at an indecently advanced age; Regulus who offended propriety by reciting the story of his son's life before a packed auditorium and who arranged for public readings in the town halls of Italy and the provinces. As to his oratorical skill, it was negligible: the man's talent was crazy, his eulogy of his son so inept that it was more likely to raise laughter than tears.

Pliny's attack on Regulus is so unusual in the correspondence—unusual in its passion, its uniformity, and its continuation until the man's death—that it deserves closer inspection. None of this portrait will stand; that is, our conception of this man as one of the worst informers (*delatores*) is due almost entirely to Pliny's art.

Whatever his misdeeds under Nero and soon after, Regulus' record under Domitian is (to us) unblemished: no crimes are attributed to him in an age when several wicked informers of the highest rank are firmly attested. Much of his abuse of Pliny and his friends was perfectly normal courtroom practice, and in two cases at least it was in fact a rejoinder against men who had attacked him first. What is more, Pliny lets slip on two occasions that he and Regulus had actually worked together as allies in court battles, and he records snatches of conversation that betray no signs of animosity; indeed, the fact that Regulus made a point of not inviting Pliny to the recitation of his speech against Arulenus must imply that Pliny was normally present on such occasions. The eulogy of a dead child is held up to ridicule, yet Pliny had likewise praised the son of a distinguished friend. Again and again Pliny grossly distorts Regulus' words and deeds.

Why does Pliny for once lose control? Moral outrage may contribute, but it is overdone. More suggestive are Pliny's comments on Regulus' style as an orator. In a reflective mood, after the man's death, Pliny admits at last that, whatever his faults may have been, Regulus' one virtue was that he truly loved oratory and took great pains over the preparation and delivery of his speeches (~~6.1.1–2~~). Earlier, however, he had vehemently attacked Regulus for his atrocious delivery, his slow-witted inventiveness, his poor memory: impudence and passion alone had earned him the title of orator. In the Roman mind, talent and character were closely connected, and Cato's definition of the orator was often repeated, that he was a good man skilled in speaking. Thus Pliny quoted with approval another's jibe at Regulus, that he was a bad man unskilled in speaking (4.7). In a most revealing passage Pliny recalls a conversation with Regulus on the differences between their styles. Pliny's speeches were long and circuitous, working out each point separately, overwhelming his opponent, whereas Regulus went immediately for his opponent's weakness and hung on terrierlike—in his own inimitable words, "As soon as I see the throat I pounce on it" (1.20.14). Regulus was all energy, and Pliny comments unfavorably in other places on his *vim* and his *vigor*; he himself loved to pursue his quarry at length, talking sometimes for several days.

In short, he and Regulus were rivals, and not only in oratory but specifically in law. It is as a trial lawyer that Regulus appears most often in the letters. The major civil law court of the day was that of the *centumviri*, the place that Pliny could call "my arena" and where his greatest triumphs occurred. Yet if we listen to Martial in the more than a dozen poems praising Regulus—Pliny received one—Regulus was the great orator of the day, and the centumviral court rang with his praises; Regulus was famous, Regulus was courted by a crowd of clients, Regulus was fabulously wealthy. Thus Regulus posed the greatest single threat to the image that Pliny sought to project; hence the campaign against him that vilified his past and ceased abruptly when the older man died. The villain of the correspondence reveals a good deal of its artist hero.

PLINY'S WORLD

Pliny's greatest value lies, of course, in his portrait of Trajanic society, in the revelation of his own opinions and emotions, and (equally significant) in what he omits. For him, as for tens of millions of inhabitants of the Roman Empire, the center of the world was unquestionably the emperor. Inevitably a prominent Roman senator spent much of his life dealing with him or thinking about him, but most of Pliny's thoughts on the facts of empire are monumentally banal: Trajan, in whose reign both the letters and the panegyric were published, naturally appears as the Good Emperor with all the conventional attributes, while Domitian must of course be the very sum of all imperial vices. Consequently most of Pliny's views on monarchy, good and bad, are superficial and unoriginal. Only occasionally does a heartfelt

sentiment slip out, as when he laments a real lack of subject matter for his pen (3.20.10). Letters, he thinks, should contain more than petty news and personal affairs, but, alas, there is really nothing noteworthy done in contemporary politics now that everything is under the sway of one man, who has alone undertaken the cares and toil of everyone for the common good. It is only by his benevolence *(velut rivi ex illo benignissimo fonte)* that there is ever anything to discuss at all. Sometimes indeed, despite the horror of Domitian's tyranny and despite the present peace, Pliny will allow himself to glance back with nostalgia, even to regret the passing of Aquillius Regulus.

The truth is that Pliny was not very close to the emperor or to his court, and the picture he offers is a very narrow one. Of the traditional wielders of power within the imperial staff and entourage there is little trace in the letters. The empress is mentioned once, no more than an acquaintance, while other imperial relatives are absent, most notably the ascendant cousin and eventual successor, Hadrian. Similarly the great freedmen of the emperor are not there, with the exception of one involved in a hearing that Pliny happened to attend. Such men could be major brokers of power and sellers of honor. For instance, Epictetus suggests that Valerius Maximus, a friend of Pliny's, won an imperial post by courting the freedmen with presents and flattery; Pliny saw in it only a reward for the man's past services, that is, either he was ignorant of such dealings or he turned a blind eye to anything sordid or dangerous. Furthermore, the civil servants from the equestrian class, who are his social equals, do not move in Pliny's world. Only two men of the highest rank, that of prefect, intrude, one because of his love of literature, the other only to receive a note of recommendation that shows no sign of familiarity; no prefect of the emperor's guard (the senior post) appears as friend or acquaintance. And at the lower levels there is but one procurator, a protégé of Pliny's own mentor who has been long since retired from active service.

Pliny does, however, have some contact with the emperor through a less formal though no less important channel, the emperor's council *(consilium principis)*. This body, composed of whomever the emperor chose to summon, deliberated on any matter he chose to submit to ~~them~~, and Pliny proudly records three separate occasions on which he was summoned. Yet again his position must be closely defined. The *consilium* could discuss matters of high policy, questions about taxes, the army, foreign affairs, and the like: none of this appears in Pliny. His attendance as councillor is limited strictly to the other function of the council, the administration of justice, playing assessors to the emperor's judge. This is the closest we find Pliny to the center of power: the litigants are of high rank, the charges are serious and have serious social repercussions, each case offers a fine opportunity for the display of imperial virtue on wider fronts. Pliny is, of course, in his natural element as one of the leading trial lawyers of the day. Yet there is one thing missing. Pliny, who lost no opportunity to record his own apt words on any occasion, nowhere recalls a single opinion on any subject offered by him to the emperor. However this silence may be explained, it is very curious.

The extent of Pliny's power or influence is quite clear. He fails almost as often as he succeeds in obtaining offices and honors for his friends from the emperor (though failure is skimmed over or ignored), and his own pursuit of a priesthood was painfully slow. This gulf between Pliny and the emperor is firmly bridged by a handful of great patrons who are as important to his success as are his native talents. Dozens of *amici principis* (friends of Caesar) parade through the correspondence, several of them ~~are~~ claimed by Pliny as friends, but a small group clearly stands out as crucial to his well-being, all of them new men like himself, all of them senior ex-consuls, and all of them powerful figures at court: Corellius Rufus, Iulius Ursus Servianus, Iulius Frontinus, Verginius Rufus, and perhaps Vestricius Spurinna. These are the men who promote Pliny at

every opportunity, praising him to the emperor Nerva as "a good youth," obtaining privileges for him, canvassing for him at elections, nominating him for priesthoods. In them lay Pliny's influence, hence whenever they appear in the letters they are praised wholeheartedly.

Pliny's natural sphere of activity lay rather in the Senate of Rome, and the activities of the Senate form one of the major subjects of the correspondence; indeed Pliny is perhaps our greatest source for its various day-to-day activities. Through him we learn a vast amount about who attended the Senate and why, about the busy round of elections, trials, great ceremonies of state, and about the complex routine with its impassioned but orderly debates. Much of its business seems distressingly trivial, for always in the background, often present in person, is the towering figure of the emperor. Thus, a vast amount of the Senate's time is taken up with simple, almost ritualized, praise of the monarch, of which Pliny's panegyric is but one example; while a distressing amount of effort is saved by the sad expedient—Pliny records several occasions—of referring any controversial matter to the emperor's decision. A great deal of the Senate's time is also spent in voting honors to individuals: a public funeral to Verginius Rufus, for instance, a triumphal statue to Vestricius Spurinna. Elections to senatorial offices are often reduced to a farce, as the emperor's general approval is needed by all candidates and his specific favor guarantees sure success, while electoral battles tend to be struggles between the candidates' senior patrons (*suffragatores*): several of Pliny's letters concern such wheeling and dealing for friends and friends of friends (he says that his own reputation is at stake). In one outraged letter protesting the use of secret ballots he tells of an anonymous cynic who wrote down the names not of the candidates but of their *suffragatores*. Nevertheless, Pliny fully justifies the continued existence of the Senate as a major administrative, diplomatic, legislative, and judicial body, particularly in its supervision of the state treasury (headed by Pliny for three years), of the maintenance of public order, and of the welfare of the provinces (if only in the curbing of its own errant governors).

He is, moreover, especially illuminating on the subject of the senatorial class, allowing us from numerous hints to build up a complex mosaic of its customs and opinions that is remarkably clear in its outlines. Ancestry is all-important. Again and again Pliny recommends a man because his father or grandfather or other relative was a consul or a senator or a leader of the equestrian order. It is crucial in contracting marriage alliances to go into the partner's pedigree, for proper ancestors would assure the glory of their posterity: as Pliny writes to his wife's grandfather—the sentiment is echoed in other forms elsewhere—their joint descendants would enjoy a clear path to high honors, a name widely famed, and distinguished ancestors (8.10.3).

Along with family went character. The senator, as befitted one of such distinguished family, had an exceptional character, and exceptional ignominy was his if he lapsed; accordingly a man's morals play a major part in Pliny's recommendation of him. A closed club was thus formed, in theory, of families of good birth, high character, and achievement: for a senator to attack a senator was bad form (Pliny was more than once reluctant to prosecute, despite the seriousness of the crimes involved); for an outsider to oppose a senator was an affront to the entire body that demanded exceptional justification. Needless to say, parvenus were abhorred. Pliny cannot forget that the father of a brutally murdered senator had been a slave, and he laments with an ex-praetor fallen on hard times that professors have become senators and senators professors. Within the club elaborate attention is paid to hierarchy as Pliny carefully records the precise rank (and office, if one is held) of each senator whom he discusses in any detail, and often that of his family as well. The important point is that while the correspondence clearly (if unwittingly) reflects the weakness of the Senate itself, it equally clearly reveals the unquestioned power of individual

members of the senatorial class, a power ultimately wielded in the form of *gratia* (influence). Offices and favors won from the emperor demonstrate the influence of the recipient; rivalry between senators is seen as a struggle in influence; patronage or oppression of lower orders rests initially on the exercise or perception of influence. Here, at least, Pliny's views expressed in the letters to or about senators surely coincide with contemporary opinion.

Pliny's original road to prominence as a young senator was through the law courts, and forensic matters hold an enduring interest for him as the topics of letters. Ignoring the many other possible motives for entering upon a career as a lawyer, he quotes with approval a senior friend's list of the cases one should undertake as a matter of course: those of friends, those that others have abandoned, and those that will serve as precedents. To these he would only add one more category, those that will bring the speaker glory and fame, subjects in which he himself took a passionate interest (6.29.1–3). In fact Pliny's own cases are almost completely confined to the first type, for by far the majority were *causae amicorum*, that is, affairs directly involving his friends or, in very many instances, affairs of other folk in which a friend of Pliny's has begged him to intercede. Quite different from these are the three major trials in the Senate of former governors and their colleagues wherein Pliny represented the aggrieved provinces: they all receive massive coverage in the correspondence; but it is clear in each that Pliny, who was of course reluctant to prosecute fellow senators, was persuaded by the Senate to take up the matter and that he had no close ties with the provinces either then or subsequently.

Pliny the lawyer must be carefully defined by the courts in which he appeared. Of the cases that he recalls, none was pleaded before the emperor himself, and only one before judges appointed by the emperor; then the charges were serious, but Pliny makes no mention of the outcome of the case, and his sole recorded action in it is a strategic silence. Much more play is given to his appearance before the Senate meeting as a court, in each case to conduct the trial of former provincial governors. In three of these he acted as a reluctant prosecutor, in two as the defender of friends, but, it should be emphasized, in all of them Pliny was but one of a number of lawyers on both sides, and it is by no means clear that his arguments or opinions had any great effect. (Certainly on one of these occasions, when he had talked on for almost five hours, the emperor Trajan very delicately, in the form of concern for Pliny's health, suggested that he should stop.)

In contrast with all of this, Pliny's heart lay in his true arena, the centumviral court, a court concerned particularly with inheritance disputes. There vast audiences hung on his every word, there he could speak for seven hours on end, there he could fix adjournments for friends behind the scenes. The course of these trials—many are hinted at, and details are given of some eight of them—is usually obscure, for Pliny only draws on them as background to introduce some other topic for discussion (a good sign of how they pervaded his daily life and his thoughts). The one element common to them all is that they involve highly important people *(potentissimi)*, both as lawyers and as litigants, which is not surprising if large sums were at issue. Thus Pliny was not a great leader of the criminal bar, nor did he particularly shine in the courts that heard important political cases—despite his long narratives of the Senate trials. Rather he was the lawyer of high society, as indeed was only fitting for a man so interested in recording its history.

His forensic career had been launched by a successful centumviral case at a very early age against some exceedingly powerful citizens. Later, however, he was to express outrage at modern youths bursting into his court fresh from the bloodless battles of the rhetorical schools and careless of the decorous ways of their ancestors. Those ancestors had been properly introduced into court life by their own seniors in a form of apprenticeship, which Pliny—who was genuinely concerned about

the future of forensic oratory—both applauded and practiced. His complaint was not merely a legal one; it was literary as well. He felt the tolerant contempt of a trial lawyer for the fictional practice cases of the schoolroom, but he was truly upset at some of the teachings. At one point in his diatribe against modern youth he sneers at the *fracta pronuntiatio* ("mincing accents," as one translation has it) of these youngsters, thus revealing a deeper prejudice: he simply did not like the elaborate, inflated style of the "Asianist" school of rhetoric.

This touches on the question: Why did Pliny win his cases? The question is a matter of oratory, and Pliny's two supreme qualities stand out. First, and rather surprisingly for the calm Pliny of the letters, the orator must be "pugnacious," and forensic oratory demanded "a pugnacious and rather warlike style." Hence he approves the ferocity of others and attributes his own success to pugnacity. Here the anecdote about his rival Regulus going for his opponent's metaphorical throat is relevant and easy to misunderstand: Pliny disapproved not of Regulus' method but of his impatience. Where Regulus went for the throat at once, Pliny carefully looked everything over, made sure that he had actually located the neck (not the knee or the heel, as Regulus tended to), and then he too—the gentle Pliny—sprang.

In this patience lay Pliny's second claim to supremacy, *copia* (fullness). He demanded time to make his points and to drive them home by repetition and rephrasing, and thus he praises fullness in others and scorns certain Asians who mistake volubility for copiousness. Moreover he closely ties this treatment at length with its ferocity, in the vivid comparison of a successful courtroom attack ~~to a~~ sword repeatedly striking a body (1.20.3; and note for that matter his image of the court as his "arena" at 6.12.2). Pliny paints one grand picture of just such a speech (full of *copia* and *pugnacia*) before a packed court, in which he set sail on a sea of rhetoric, full of indignation, anger, sorrow, and the whole baggage of the practiced orator (6.33.8–9).

Above all, Pliny wished to be remembered as a man of letters; that is, for what he himself wrote and for his encouragement of other writers. Culture accordingly predominates over all other possible topics in the letters, to the point even of obscuring other activities equally important to Pliny's life. Certain areas of literature interest him not at all. Technical writings and writers, be they concerned with law or natural science, receive almost no attention. Philosophy is equally uninteresting as a subject of correspondence and is reduced to a matter of personalities: certain philosophers are socially acceptable (one is recommended for his ability to "polish" a man of culture), others are figures of satire. However, three arts do engross Pliny's full attention: oratory, poetry, and history.

Oratory in court or Senate or public hall played a large part in Pliny's life, to which must be added the long hours passed in revision, criticism, recitation, and finally publication of what must have been scores of speeches: all phases of the process reappear constantly throughout the letters. Although no friend to the Asianist theories, Pliny tried nevertheless to steer a middle course, avoiding equally the terse, dry style of the "Atticists." The keynote of his speeches—as he saw it—was a controlled fullness of treatment set off by a refreshing variety of style and topic. He often, therefore, defended his own practices and attacked the theories of others, but there was no question that he was a master orator and renowned as such.

Nevertheless, where Pliny really yearned to achieve recognition was in the world of poetry, and poetry edges out oratory as a subject for discourse. The letters disclose a constant round of recitations by himself and his cronies, mutual praise, and incessant encouragement. The scraps that survive are the embodiment of conscientious mediocrity. Despite desperate application and immense versatility in the forms, the dominating traits both in Pliny's theories and in his surviving scraps are those twin banes ~~of~~ talent's slavish imitation of earlier and better poets, and the crushing display of erudition. Repeatedly Pliny shows himself to be on the defensive

for writing poetry, elaborately justifying to his friends both the composition and the recitation, particularly as a form of relaxation from the cares and business of the day. Poet after poet parades through his letters, each of them praised or discussed, all of them now lost and forgotten; of those who are still remembered, Martial appears only once, posthumously and in a condescending sketch, Statius and Juvenal not at all.

As for the writing of history, Pliny's attitude is curious. He admires its concern with deep truths and great examples, and he takes a constant interest in those of his contemporaries who dabble in historiography and biography. Many of them urged him to indulge as well, but despite some flirtation with the muse he never did. In part this was perhaps because with his letters he was already in effect writing contemporary history while avoiding many of its problems. In part it was undoubtedly also because he was shrewd enough to see that his generation had produced a truly great historian, his friend Tacitus. Hence he did a great deal to aid Tacitus, not merely encouraging him in his work but sending him considerable material for inclusion, most of which mentioned Pliny himself. For him history held a special interest: it was not just the recorder of truth, it was the bestower of immortality.

As important to Pliny as the creation of literature was its promotion at all levels and in all surroundings. Proper education is a repeated concern of the correspondence as he searches out tutors for the children of his friends, endows a public teaching post, and follows with interest the careers of professors. Privately Pliny encourages friends, especially his juniors, to work and study with him, and the art of general conversation on literary matters is highly developed. Two major activities stand out. First, the dissemination of literature. Many of Pliny's shorter notes deal with the circulation of new compositions for critical comment. The standard form is to send the work with a polite request that the recipient read and emend it with an eye to publication. Much of this criticism was undoubtedly mere flattery, but it should be noted that the practice was not Pliny's particular self-delusion, for Tacitus apparently valued his opinion, sending him material more than once. Much more dubious was the practice of recitation before invited audiences, then at its height and very much attacked by contemporaries. Pliny indulged in it with a vengeance, both as performer and auditor, and he replied at length to those who disapproved of it. The second form of literary promotion was simple patronage of men of letters. This encompassed not merely teachers, poets, and retiring amateurs, but almost everyone Pliny wanted to help for whatever reason. That is to say, literary talent or erudition was taken for granted in the genteel world of Pliny's society, so that whether recommending a man for political office, for a marriage alliance, or for legal assistance, Pliny's standard practice was to include praise either of the man's talent or at least of his appreciation of it in others. Thus, for better or worse, literature was directly or indirectly protected and standards of good taste ensured for the future.

The emperor and the Senate, the practice of law, and literary culture: these are the main subjects of Pliny's correspondence and the central interests of his life. Brief mention must also be made of two other elements that are no less important to him, but that are left in the background of the letters. First, of course, there is money, the fundamental thread in the whole fabric of Pliny's society. Pliny was a very wealthy man, and, as he states bluntly, almost all of his money was in land, the rest lent out at interest.

Land, in particular country estates and farms, was indeed the main source of most aristocratic wealth and power, but Pliny betrays some attitudes to it that are not typical of his class. True, one of his often repeated themes is that of retreat to the countryside *(secessus)* whenever he can tear himself away from work, there to relax, to take exercise, and above all to read and write in peace—a peace all too often broken by the problems of his farms and the

complaints of his tenants. Yet this rural idyll of literary seclusion is something of a pose, part of the carefully cultivated image of the man of letters. In fact, Pliny takes a rather close proprietary interest in all aspects of real country life: the leasing of farms, the supervision of tenants, the problems of sowing and harvesting, weather conditions good and bad, and above all the fluctuation of prices. He took as well a keen interest in various aspects of the property market.

His general attitude to money matters is of a piece with this. He was, in fact, the largest known private benefactor in Italy in imperial times—his childlessness was doubtless important here—and his actions were genuinely prompted by the public good and his own love of renown, as were those of most of his class. But he stands out as being particularly canny in these expenditures: he would for instance subsidize only part of the salary of a public teacher in order to ensure that the town took an active interest, and he carefully recommended to a friend the most responsible and least risky method of spending money for the public good. Pliny assiduously cultivated the image of a man of letters, but he was undoubtedly known to his contemporaries as something of a financial expert, a talent more clearly reflected in his official career. None of this is exploited in the letters; it is simply there.

The converse is true of the social world—its structure and its opinions—within which Pliny operated, for that is the subject that gives the correspondence its eternal fascination. Pliny is delighted to share his highly conventional ideas on marriage and the role of the wife, on the upbringing of children, on the proper relationships with various family members, with friends, and with acquaintances, and his fashionably humane views on slaves and freedmen. Similarly there is much to be gathered on the depth of his local roots in his native Comum, "my delight," as he called it, his visits there, his patronage of the place, his many close friends there and in the surrounding region. The functioning of this world is as well defined as its structure: ritual morning salutations, dinner parties, visits in the country, recitations in the city, meetings with friends for advice on literary matters or financial affairs, the duties of friends affectionate and friends politic, the highly ritualized act of recommending a client to a prospective patron (an art that demands a separate letter form to itself), the etiquette of giving gifts in life and legacies in death, everywhere the maintenance of good relations, the constant granting of favors and rendering of thanks. All of this Pliny deftly portrays in a large and convincing landscape of a particular society at a particular time, and he does it through the unusual medium of a mosaic of letters: in both subject and execution he was a great innovator, and he deserves considerable praise for that.

In searching for his motives we soon discover that Pliny is both more honest and more dishonest than other writers. Nowhere does he actually say why he chose to make a high art of epistolography, merely that friends encouraged him to collect his more carefully written letters. Nevertheless his motive is clear throughout. Much that is not immediately obvious can be coaxed from the letters to form an estimate of Pliny's own mental landscape, his emotions and his self-perception, his views of nature and supernature, his attitudes to pain, disease, and death. One obsession stands out from them all, running as a connecting theme from the first book to the last: immortality. As Pliny himself allowed, "the prize of eternity" was before his eyes, yet only when one looks out for this obsession does one realize how pervasive it is. For example, a writer friend is urged to publish, for he is mortal, his works will be an eternal monument to him; the panegyric of the emperor is a light for posterity; death came cruelly and prematurely for another author who was composing an immortal work—causing Pliny to reflect on his own mortality and his own writings; he believes that Tacitus' histories will be immortal and frankly confesses that he wants to be in them; Verginius Rufus, a great man and Pliny's friend, will live forever in the memory and con-

versation of men; nothing so excites Pliny as the love and desire for a long-enduring fame. In the end, he offers a definition of the most fortunate of men as one who could delight in the prospect of a good and lasting reputation, and who, being assured of posterity, could enjoy his future glory now (9.3.1). He therefore set out carefully to build his own monument, choosing an unusual medium and working in it better than anyone had done before. It is impossible to resist applying to him his own words on the death of the poet Martial (3.21.6): "What he wrote will not last forever, you say. Perhaps not, but he wrote it as if it would."

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EDWARD CHAMPLIN