

A DARKER PLINY

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This is a short summary of a longer article “Not Dark Yet ... :Reading to the End of Pliny’s Nine-Book Collection”. The full version will appear as a chapter in I. Marchesi (ed.), *Betting on Posterity: Pliny as Bookmaker* (OUP, 2014). The text of the summary appears (in slightly different form) also in R. Gibson, ‘Reading the letters of Sidonius by the Book’, in J. van Waarden and G. Kelly (eds.), *New Approaches to Sidonius Apollinaris* (Peeters, 2013).

The popular perception of Pliny is that of a sunny and optimistic writer. In the opening words of Stanley Hoffer’s influential monograph on Pliny, ‘The leading trait in Pliny’s epistolary self-portrait is his confidence ... Pliny presents a man and a world that have the fewest possible anxieties’.¹ Such self-confidence is not without its problems (or interest) for modern critics, since – as Hoffer goes on to persuasively suggest – ‘[Pliny’s] cheerful and confident picture is designed to wish away the basic tensions and contradictions of his upper-class Roman life’.² Hoffer then makes it his business to bring the worries which Pliny is trying to conceal or wish away to the top of the critical agenda – hence the title of his monograph: *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger*.

Nevertheless, Pliny’s reputation for sunny optimism (and concealed anxieties) is not an entirely accurate reflection of the character of all nine books of his letter collection. For an optimistic attitude is maintained by Pliny, albeit with occasional blips,³ for the first six books of the collection only. The remaining three books of the collection introduce material that is both bleak and disturbing to a degree that exceeds anything seen in the collection so far. And the attitude of Pliny himself appears to alter as a consequence. This change in the character of Pliny’s collection has not gone unrecognized by critics. In a classic contribution from 1985, Sir Ronald Syme noted,

¹ Hoffer (1999) 1.

² Hoffer (1999) 1.

³ For an instance of early pessimism in Book 2 occasioned by the flourishing of Pliny’s *bete noire* Regulus (but soon redeemed by the consular success of Book 3), see Whitton (forthcoming b).

for example, that ‘illnesses seem to pile up in the period covered by Books VII and VIII’, and suggested as explanation ‘a sequence of unhealthy seasons’ (cf. 8.1.1) or ‘an epidemic supervening in the train of second war against the Dacians’.⁴ But, as will become evident below, the gloom in Books 7-8 (and 9) of Pliny spreads far beyond the personal or domestic, and includes a strong dose of political pessimism.

Nevertheless, Syme’s recognition of the darker character of Books 7-9 has done little to alter general perceptions of Pliny as anything other than fundamentally a sunnily optimistic writer. Books 7-9 are perhaps regarded as somewhat ‘uncharacteristic’ of Pliny (which rather begs the question of what *is* ‘characteristic’ of Pliny).

The change in the character of Pliny’s collection is encapsulated in the first words of Book 7: *Terret me haec tua tam pertinax ualetudo* (‘The obstinacy of this illness of yours terrifies me ...’, 7.1.1). This dramatic opening is repeated in the opening words of a letter just over half way through Book 7, where Pliny declares: *Angit me Fanniae ualetudo* (‘The illness of Fannia torments me ...’, 7.19.1). An unprecedented series of letters on illness and death then follows.⁵ Of course, death and illness have been hardly absent from the pages of earlier books in Pliny’s collection. However, aside from the high frequency of these topics in Book 7, what is also new is Pliny’s admission for the first time that illness affects himself (7.1-3-6, 7.21, 7.26) - not to mention his changed attitude to the death of others. Where Pliny closed Book 5 with a robust determination to master his grief over the death of a young protégé (5.21.6), in Book 7 he presents himself as caught in the midst of fears and grief which he has not yet overcome or worked through (7.1.1, 7.19.1, 7.19.11).

A second noticeable feature of Book 7 (and its successors) is the fading of Trajan from view. Book 6 had awarded the emperor, newly returned from victory in his second Dacian campaign, both attention and great prominence.⁶ By contrast in Book 7, after a few early mentions of the emperor (7.6, 7.10), nothing further is heard of Trajan. Instead, attention is given to the former emperor Domitian and the

⁴ Syme (1985) 182 = *Roman Papers* 5.486.

⁵ Cf. 7.21 (on Pliny’s troubles with his eyes), 7.24 (on the death of Ummidia Quadratilla), 7.26 (reflections on Pliny’s behaviour when ill, occasioned by the illness of a friend), and 7.30 (on the death of a friend’s pupil). For readings of Book 7, see also Fitzgerald (2007), Gibson-Morello (2012) 187-96.

⁶ Cf. 6.5.5, 6.13, 6.19, 6.22, 6.27, 6.31, and see Gibson-Morello (2012) 50-2.

atmosphere of terror and fear which he inflicted on Rome in the 90s (7.19.4-6, 7.27.12-14, 7.33). Together the ghost of Domitian, the frequency of death and illness, and Pliny's greater susceptibility to fear and grief in Book 7, combine to give both darker content and tone to the book than any previously encountered in the collection.

Book 8 deepens the gloom further still. The book once more opens with the theme of illness - this time amongst Pliny's slaves (8.1) - and develops that theme with a quite remarkable series of letters devoted to death and sickness among young and old, whether in Pliny's own *familia* or in his wider circle of friends. In a book of 24 letters, death and serious illness form the main topic in 7 letters, or fully 30% of the total.⁷ More significant than percentage totals, however, is the change in Pliny's attitude maintained from Book 7. Where in the early books of the collection Pliny was determined to master his emotions (and put an end to grief), in Book 8 we encounter him quite tangled up in his emotions, unable to lift his eyes above his current situation (8.19.2, 8.23.3), and prone to expressing 'uncharacteristic' sentiments on the futility of life in the face of death (8.23.6-7).

Death and illness are joined by natural disaster. For in letter 8.17 Pliny reports the devastating effects of an inundation of the Tiber after 'continual storms and frequent flooding'. Even the channel dug by the emperor Trajan to reduce the impact of the flooding has had only limited success (8.17.2). The emperor is in fact mentioned only once elsewhere in the book, in an early letter on his military triumph in Dacia (8.4). Trajan's success in Dacia with controlling and diverting rivers - highlighted at 8.4.2 - makes an obvious contrast with his relative failure in controlling the Tiber at home in letter 8.17. The metaphorical potential of the contrast is obvious. Of course, that link between the two 'river' letters in this sense could be dismissed as fortuitous. But there is no doubting the political pessimism of the longest and most important letter in Book 8. For in letter 8.14, in the context of a senatorial debate on the fate of some freedmen accused of murdering their master, Pliny laments the pitiful ignorance of proper behaviour among the senatorial elite in forthright terms: 'The slavish situation of former days casts a kind of forgetfulness and ignorance over senatorial procedures as over other most honourable pursuits ... the resumption of freedom has found us ill-educated and ignorant, but, fired by the sweetness of that

⁷ Death: 8.5, 8.16, 8.19, 8.23; illness: 8.1, 8.10, 8.11. For readings of Pliny Book 8, see also Bernstein (2008), Whitton (2010).

freedom, we are compelled to perform certain duties before we are acquainted with them' (8.14.2-3).⁸

In Book 1 Pliny had enthusiastically celebrated the invigorating return of *libertas* after the death of Domitian (e.g. 1.5.1, 1.10.1, 1.13.1). But now in Book 8 he expresses a pessimistic sentiment unthinkable in Book 1, namely that the return of freedom found a senate unfit to exercise the opportunities it offered. The darkness of Pliny's thinking here is confirmed when he goes on – for the first time in the entire correspondence – to admit the collective guilt of the senate for its behaviour under Domitian (8.14.8-9).⁹ Previously in the collection Pliny had devoted some effort to putting clear blue water between himself and those whom he regarded as compromised by their behaviour under Domitian.

Pliny's ninth book, in some respects, represents a return to form after the darkness of Books 7-8. Gone are the debilitating series of illnesses and deaths which marked Books 7-8, and along with them Pliny's 'uncharacteristic' entanglement with his emotions and sense of futility. Pliny looks more confidently to the future, willing to anticipate in letter after letter a bright future in terms of his reception by posterity above all as a writer and literary figure.¹⁰ In this context, Pliny is once more able to rise above the tragedy of death among younger generations (9.9), and he hails the recovery of friends from illness (9.22). No one in Books 7 and 8, it should be added, recovers from illness.

But if personal matters show some evidence of brightening up for Pliny, the opposite is true of political matters. Significantly, Trajan is entirely absent from the book (although his wife Plotina receives passing mention in 9.28), and Pliny ends the book with a marked retreat to his country estates, away from the bustle and politics of the capital (9.36, 37, 39, 40). More importantly, three letters at the heart of the book reveal a new willingness in Pliny to confront the darkness of the past. For letter 9.13

⁸ *priorum temporum seruitus ut aliarum optimarum artium, sic etiam iuris senatorii obliuionem quandam et ignorantiam induxit. ... reducta libertas rudes nos et imperitos deprehendit; cuius dulcedine accensi, cogimur quaedam facere ante quam nosse.* For a sustained reading of this important letter, see Whitton (2010).

⁹ The sentiment has clear Tacitean antecedents; cf. Tac. *Agr.* 45.1, Whitton (2010) 126.

¹⁰ Cf. 9.2, 9.6, 9.8, 9.11, 9.14, 9.18, 9.23, 9.25, 9.31. On Book 9, see further Gibson-Morello (2012) 234-64.

reveals the turmoil in the senate just after the assassination of Domitian in the years 96-7: a turmoil which Pliny had rather glossed over in the context of Book 1.¹¹ Letter 9.19 admits that the behaviour of Pliny's patron Verginius Rufus in the years surrounding the fall of Nero in 68-9 was open to adverse interpretation: a position implicitly denied in letter 2.1.¹² While letter 9.27 condemns the behaviour of an audience which asked an unnamed historian (probably Tacitus) to stop reading from a work of recent history (one likely to deal with senatorial conduct under Domitian).

In sum, the final three books of Pliny's letters reveal a pronounced difference in both content and tone from their six predecessors. Largely gone are the sunny attitudes and upbeat topics which characterize Books 1-6. In their place we find some of the most bleak and cheerless subject matter of the collection – whether personal or political – and a frequently low-spirited or even pessimistic attitude to match.

I end by reflecting on the fact that Trajan, largely absent from the collection since Book 6, was – almost unusually - continuously present in Italy during the dramatic time covered by Books 7-9 (107-9 CE). Appointed emperor in January 98, Trajan had not entered Rome until September 99, and was soon off to conduct the first Dacian campaign in March 101, returning only in December 102. A relatively lengthy interval of two and half years intervened before the start of the second Dacian war and the departure of Trajan in June 105. Upon returning in June 107, he would then be continuously present in Italy until the Parthian war of September 113. Is the coincidence between the political pessimism of Books 7-9 and this sustained sojourn of the emperor in Italy merely a coincidence? The absence of the emperor from those books, and their sometimes disturbing political content, suggests the opposite. In his journey from light to dark over nine books of letters, Pliny has traced in a smaller compass the political journey that Tacitus himself would later undertake across his corpus as a whole, from the pro-Trajanic enthusiasms of the *Agricola* to the pointed silences and increasing imperial disillusionment of the *Annals*.¹³

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¹¹ Cf. esp. 9.13.10-11. For a reading of letter 9.13, see Gibson-Morello (2012) 27-33.

¹² Contrast esp. 9.19.5 with 2.1.2.

¹³ On this Tacitean journey, see esp. Woodman (2009).

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Pliny decided for the moment to let that pass. This was not the time or place. Balbus swung his legs off the dining couch, stood and stretched. If it had not been so dark Pliny would have seen the anxious look that crossed her face. Suetonius, with sharper eyes, perhaps did see it. Well, said Pliny. Let's make an early night. Busy day tomorrow. Pliny as a man of science sailed across the bay to obtain a nearer view; he landed at Stabiae, and there was killed by poisonous fumes. The circumstances are recorded by his nephew in a letter to Tacitus (Pliny, Epp. VI. xvi). Vespasian had died and had been succeeded as Princeps by his son Titus two months before. Pliny's earlier writings were on subjects suggested by his professional experiences, e.g., the use of the javelin by cavalry, a history of the German wars, the training of the orator. Start studying Pliny. Learn vocabulary, terms and more with flashcards, games and other study tools. For while the intense heat hinders my journey on land, so the continuous northerly winds slow down my voyage by sea. 4th Sentence T-P. You have reported to me as you should, my dear Pliny. 5th Sentence T-P. For it is of interest to me to know by what means of travel you are reaching your province.