The Letters of Pliny the Younger
A Balance between the Public Persona and the Private Life

The letters of Pliny the Younger offer the reader a rich and varied portrait of administrative and personal life in the first century CE. Among Pliny’s correspondents are the Emperor Trajan, with whom he exchanges a series of important letters on the treatment of Christians, Trajan’s chief of staff, Lucius Licinius Sura, to whom he writes a letter concerning the existence of ghosts, and the historian Cornelius Tacitus, to whom he relates an incident from his own life that he desires to be included in the historian’s pages. In the letters, we witness his fair and humane treatment of slaves, his shrewd negotiations as a lawyer, his love of an adoring young wife, his inquisitive mind inquiring about the supernatural, his approach to the art of writing, the importance he gives to, among other things, the art of translation, his disappointment at the indifference of an audience at a poetry reading, and his willingness to point out the pretensions of a host at a dinner party. But he is not above jockeying for a place in the pages of Tacitus’s histories. We might ask how much of what we read in these letters is truth and how much a façade.

1 The translations of Pliny throughout are my own.
Of course, a letter is unlike an historical document or scientific study which at least intends to strive for objective truth. Pliny had a distinguished career in government and thus all his actions, including these letters, published in several volumes in his lifetime, were visible to the public and to the Emperor. As we read, we must also be conscious of this fact and not be over hasty in our judgment of Pliny’s character. Upon first reading we can say he is humane and loving, politically shrewd and inquisitive. And this would be accurate. But we cannot know the extent to which he is “being himself.” Is he hiding his real thoughts and simply adopting a kind of mask for professional purposes? His style, as opposed to Cicero’s, which he followed early on in his career, is elaborate and less direct. Pliny’s public persona is carefully balanced against his private thoughts. He is in fact writing his own biography. And who of us, in a similar position, would be completely truthful, even as we strove to be honest, in our expression of ourselves, if we knew that the entire world would read our pages. Indeed, it is for this reason, and also since many of his correspondents were famous in their own right, that the letters of Pliny the Younger are such a fascinating and unique document. So, let us begin to examine these letters and see if we can create a portrait of Pliny the Younger carefully, remembering it is just as likely as not that he is showing us himself as he would like to be seen.

On the subject of this theme, of the public and private persona, I would like to examine the following letter to the historian Tacitus. Pliny the Younger writes,

I strongly predict (and about this fact I have no reason to doubt) that your histories will be immortal. Believing this sincerely to be the case, I all the more desire a place in them. If we are generally very careful to choose the best artist to do a portrait of our face then does it not stand to reason that one’s actions ought to be celebrated by an author like yourself? And so in view of this, I would like to relate to you a story, which I’m certain you’re already familiar with, as it was
highly publicized at the time, yet still I’ll repeat it now, that you may realize how valuable it is to me that my role in these events, well-known because of the dangerous circumstances in which I acted, may receive an additional luster from the pen of so bright a genius as yourself.

Here Pliny is creating a public image of himself. He asks Tacitus to record an event that relates how he defended a friend during the prosecution of Baebius Massa for extortion. Herennius Senecio, together with whom Pliny led the prosecution, sought to establish a further “preventive measure” against Massa after the case was over. Massa in retaliation accused Senecio of having a “personal vendetta” against him and threatened to prosecute him in turn for “high treason.” Pliny, witnessing his friend being threatened, speaks to the court, “Most noble consuls, I believe that for some reason Massa is implying that I have betrayed the interests of my client in this case, since he has failed to mention that he will prosecute me as well.” He defends his friend by daring Massa to prosecute him as well. It is certain that Massa would not prosecute Pliny given his prestige and his association with the Emperor. And he used his own power and influence to defend Senecio. He concludes the letter,

The late Emperor Nerva (who in the days before he became Emperor would keep track of every worthy political event) wrote a very impressive letter to me, applauding not only myself but the Age that he said had produced such an orator who embodied the spirit (as he liked to call it) of the ancients.

But whatever my action signifies, I know you will enhance and spread the glory of it; not that I require you to exceed the limits of reality. History should never depart from the truth nor does any noble act require any more than its truthful depiction.

The description of a “noble act” should not “exceed the limits of reality,” because it should require no more than a “truthful depiction.” Clearly, in this letter, Pliny shows the importance of
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maintaining a certain kind of public persona. He is seeking a well-known historian to recreate that persona in his pages. He calls upon Tacitus to “enhance and spread the glory of [his action].”

Pliny’s letter to his young wife’s aunt adds another dimension to his portrait. Here he writes about his wife, Calpurnia, who was fourteen years old when they married. Pliny was forty years old. She was his third wife, and he shows genuine affection towards her. The beginning of the letter is addressed to his wife’s aunt. He writes,

You stand out as an exemplary model of tender regard to your family in general and to your late brother in particular, whose feelings of affection and companionship you returned with an equal fervor, and you have not only exhibited the kindness of an aunt but supplied the warmth that a father shows to his daughter; and I am persuaded to say, with unwavering honesty, and pleasure, that she, in her capacity, behaves in a manner worthy of her father, her grandfather, and yourself.

He applauds the positive influence that she had on his young wife, such that she, Calpurnia, “behaves in a manner worthy of her father, her grandfather, and yourself.” In Pliny’s description of his wife there is real tenderness and genuine love. A reader has no doubt that she also adored him and fully returned that love. He writes,

She discriminates with the eye of one sure in her judgment, she is prudent, and her love for her husband is virtuous and bespeaks a chaste nature. Her affection for me has aroused her interest in literature, and she reads my compositions with pleasure, often memorizing them and afterwards repeating to me word for word the contents, she always has a copy ready in her hands. How attentive she is to my every argument when I am beginning a new case, curious about my
line of reasoning. And she is as relieved and joyous as I am when the case has finally concluded. During the court proceedings, just as I’ve begun my opening arguments, she will quickly send for messengers to relay to her the impressions my case is making on the jurors, the amount of applause I receive, and the success, lastly, of my closing arguments. When I am giving a lecture in an auditorium, she hides behind the curtains at the back and peaks out at the audience and at me, listening, greedily, to my every word and following the logic of my argument. She adapts my lyrics to music and plays the resulting songs beautifully on her lyre. She has no other instructor in this but Love.

And he is sincere when he writes,

But her devout nature is a product of your training and instruction and as she was growing up under your roof she was surrounded by all that was sacred and moral. And did she not learn how to love me as a result of your description of my character? You revered my mother as your own and it was you who shaped and encouraged my character from infancy, thus it is no mystery that I should have become the kind of man my wife is in love with.

It is a letter that shows Pliny was deeply in love with his new wife and that she returned that love. It is one of his most beautiful letters. And yet, if we are to keep in mind the intricate relation between the public persona and the private life, we need to remember, that this is Pliny’s portrait of his wife. And we must remember, also, that these letters were for publication.

The following letter to Valerius Paulinus shows Pliny’s humane treatment of his servant, Zosima. In describing him, he writes,

He has never been known to speak ill of anyone and is, besides, well educated, though presently he plays the role of comedian, perhaps not befitting one such as himself, though
nevertheless it is an occupation at which he excels. He speaks, placing great emphasis on his words and his judgment is sound. He is moral and I admit not very graceful in his movements, though one shouldn’t hold this against him. He plays the lyre far better than a comedian ought to. Furthermore, he is so well read in poetry, philosophy, and oratory one would think the study of these subjects was his native occupation. I am elaborating on all these qualities to show that he has many services, outside the ones most normally reserved for his occupation, from which I benefit.

I would like to note at this point Pliny’s letter to Fuscus, where he writes,

A part of my day is also spent listening (not as often as they would like I’m sure) to the complaints of my tenants: their rustic manner of speaking amuses me and yet truly I find a certain dynamic quality in their speech, a quality that I bring over to my own studies and also to those engagements of a politer sort.

Pliny engages with his servants and with the common people in a way that reminds me of Proust’s consulting his servants for various bits of gossip. But of course, unlike Proust, Pliny was a politician, and his dealings with servants and the people was, in a certain sense, always political. In the letter to Paulinus, Pliny writes that on more than one occasion Zosima became ill and coughed up blood. The first time, Pliny sent Zosima to Egypt where he received the care that he needed and returned home completely healed. This second time, Pliny will send him to a farm to recuperate and relates the details associated with Zosima’s journey in the letter. Concerning Zosima, he writes,

But even if I were of a more rough and hardened disposition, if my servant Zosima, a freed-man, (who it must be admitted has the greater right to be treated humanely as he is more in need of such treatment) was ever taken with a serious illness,
or indeed even a mild cold, such would be my response that I would immediately offer him aid.

These two letters show that Pliny treated his servants humanely and was friendly to his “tenants”; he felt genuine affection for Zosima and was in a sense inspired by the “rustic” manner in which the common people argued their points.

For comparison, there is Pliny’s letter to Acilius, where he tells of the slaves’ brutality against their slave-master, Larcius Macedo. Pliny, in order to be fair, describes who Macedo was:

an arrogant man, who indeed thought too much of himself, and treated his slaves with a severity commensurate with his tyrannical character, too little or rather too much aware that his own father had been in such a position once.

But, nevertheless, he did not deserve to be so brutally beaten by his own slaves that he died. Pliny concludes,

It is clear the extent to which we are potential victims of dangerous and often violent actions against our person such that our dignity is outraged, and our body slaughtered. Nor does leniency or respectful treatment of slaves ensure the prevention of such barbaric acts. It is not quiet reflection, but the spontaneous eruption of hatred that arms these malicious ruffians against their masters.

Before I conclude this discussion of Pliny’s treatment of people who are of lower social status, I would like to examine a letter to Avitus that concerns a gathering of friends for dinner and Pliny’s reaction to what he sees. Of the peculiar behavior of the host, Pliny writes,

Some very exquisite dishes were served to him [the host] and several others while the remaining guests had placed before them insufficient amounts of what, in any case, seemed barely edible. Before him he also had several bottles of wine
of varying vintages, but you must not think that the guests were free to choose their favorite variety; in fact no one was allowed to choose at all. He set aside a bottle for himself and me; the next was for those friends he considered of a “lower order” (it must be understood that he measures his friendships according to “quality” as he does his wines); the third and last bottle he reserved for his servants and my own.

So the quality of the food and wine that each guest was being served was predetermined according to their social status. Someone at the dinner asks Pliny whether or not he approves of this method. He responds that he doesn’t. As the conversation continues, Pliny is asked what he would do differently. His response is:

I would distribute the bottles equally among the guests, for when I arrive to dine with people I expect a certain amount of courtesy and certainly not to be censored. Each man that I have invited to my table is on an equal footing with myself and each other and this equality will be observed in all aspects of the dining experience.

Someone asks him “Servant’s as well?” and Pliny responds, “Yes, even them, for on an occasion such as this, where we are all seated together, I consider him no longer a servant but a trusted companion.” The man responds again to Pliny, “But this must be a great added expense for you.” Pliny concludes the letter:

I assured him that this was not the case; and when he continued, asking how it could be done, I responded, “You must know that the servants do not drink the same vintage wine that I do and moreover, I drink the wine that they prefer.” And certainly if a man is able to balance his appetite, thus reducing waste, he will not find it a great expense to feed all his guests, with equal portions of a quality cuisine, as he does so himself. Restrain your appetite, and, so to speak, diminish that weakness, and you will find yourself better able to
economize in good faith. You will find your own temperance a much better guide in reducing your expenses so that you don’t end up offending your guests.

The man that emerges from these series of letters is humane in his treatment of and concern for those with a lower social status. But he is appalled by the brutality they are also sometimes capable of if not checked. Pliny is eminently just, a man familiar with Roman law, who had many years of experience in rhetoric and oration, who knew how to negotiate for the rights of his client while maintaining the ethics of the law, and who knew how to balance the public and private spheres.

Pliny the Younger’s letters can be regarded as models of their form. They were used well into the eighteenth century as educational tools in writing and rhetoric. In this context, I would like to turn to the following letter to Fuscus, who had written to Pliny inquiring about “the method … to use when pursuing [his] studies.” Pliny begins by speaking about the importance of translation and then continues to elaborate on other helpful practices to improve one’s writing. The beginning is worth quoting in full since so much of what Pliny says is now common practice for writers:

Translation is a very important skill to develop and so I recommend (as many poets and writers in general do) translating from Latin into Greek or from Greek into Latin. This way you will learn many new and elegant expressions, a variety of colloquialisms, and forceful turns of phrase. Also, to imitate authors allows you not only to invent after their manner but to become better acquainted with their language and little will escape you when translating: this method will improve your critical reading skills and increase your ability to judge the quality of a work.

It may benefit you, also, when you have read enough of an author, such that you consider yourself fairly knowledge about his work, to hone your insights by carrying his ideas in your mind such that, after much thinking, you feel you
now can consider him your rival by writing a composition on the same subject; now compare your work and his and minutely examine both his text and yours. You will feel that you achieved a great victory on points where you succeeded in bettering him in your exposition as you will suffer humiliation if you find that his argument is logically sound on every point and immune to your critique.

You may dare to take the most brilliant passage from a work and try to better it yourself. This is bold indeed but as it is performed in secret and without an audience you cannot be accused of being presumptuous. And yet there are those with sufficient confidence who take on the task of adopting the voice of a great author only to better him in speech and they receive great applause, I might add, and because they dispense with being overly critical of their own work, they advance beyond those authors they thought brilliant enough to follow.

Pliny’s suggestions here are especially useful when a writer is just starting out. The following reminds of something one might encounter in Ezra Pound’s *ABC of Reading*. Yet whatever one thinks of that text, the advice Pliny offers is sound:

I know that your concern at present is forensic oratory and yet I would suggest that you not always take that line of reasoning and learn to vary your approach by exploring different subjects. A farmer rotates the various crops he plants to improve the quality of his land and so the mind is enriched by studying different subjects. Therefore, it is useful to single out a brilliant passage from an historical text and then to practice writing letters with that text in mind. Often in pleading a case, one has recourse to both an historical style as well as a poetical style in developing one’s argument and furthermore a succinct and polished style is cultivated by writing letters. It is also well to ease your mind by reading poetry and when I say this I do not mean a long and sustained work
(for only men of leisure have the time to engage in this activity), but the short witty epigrams which serve to relieve your tensions and allow you to pass a few moments away from the more pressing work. These short poems are usually thought of as entertainments, but these witty epigrams are often better known than longer, more serious poetry.

He concludes this letter with the following remarks on what to read:

Remember, when studying a topic, to read the best that was ever written on the subject; as the saying goes, “though we should know much, we should not read many books.” I should not need to tell you exactly who those authors are, since they are generally well known. Though I have extended this letter far beyond the length I originally intended, nevertheless, if you follow my advice, you will find your own time spent studying considerably shortened.

It is a fascinating letter, in which we read of the program of study suggested by a cultivated Roman gentleman of wealth in the first century CE, who would write, furthermore, in a letter to Arrianus, of the attitude one should adopt towards this study:

Nothing, in my opinion, enables us to approach our studies with a graceful and genial air, as we do our manners, then to temper seriousness with good humor, since there is always the chance that the former may turn into arrogance and the latter is too close to frivolity.

Pliny the Younger wrote hundreds of letters, many of which survive and are of great historical importance to our understanding of the first century of the Common Era. We must not be misled into thinking of these letters as intimate in the same way our own contemporary letters are considered intimate. They are not private; they were reworked for publication and their survival today is largely due to their popularity. They do not so much give
us Pliny’s “personality” — it would be wrong to use this modern word with all its psychological implications to speak of a Roman of the first century CE — as they do the public persona that he cultivated throughout his career. This is not to suggest that his opinions and his moral sense are somehow inauthentic. It is better to say that it is not quite Pliny “expressing himself” in these letters. Perhaps one can say the public and the private merge and are almost one and the same thing for Pliny the Younger.

He was born an aristocrat and rose through many imperial and civil offices, finally serving as the imperial magistrate under the emperor Trajan. We do not know much about his old age, though it is thought that he died suddenly around 113 CE, during his appointment in Bithynia Pontus, a province of the Roman Empire on the Black Sea coast of Anatolia (Turkey); nothing in his letters refers to later than that date. We do know that he made a will in which he called for the release of hundreds of slaves and established a fund to support them after his death. It is a great testament to the humane treatment that Pliny observed with those of a lower social status. The letters of Pliny the Younger offer the reader a fascinating portrait of Roman society in the first century CE as seen through the eyes of a cultivated Roman aristocrat. They are a unique document and as such we are fortunate that they have survived to this day.

Works Cited