VII

REVISITING THE ANCIENT WORLD IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
This Is Not a Golden Age

1. A Balance between the Public Persona and the Private Life

Pliny the Younger was born into an aristocratic family and rose through many imperial and civil offices, finally serving as the imperial magistrate under the emperor Trajan. He spends hours in his study carefully constructing his image for posterity, in a series of letters that have since become famous. Now as he looks up from the page and gazes over the ruined city, and from his study, he sees the common people, unemployed and starving in the streets of Rome. He thinks, “There is so much suffering in the world.” He bows his head and begins to write again. He is writing to his friend, the historian Tacitus, who is hard at work on a history of Rome,

Perhaps you think I’m being contradictory. Not at all. Exercise fires up the imagination. Also, the countryside is pleasing to the eyes and so too the silence that one notices being so far away from the city. These things put me in a meditative mood. Therefore, my dear skeptic, let me advise you to take, when you’re hunting, not only your basket and a bottle of wine but also your writing implements. You’ll find that Minerva frequents the hills and forests as much as Diana.

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1 All the following translations are my own.
Pliny spends his mornings hunting, a typical occupation of the upper classes, but also finds time to write letters to a young man just entering his first year at the University, where he speaks of the “contemplative life,” suggests certain authors to read, and emphasizes the importance of translation. He prefers staying at home in his study, rather than attending the games. He writes to his friend, Calvisius,

You will ask: How can that be here in the center of Rome with all the noise? The answer, dear friend, is simple: The Cirsen-sian Games were being held and I have no interest whatever in that kind of sport. There is nothing new, no variety; it is not something you would want to see more than once. I cannot image why thousands of grown men are possessed again and again by this infantile passion to watch galloping horses and men standing upright in their chariots.

He thinks of the death of his friend Larcius and wants to relate the incident in a letter to Acilius. He began this afternoon, writing,

The recent shocking brutality that the slaves of Larcius Macedo, a man of Praetorian rank, exhibited upon their master is profoundly tragic and deserves to be the subject of a far more substantial analysis than a private letter can provide.

He deplores the fact that Macedo, though an arrogant master, suffered a brutal attack by his slaves that caused his death. He thinks the revolution is just around the corner, and the rabble must be squashed if they pose a threat to his privileged class. Pliny knows that men like himself have much to fear in these uncertain times.

Except for the love of his young wife, Calpurina, to whom he writes an adoring letter, the nights would be unbearable, the days endless, the constant negotiations and responsibilities of
his position as Magistrate, crushing. Before he retires for the night, he writes this letter to her aunt,

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. Know then that we both thank you for giving us to each other and that you chose one for the other.

And then he lies down in bed and tries to sleep.

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), since nothing in his letters refers to later than that date.

2. The Wild Boys Arrive

But outside, the wild boys begin to have their say. They are responding to the worldview of Pliny the Younger.

3. Catullus and His Friends: Let the Games Begin!

Catullus, in his room, wipes the tears from his eyes, and thinks, “Lesbia is at it again!” He will have his revenge on this whole stinking Roman world. He was born into a wealthy family of Verona, around 82 BCE but was a punk rocker of the Latin world. Yet all the other poets knew he had a heart of gold and was, above all, a great poet. He writes, thinking of Clodia, the famous “Lesbia,”

My woman says she doesn’t want to marry anyone but me, not even if Jupiter seeks her out. But I don’t trust her.
It’s an old story: the things a woman says to an eager lover should be written on the wind or on running water
Then he crumples up the page and tosses it into the gutter. He thinks of Juventius, his one-time boyfriend, who was born into a rich family. Once when he was upset, he told Aurelius, “When you’re randy, I know you’ll fuck anything! / But I ask you, please keep away from my boy-friend, Juventius.” But it was no use. Juventius consistently frustrated his love. As a matter of fact, he mailed this letter just the other day:

Couldn’t you have found, Juventius, among all those pretty men in all the gay bars, any man other than this one from the sickly region of Pisaurum, who’s yellower than that gilded statue of Caesar, and whom you, to top it off, actually like and dare to prefer over me, completely unaware of the offense you’re committing!

He goes to the Roman baths where he meets Veranius. He can be gentle with Veranius, whom he affectionately calls “Veran.” He remembers taking him into his home after his long travels, and listening to his stories, desiring to “kiss your mouth, your sweet eyes.” He is happy in the company of his friend.

Later at night walking on the streets of Rome, he thinks about the corruption of politicians,

What is it Catullus? Why do you think death is the only answer? Like a pus-filled wart, Nonius sits his fat ass in the magistrate’s chair. He swears by that lying snake, Vatinius, that he has a right to the consulship. What is it Catullus? Why do you think death is the only answer?

He is suddenly depressed. But then he thinks of Ipsitilla, the prostitute that “Veran” procured for him. He smiles and says to
himself “nine quick fucks in a row. She really was a live wire!” And then he thinks of that pig Aurelius and of how he tried to sleep with his boy. He was glad he told him, “Why don’t you just jerk off while you have the chance and not risk trying anything because I promise you’ll end up with a cock in your mouth.” That shut him up.

4. The Search for Pleasure without Love

Meanwhile Ovid, in another part of town, is giving advice to a young man who suffered from an ugly divorce and is heartbroken. He tells the young man of his new work, *The Cures for Love*, and gives him a free copy. It is inscribed with the words, “seek sexual pleasure without love and that will rid you of thoughts of your ex.” Later critics would say of Ovid’s two volumes, *The Art of Love* and *The Cures for Love*, that they were immensely popular in their time and have exerted a wide influence on European civilization. Chaucer was not the only poet who read Ovid’s love poems, so did almost every educated person with any interest in the subject. His wit and humor was often lost among medieval scholars who recast his themes in terms of “courtly love”, an idea that would have seemed ridiculous to Ovid.

His women are often “found on the street,” and in one poem he speaks of a “prostitute in Rome,” in other words, not a lady in an ivory tower. He repeatedly speaks of love (or, rather, sex) as a strategic game where the stakes are very high and the loser often suffers greatly. His “cures” are exactly that, poems that attempt to remedy the pain of love.

Who knows what Ovid would have thought of this. Could he have imagined that Lempriere’s Classical Dictionary, in the eighteenth century, would print this amusing description of *The Cures for Love* and its companion volume:
… the doctrine which they hold forth is dangerous, and, as the composition of an experienced libertine and refined sensualist, they are to be read with caution, as they seem to be calculated to corrupt the heart, and sap the foundations of virtue and morality.

It is true he did tell lovers to avoid their partners, not to engage in magic, to spy on their lover in the bathroom, to have multiple partners and to never be jealous.

Now, in exile, he thinks of Circe’s speech to Ulysses, when she tried to lure him into staying with her on the island:

Though I thought at first I’d make a good candidate for your wife, being a goddess and a daughter of the Sun, I no longer think so.

But please stay with me awhile. Do me this tiny favor and you will satisfy my prayers. Look, Poseidon must be very angry:

the waves are rising and this furious wind indicates there’s a storm coming.

Please stay until the sea is calm and the storm has passed.

If you sail now, I fear that your life will be in danger.

And there is no reason to go. No new Troy arises, calling its men to arms and challenging your authority.

But here your strength will not be wasted.

I know that you can govern the land with justice, peace, and love

and ensure safety for all my people.

I alone suffer from having loved you too much.

Though critical of her at one time, in his Cures for Love, now, an older man, he finds himself moved by her words, and so far from home, destined to die alone in exile, he begins to weep.
5. Hail Priapus!

Elsewhere, now that it is evening, various poets are arriving at the home of Maecenas, Horace’s wealthy patron, for a night of drink and merriment. They prefer to remain anonymous. When they all arrive, they greet each other with a secret handshake and take their seats. Maecenas himself stands up at this point and closes the front door for the night and the historical record vanishes into oblivion. Nothing else is known of the poets who gathered there. When future histories were written, it was claimed that Virgil attended these secret meetings or that Ovid was the sole author of the writings that were produced there. But it is unlikely that either is the case. Later historians would write,

What remains, and was compiled under the name the Priapeia are a collection of bawdy epigrams in Latin found on statues of the god, Priapus. They were often carved into a tree-trunk fashioned in the shape of the god, with a huge phallus extending from the middle. The statues were placed in the garden of wealthy Romans to promote fertility, the phallus itself also acting as a weapon against thieves.

Historians think that the following was written by Catullus, or someone perhaps using that name as an alias. In any case it sounds like something he could have said near the end of a long life of sexual debauchery, and drink:

You Roman bitches suck my cock the whole night long, slurping and spitting and expanding and contracting your cheeks and playing with your cunt til you’re so hot you lop off my prick with your teeth! You’re more lecherous than the sparrows that fuck to the death! Or you rupture my ass with your strap-ons! I’m a tired, jaded, skinny and pale aesthete
who was once healthy
and could ram my dick in the ass of any boy I wanted!
Now I feel weak, nauseous
all my strength is kaput!
And I spit up
this ugly thick green mush
every morning as I wake up.

Historians also note that the first translation in 1890 by Leonard C. Smithers and Sir Richard Burton, was produced for private circulation and limited to an edition of five hundred copies.

6. The Cynic

Lucian, the old cynic, in his own way, belongs in the company of these men. His *The Dialogues of the Dead*, ridicules pomp and glory and the vanity of life, favoring instead a simple contemplative life based on acceptance of reality. For him, self-reliance and plain speech provide a more solid foundation on which to build a life that is truly free and governed by wise decisions. At this moment, Lucian is writing an essay for a local paper. He begins,

The Cynics, Diogenes and Mennipus, were the chief mouthpieces for my satire and critique of the time. The word “Cynic” is derived from the Greek word meaning “dog-like.” In the words of Diogenes, “other dogs bite their enemies, I bite my friends to save them.” Cynicism was an ancient school of Greek society based on the idea that man, guided by reason, could achieve happiness by living in a way that was natural for humans and rejecting all conventional desires for power, wealth, sex, and fame, to pursue instead a simple life free from all possessions. Diogenes of Sinope (c. 412–323 BCE) took the principles of Cynicism to the extreme by falsifying coinage, sleeping in a tub, and eating raw meat, all in defiance of conventional values.
In his old age, he muses on the irrationality of desire. He thinks of dialogue seven which concerns this. In it, Tantalus tells Menipus, “But you see my punishment is subtle: I am given the desire to drink continually even though I am not thirsty!” Menipus tells him this is nonsense. He continues,

MENIPUS And yet, come to think of it, you do need a drink. Some hellebore would do you a world of good! You’re suffering from a converse hydrophobia: you don’t fear water but you’re afraid of being thirsty.

TANTALUS Look I’d drink anything if I could. Give me hellebore or hemlock and quench my thirst along with my life!

MENIPUS There you go again. Anyway, don’t be afraid, Tantalus. Neither you nor any ghost will ever drink anything. I promise you it’s impossible. But thank Pluto we all don’t have to suffer from a continual thirst like you do, with the water running away from us as we try to take a sip.

Lucian thinks,

In this dialogue the essence of my critique is that desire is not rational and often we are drawn to those very things that go against our natural tendencies. I spoke of wisdom, self-reliance, plain speech and freedom, as against the arguments of philosophers.

He is the elder statesman of the underground, a Burroughsian figure, a skeptic not easily persuaded to veer from his hard-won beliefs. He is critical of the spiritual life and does not believe in the value of myth.

Possessed of a furious thought, Lucian begins to write, and slowly his lips part in a devious smile.
Works Cited