

**Roman Letter-Writers (Part Two):  
Seneca and Younger Pliny**

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In the last issue of Labyrinth, I said that there were several collections of published letters which have come down to us from the Roman world, and chose a few excerpts from Cicero's letters and Horace's Epistles to give you some idea of their very varied content and purpose. About a century or more after these two writers from the late Republic and the earliest years of the Empire came the works of Seneca and the Younger Pliny.

During the Emperor Nero's reign (54-68 A.D.) his longtime tutor in philosophy and policy adviser, Seneca, fell further and further from the imperial favour, partly because Seneca was a stoic whose advice must have seemed increasingly unattractive to the self-indulgent emperor. Three years before Seneca's name was associated with a conspiracy to assassinate Nero, the philosopher had sought permission to retire from public life. During these three years he spent his time writing and further developing his philosophical ideas, staying well clear of Rome and even, according to the third century historian Dio, donating all his accumulated wealth to the emperor. Nero's reaction, predictably, to the news of the conspiracy was to order the deaths of all the plotters, and though Seneca's involvement was far from certain, he too was condemned but permitted to take the Stoic's way out by committing suicide. Seneca's Epistulae Morales comprise over a hundred attractive letters, of varying length, addressed to a friend named Lucilius, a man from Pompeii who was at the time in the imperial service in Sicily as a procurator. Of Lucilius we know virtually nothing more than these details, but since Seneca's letters are quite unlike Cicero's in being, as Francis Bacon observed, "yf one marke them well, ... but Essaies, that is, dispersed Meditations, though conveyed in the forme of Epistles," we really do not feel the loss of any real personality to respond to Seneca's correspondence. A majority of these "letters" take the form of some anecdotal material which a friend might reasonably be supposed to enjoy reporting to

a friend, but which actually serves to introduce the philosophical content of the essay, generally much the longer part. Many letters then conclude with what Seneca himself almost calls "the quote/great thought for the day". Often these quotations show Seneca the Stoic in an attractive light to modern taste, because he seems as ready to quote from Epicureans or Cynics as he does from his fellow Stoics, in a pleasantly tolerant and eclectic way.

To give some idea of Seneca's anecdotes at their best, here are a couple of his shorter essay openers:

Tired out by a journey which has been really uncomfortable rather than long, I've reached my house at Alba late at night, to find nothing prepared - except myself! So I'm putting my weariness to bed, and at the same time I'm putting my cook's and my baker's slowness to good use, by having a little conversation with myself on this very subject: how nothing's a nuisance if you take it lightly, how nothing need irritate you as long as you don't blow it out of proportion by getting annoyed ... (123)

It's December - and the entire city is in a lather! Public permission has been granted for lavish festivities, tremendous preparations are going on everywhere. It's just as if there were some sort of difference between the Saturnalia and regular working days. Actually, there's such a minimal difference that in my opinion the fellow was right when he said December used to last a month and now it lasts all year! (18)

Here's a longer, and quite well-known, anecdote which Seneca uses to introduce an essay on the right time to die:

Today we watched as the boats from Alexandria suddenly hove in sight, the ones they usually send ahead to announce the arrival of the fleet following them up, called "mail packets". They are a pleasant sight for the Campanians: a whole crowd turns out on the docks at Pozzuoli, picking out the Alexandrian ships even in a great press of boats by the kind of sails on them, because they are the only ones allowed to keep flying their topsails. Out at sea, all the boats spread topsails, because nothing contributes to speed so effectively as the upper canvas, which really carries the boat forward the best. That's why whenever the wind freshens and then stiffens a bit too much, they lower the yardarm: the gale has less force lower down. When ships have entered the channel between Capri and the promontory from whose "windy peak lofty Pallas watches", the rest of them are required to lower sail, and

so the topsail still aloft is the way you can spot the Alexandrians at once. (77)

Now let's take a look at Younger Pliny, who was writing his ten books of letters four or five decades later than Seneca. Pliny's letters are certainly closer in tone and content to being "real" letters than Seneca's essays in epistolary form, but often seem to lack the spontaneity which most of Cicero's letters so attractively possess. This is likely to be because Pliny had more than half an eye on publication, we suspect, and perhaps also because his personality and temperament, not to mention the times in which he lived, were rather tamer than Cicero's faultier but somewhat more interesting character and his much more turbulent contemporaries.

All the same, Pliny's letters have their interest too, and there are at least three or four which many readers have met when they haven't seen any of Cicero's. Two of these contain the earliest factual eye-witness account of the eruption of a volcano - Pliny was seventeen when Vesuvius blew up in 79 A.D. - Book 6, 16 and 20. Two others, one from Pliny and the other a reply to it from the Emperor Trajan, contain an oddly disconcerting brief discussion of an obscure fringe-sect of fanatics out in the eastern provinces - Christians! (Book 10, 96 and 97). These four are so often translated or reprinted that in spite of their obvious interest, I'll avoid them here. Instead, I've chosen several which illustrate the low key "ordinariness" of many of Pliny's letters, since he seems to have had a not very unconventional or original outlook on life. This can be quite attractive for a while, even if too many of his letters at a time begin to irritate the reader.

Family feelings, particularly tragic ones, occur all too often (as of course they did in actuality) in these letters:

The death of Helvidius' daughters is a dreadful tragedy! Both sisters died in childbed, after each had given birth to a girl. I am deeply distressed, but I believe quite justifiably so: it seems to me a grievous loss that their own fruitfulness has cut off two young girls of such good family in the first flower of their youth.

I feel most painfully for the babies' misfortune, who have been born and orphaned in a moment, and for the bereavement of their excellent husbands. I even grieve on my own behalf, because I remember the girls' father (now also deceased), with such warm affection, to which my speech in his defence and my writings are all witnesses. Now only one of his three children still survives as the sole unhappy prop and support to a house that so recently was founded on many more. (4.21)

Pliny can be quite superstitious about death. Here's part of his report of an author whom he admired, who was writing an account of the victims of Nero which he left unfinished at his death:

Gaius Fannius, as it happens, had a presentiment of his death well beforehand. He dreamed he was reclining, still dressed for study, late at night on his couch when all was quiet, his book-case at hand as it usually was. Suddenly he thought he saw Nero enter, sit down on the couch and take up the first of the books which Fannius had written about the emperor's crimes. Nero read it through to the end, as he did the second and third books, but then he went away. Fannius was terrified, and his interpretation was that his own writing would come to a conclusion at precisely the same point as Nero's reading had; - and so it did! (5.5)

Here's a letter to his wife which reflects Pliny's anxiety about her ill health:

I've never complained more about pressures of business than when I was too busy either to take you to Campania myself when you set out there for your health's sake, or to follow you there right away. Now I'd particularly like to be with you, so that I could see for myself what improvements in your strength and in your dear little self there are, and how you are putting to good use both the pleasantness and the plenty of the holiday area. Even if you are quite strong again, I would feel anxious and miss you, because there's something so worrying and suspenseful when you know absolutely nothing about someone you love a great deal. As it is, your absence and your poor health together make me worry and think uneasily about all sorts of possibilities. I'm afraid, I imagine things, and as frightened people do, I picture to myself precisely the things which I pray most earnestly don't happen to you. So I ask you all the more seriously to console my anxiety with a daily letter, or even two a day, because I'll worry less while I'm actually reading them, even if all my fears return the moment after I've read them! (6.4)

Many of Pliny's letters deal with quite different topics, of course: his legal work, the latest literary sensations, his house or his farm-estates out of town, his friends' lives. The tenth book is particularly famous, because it contains letters both from Pliny and from Trajan in reply, and because it presents such remarkable insights into the daily administrative details of a Roman province in the early second century A.D. Of course, we owe the preservation of this interesting group of letters to Pliny's literary reputation; there are, in fact, quite a lot of letters, not all genuine by any means, attributed to many

famous Greeks and Romans: Plato, Aristotle, Augustus, Hadrian, and so on. Equally interesting, however, or even more so, are the private letters from unknown and ordinary people all over the Greco-Roman world which have here and there survived, on papyrus or parchment or even wood-shavings. In the next issue I'll write about some of them.