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PLINY THE PESSIMIST

'He is always enthusiastic, almost invariably cheerful, and amiable, and quite correct. One can well imagine how a sunny-tempered man of elegant tastes and universal humanity must have won easily the regard of a great number of friends'; so E. T. Merrill wrote of Pliny over a century ago.[1] Such sentiments on the ebullient style and sunny personality of Pliny have perdured for decades, even up to the present.[2] And why not? A reputation for optimism and even naiveté should not be so easily overcome for one who admits to a weakness for praising his friends too excessively (*Ep.* 7.28) and writes an entire letter for the sole purpose of demonstrating his unwillingness to say anything negative about someone (8.22.4). The *Panegyricus*, with its periods of fulsome praise and hopefulness, presents no reason to alter Pliny's image as a cheerful optimist.

While not fully abandoning the spirit of Merrill's observations, scholarship over the last decade and a half has begun to acquire not only a new appreciation for Pliny's artistic abilities but also a new respect for Pliny's – how shall we put it – Tacitean side.[3] Thus Hoffer's study on Pliny's anxieties reveals some of the latent fears and concerns that lurked in the senator's psyche. More important for this article is Griffin's study re-evaluating the personalities and political attitudes of Pliny and Tacitus, in which she argues that neither is Pliny as optimistic and politically naive as he may superficially appear and nor is Tacitus as dour and cynical as he may initially seem.[4] I would like to continue the line of inquiry begun by Griffin, focusing particularly on Pliny's attitudes towards literature, oratory, and politics. Although

* A version of this paper was presented at the Classical Association of the Middle West and South conference in 2010 at Oklahoma City where I received helpful comments from the audience. I would like to thank the anonymous referee for suggesting a number of important revisions. I would also like to thank Evan Ward who served as my research assistant during the research and writing of this article.

[1] E. T. Merrill, *Selected Letters of the Younger Pliny* (New York, 1903), xxxiv–xxxv.

[2] See É. Wolff, *Pline le Jeune ou le refus du pessimisme* (Rennes, 2003); S. Hoffer, *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger* (Atlanta, GA, 1999), 24 and 158, where he refers to Pliny's 'eternally cheerful and optimistic persona'.

[3] See R. Morello and R. K. Gibson (eds.), *Re-imagining Pliny the Younger*, *Arethusa* 36.2 (2003); I. Marchesi, *The Art of Pliny's Letters: A Poetics of Allusion in the Private Correspondence* (Cambridge, 2008).

[4] M. Griffin, 'Pliny and Tacitus', *SCI* 18 (1999), 139–58.

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Hoffer contributes much by his exploration of Pliny's unexpressed anxieties, I would like, instead, to examine Pliny's overt statements that reveal not his latent anxieties but an explicit pessimism, however politely expressed.

Rather than 'opposition' or 'nostalgia', I choose the word 'pessimism' to capture Pliny's sentiment at times because it expresses a feeling of ambivalence, and Pliny's critiques never rise to the level of opposition and are never as superficial as mere nostalgia for the past, though he does, like many a Roman moralist, critique his own times in comparison with the past. Moreover, opposition toward the enlightened *principes* under whom Pliny wrote would have been misplaced. Instead, Pliny shows an awareness that Roman society, regardless of the *princeps*, tolerated only the slightest reform. Pliny's pessimism is not unlike Virgil's, who respected Augustus and yet had reckoned exactly the cost of his regime.

Two letters succinctly convey the nature of Pliny's pessimism. In letter 2.20, in which Pliny records M. Aquilius Regulus' shady dealings in a number of wills, he does not vilify solely Regulus, whom Pliny regarded as a scoundrel, but also the state (*civitas*) that rewards dishonesty (*nequitia*) and wickedness (*improbitas*) more greatly than it does honour (*pudor*) and virtue *(virtus*); Regulus is merely an example of an endemic problem (2.20.12).[5] In letter 4.15, written in praise of Asinius Rufus and his son Asinius Bassus, Pliny highly recommends the latter to Minicius Fundanus, not only because of the young man's virtues (4.15.7) but also on account of the age's paucity of good merits, which might otherwise produce more candidates worthy of recommendation (4.15.8 *vellem tam ferax saeculum bonis artibus haberemus, ut aliquos Basso praeferre deberes*). These letters reveal concerns that are neither the creation nor the responsibility of a *princeps* or an individual senator; there is something beyond individuals alone that Pliny is critiquing and that binds Regulus, Trajan, and Pliny alike. What that something is seems to vary by context: sometimes Pliny's pessimism stems from such vague notions as 'the times' or 'society' (as in letter 4.15, *saeculum*); at other instances from morals, education, and even the state itself (as in letter 2.20, *civitas*).

[5] A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (Oxford, 1966), 205, rightly dates the letter to the reign of Trajan; if the letter is given a Domitianic date, then it must be recognized as an important act of dissidence, for Regulus would still have been in favour. See also Tac. *Hist*. 4.42.5 for Regulus as an example of *nequitia*, which is Tacitus' only usage of the word.

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This article will explore those moments, scattered as they may be, when Pliny exhibits his pessimism. Though he was certainly cautious in his wording and presentation, he also quite plainly, and perhaps surprisingly, expresses his concern over three essential matters: literature, oratory, and politics.[6] I will discuss six letters, two from each of these three categories, that expose Pliny's critical pessimism.

Pliny and the state of literature

In his *Panegyricus* and in several letters, Pliny writes with great enthusiasm that the reigns of Nerva and Trajan have brought about a renaissance in letters (*Ep*. 3.18.5–7, 8.12; *Pan*. 47.1–3). Thus in letter 1.13, which Sherwin-White dates to April 97, Pliny joyously declares that this year has brought forth a great yield of poets.[7] Yet none of the poets are recalled by name, and once his opening claim has been made, Pliny readily admits that the contemporary literary scene is in a state of enervation (1.13.1–2):

magnum proventum poetarum annus hic attulit: toto mense Aprili nullus fere dies, quo non recitaret aliquis. iuvat me quod vigent studia, proferunt se ingenia hominum et ostentant, tametsi ad audiendum pigre coitur. plerique in stationibus sedent tempusque audiendi fabulis conterunt, ac subinde sibi nuntiari iubent, an iam recitator intraverit, an dixerit praefationem, an ex magna parte evolverit librum; tum demum ac tunc quoque lente cunctanterque veniunt, nec tamen permanent, sed ante finem recedunt, alii dissimulanter et furtim, alii simpliciter et libere.[8]

This year has brought forth a great yield of poets: in the whole month of April there was scarcely any day on which someone was not holding a public reading. I am delighted that literature thrives and the talents of men are brought forth and displayed, despite the fact that an audience gathers only reluctantly. Many sit in the public lounging places, and they waste their time listening to gossip. They give orders that it be announced to them immediately whether the reader has entered, or has read the preface, or read through a great part of the work. Then at last even at that moment they come slowly

[6] This list is not meant to be exhaustive. For example, Pliny admires both philosophy and philosophers, yet he still critiques Stoic prohibitions against grief (8.16) and those philosophers who pursue glory and renown (5.1). For these matters, see M. Griffin, 'The Younger Pliny's Debt to Moral Philosophy', *HSPh* 103 (2007), 465–8.

[7] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 115, bases the date on 1.13.1, *toto mense Aprili nullus fere dies, quo non recitaret aliquis*, and further suggests that in April 98 Pliny would have been too occupied with his duties as prefect of Saturn for such matters as poetry.

[8] Citations of Pliny's text are from R. A. B. Mynors, *C. Plini Caecili Secundi Epistularum Libri Decem* (Oxford, 1963).

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and hesitantly, nor do they remain long, but they leave before the end, some secretly and by stealth, others plainly and freely.[9]

Pliny is suggesting that, although writers now have the freedom to write what they please, Roman literary society has been so diminished that no mature audience exists. It appears that he is attempting to praise the new age that the regimes of Nerva and Trajan have ushered in, but his frustration at literary society reveals the difficulty of a meaningful and lasting revitalization of society after Domitian's reign, a theme that persists throughout Pliny's letters.

Matters were not always thus, as Pliny reminds his readers later in the letter: the Emperor Claudius, while strolling the Palatine, happened upon a reading by the historian M. Servilius Nonianus and joined the auditors (1.13.3).[10] Pliny is struck by the spontaneity of Claudius, who presumably would have had affairs of state as a ready excuse for not attending a public reading. Yet Pliny knows the reign of Claudius was no golden age, and he criticizes the status of freedmen under Claudius, such as Pallas, in more than one letter (7.29, 8.6). So why the odd reference to Claudius and what is Pliny trying to communicate? Surely the reference to Claudius calls to mind Nerva and Trajan, for who else could be a comparandus for the *princeps* but another *princeps*.[11] Pliny is not likely to be expecting Nerva and Trajan to attend poetry recitals, for one suspects, as does Hoffer, that Claudius' unannounced arrival at the reading might have come off rather clumsily.[12] Moreover, Nerva was elderly and Trajan would have an empire to win in such far-flung places as Dacia and Parthia. There is a temptation to read Pliny's enthusiasm for the new poets, as Sherwin-White does, as simply praise of the new regime and its new freedoms.[13] However, we must remember that Pliny's letter dates to the very early days of that regime, and Pliny has no guarantee that the new era will be more enlightened than the last. He held out hope, however, and thus it is best to read his reference to Claudius as a protreptic for Nerva and Trajan to take up the patronage of the

[9] All translations are my own.

[10] For M. Servilius Nonianus, see Tac. *Ann.* 14.19.

[11] Though the letter dates to April 97, and therefore before Nerva's adoption of Trajan later in the year, I include Trajan because the letter was probably not published until Trajan was *princeps*. For the dates of composition and publication, see Sherwin-White (n. 5), 27–8.

[12] Hoffer (n. 2), 166.

[13] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 115.

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arts and to be models, as Pliny is, to their fellow citizens.[14] Yet high expectations often breed disappointment. So, while there is indeed optimism in this letter, there is also doubt and a sense of fragility to the new state of affairs.

Setting any references to the *principes* aside, the letter could still be read as simply more praise for the new regime.[15] Under this regime, potential auditors can listen or not as they please. Under previous *principes*, listeners had had, at times, to endure great suffering as they were forced to be spectators and auditors.[16] Following the excesses of previous emperors, the freedom to leave or not to attend a reading must have been a liberating experience for literary men such as Pliny and Tacitus. Yet now that the *princeps* has allowed for this freedom, in what kind of milieu does Pliny find himself? He clearly suggests that it is one lacking an enthusiasm for literature by those whom he styles *otiosissimus quisque* ('the men with the utmost leisure'), whose leisure has left them in a state of torpor (1.13.4). At the close of the letter (1.13.5–6), he records, as he often does, how he tries to model a certain behaviour: in this case how and why one should attend a recitation, but, despite Pliny's example, his contemporaries have yet to embrace his sense of duty.

Pliny comments further on the state of literature in letter 3.21 on Martial's death, wherein he writes that among the many honourable practices of the past that have fallen into desuetude is the tradition of providing gifts of money or public office to poets who sing the praises of cities and men (3.21.3). If Pliny were simply pining for ages past, then his thoughts here would hardly be worth mentioning, and perhaps they could be reduced to typical Roman nostalgia. However, he is noting a decline in literary patronage in his own time, and the critique is heightened by mentioning this in a letter about a poet who thrived principally under the old regime. Moreover, Pliny adds that 'now nothing is done that might deserve a poet's praise' (3.21.3, *nam postquam desimus facere laudanda, laudari quoque ineptum putamus*). Not only is this epistle a lament for the poet Martial but also for the lack

[14] For Trajan's literary patronage, see Philostr. *V S* 1.7.488, 1.24.532; K. H. Waters, 'The Reign of Trajan, and its Place in Contemporary Scholarship (1960–72)', *ANRW* 2.2 (1975), 429; E. Cizek, 'La literature et les cercles culturels et politiques à l'époque de Trajan', *ANRW* 2.33.1 (1989), 4.

[15] Hoffer (n. 2), 162–3.

[16] For the indignities suffered by many at the imperial theatre, see Suet. *Ner.* 23.2; Suet. *Vesp.* 4.4; Tac. *Ann.* 16.5.3; Cass. Dio 63.15.2–3; S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 1–10.

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of praiseworthy deeds among Rome's elite. Pliny is very explicit that he is referring to his own day (*nostris vero temporibus*) and, based on our information about Martial, we can be even more precise in dating the letter to sometime between 102 and 104, namely during Trajan's Dacian campaigns, a time when praiseworthy deeds should have been ready at hand.[17]

Pliny seems to be echoing his words from letter 2.20.12, where he noted the lack of reward for *pudor* and *virtus*. The criticism is familiar to his age; we are reminded of Tacitus' laments from the *Agricola* (*Ag.* 1.4), where he asserts that the times are savage and hostile to virtues.[18] Letter 1.13 was written less than a year after Domitian's assassination, and therefore it might be understandable that literature was still in a state of recovery, but by the date of letter 3.21 a more vibrant literary scene could be expected. Try as Nerva, Trajan, and even Pliny might, there is a determined resistance to a full recovery of society after the reign of Domitian.

Two further points on letter 3.21 require mention. First, just as in letter 1.13, Pliny is presenting himself as an exemplum for others; he provided patronage to Martial in the form of funds to travel back to Spain, which he did in recompense for the poet's verses praising Pliny's virtues (3.21.2). Pliny is thus a model for not only virtuous and industrious behaviour as described in Martial's poem but also for his literary patronage (3.21.3). Pliny commonly represents himself as an exemplum for certain behaviour, as in 1.13.5–6 and 3.21.2, 6; this could merely be a function of his self-representation, but in both letters he indicates that there is a persistent need for such exemplarity, a kind of remedy for Rome's ailments.[19]

In addition, the structure of Pliny's letter is important to note, in particular the way in which the author inserts his critical pessimism. In this letter, he uses what I call 'embedded pessimism', the first of three structural techniques that I will outline in this article. His pessimism – 'nothing is done worthy of a poet's praise' – is embedded almost in passing within a letter containing a very striking opening

[17] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 262–3. The First Dacian War dated to 101–2 and Trajan's subsequent triumph to 103. For Pliny's meagre offerings on the Dacian campaigns (*Ep.* 8.4; *Pan.* 17), see R. Syme, 'Pliny and the Dacian Wars', *Latomus* 23 (1964), 750–9; Griffin (n. 4), 152–3.

[18] *Agr.* 1.4: *at nunc narraturo mihi vitam defuncti hominis venia opus fuit, quam non petissem incusaturus: tam saeva et infesta virtutibus tempora* ('Yet now I have needed to beg for pardon as I am about to narrate the life of a dead man, pardon which I would not have sought if I were about to accuse him: so savage and hostile to virtue are the times').

[19] Pliny does not restrict exemplarity only to the *princeps* and himself, for he also describes Titinius Capito as an exemplum who did much to revive the state of letters (8.12.1).

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(3.21.1) – 'Martial is dead!' – followed by a transcription of Martial's poem on Pliny (3.21.4–5), and a closing statement on Martial's life and legacy (3.21.6).[20] What grabs the reader's attention is everything surrounding the statement at 3.21.3. Those who do not read closely or who are distracted by the more colourful parts of the letter risk missing the critical comment. Such a structure allows Pliny to express his pessimism without it consuming the entire letter, which in this case has significant news to convey.

Pliny and the state of oratory

Of course, for Pliny the most important literary pursuit was oratory. His enthusiasm for the state of oratory can best be seen in letter 3.18.5–7, where he exuberantly claims that oratory, after nearly dying out, has made a comeback, owing largely to the liberal Emperor Trajan and his own *Panegyricus*, a work which, in the judgement of Syme, had 'done no good to the reputation of the author or the taste of the age'[21] (Syme's temperament is clearly more suited to the severe Tacitus and his *Dialogus*, which 'had pronounced the epitaph upon Roman oratory'[22]). Yet, Pliny, too, is capable of offering a critique and sounding his own death knell for oratory.[23]

Among Pliny's most pessimistic letters is 2.14, wherein he bemoans the state of oratory at Rome and pronounces his gradual withdrawal and retirement from oratory. He critiques three facets of oratory: its importance (2.14.1), the training of orators (2.14.2–4), and the audience (2.14.4–11). He writes that most of the cases he is arguing are small affairs lacking significant magnitude, with personalities

[20] Both H. W. Traub, 'Pliny's Treatment of History in Epistolary Form', *TAPhA* 86 (1955), 2219–20, and J. Shelton, 'Pliny's Letter 3.11: Rhetoric and Autobiography', *C&M* 38 (1987), 128 n. 22, write of ring composition or 'literary framing' in Pliny's historical letters, such as 3.16, 4.11, and 4.17. What I am suggesting here, embedded pessimism, is similar in structure yet different in emphasis: that which is 'framed' or embedded within the ring composition contains the pessimism.

[21] R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 114. For other letters showing Pliny's enthusiasm for oratory, see 4.16, 4.24, 6.23, 9.23.

[22] Syme (n. 21), 333.

[23] The notion that Roman oratory was in decline was a commonplace, examples of which can be found at Sen. *Controv.* 1 pr. 6–11; Sen. *Ep.* 114; Petron. *Sat.* 1–6. There is also the lost essay of Quintilian entitled *De causis corruptae eloquentiae*. For these works see C. Brink, 'Quintilian's *De causis corruptae eloquentiae* and Tacitus' *Dialogus de oratoribus*', *CQ* 39 (1989), 472–503, and G. Williams, *Change and Decline: Roman Literature in the Early Empire* (Berkeley, CA, 1978), 1–51.

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wanting in renown (2.14.1 *sunt enim pleraeque parvae et exiles; raro incidit vel personarum claritate vel negotii magnitudine insignis.*). This theme of insufficient substantive work has been mentioned above in regard to poets who lack deeds worthy of commemoration and will reappear in Pliny's critique of political life at Rome (3.7, 20).[24] The decreased significance of oratory is a theme more associated with Tacitus' *Dialogus* (38, 40–1), a work generally seen as inconsistent with Pliny's view of oratory,[25] but the tone here certainly strikes a contrast with Pliny's usual optimistic outlook on oratory.

Pliny also critiques the training of orators (2.14.2–4), another resonance with Tacitus' *Dialogus*, particularly the speech of Messalla (28–35). In many ways, this is simply nostalgia; the youth were always better schooled and more well behaved in the past. Yet the critique continues with Pliny's next point, about the audience, which is bought (2.14.4–8), and consequently the worst speaker receives the most cheers (2.14.8 *scito eum pessime dicere, qui laudabitur maxime*.). The letter implies that Romans have forgotten how to act as an audience, which is true of audiences for poets and orators alike.

Pliny records the story, told to him by his teacher Quintilian, of Domitius Afer, whose speech was continually interrupted by a raucous audience (2.14.9–11).[26] This disruption led Afer to proclaim that oratory was dead (2.14.11, *hoc artificium perit*). Pliny corrects the statement and writes that oratory was only then dying; now its extinction is nearly complete (2.14.12, *quod alioqui perire incipiebat cum perisse Afro videretur, nunc vero prope funditus exstinctum et eversum est*). Letter 2.14 functions as Pliny's '*dialogus*', and, just as Tacitus' primary interlocutor, Maternus, has sworn off public speaking, so Pliny closes the letter by suggesting that he will be limiting his appearances in court as the beginning of his gradual withdrawal.

[24] In addition to 3.7 and 3.20, Pliny also expresses disappointment in letter 9.2.2–3, when he compares the wealth of material that Cicero possessed with the narrow confines that enclose him (*illi enim et copiosissimum ingenium, et par ingenio qua varietas rerum qua magnitudo largissime suppetebat; nos quam angustis terminis claudamur etiam tacente me perspicis* ['For to that one [Cicero] there was the most abundant natural talent, and a diversity and a greatness of matters, equal to his natural talents, were most generously available. You notice, even with me being silent about it, how confined we are within narrow limits.']).

[25] Marchesi (n. 3), 118–35.

[26] A clear distinction between Pliny and Tacitus is their portrayal of Domitius Afer, whom Tacitus generally depicts negatively (*Ann.* 14.19); Pliny traced his own rhetorical pedigree back to Afer through Quintilian and is thus gentler on the *delator* (8.18). For another example of divergent views, see their treatment of Curtius Rufus (Tac. *Ann.* 11.21; Pliny *Ep.* 7.27.2–3) and the analysis of Wolff (n. 2), 56–7.

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Clearly, Pliny did not retire. He writes about his speeches, such as the *Panegyricus* (3.13, 18) and the now lost *De Helvidi Ultione* (9.13), with great excitement. Those letters, however, cannot be taken as the complete picture of his point of view on oratory. He held a more complex and ambivalent opinion, as letter 2.14 demonstrates. Further evidence of this ambivalence can be found in letter 6.2, wherein, dispirited by the present state of oratory, he longs for the good old days when his arch-nemesis, M. Aquilius Regulus, was still prowling the law courts. Pliny's hatred for M. Regulus (1.5) is well documented; he was a man to whom Pliny could not even concede the consolation of mourning the death of his own son without biting criticism (4.2, 7). Thus, Pliny's pining for Regulus is all the more astonishing, especially since he is clearly referring to the Domitianic Regulus when he writes that Regulus would be harmless now under a *princeps* such as Trajan (6.2.4, *nunc enim sane poterat sine malo publico vivere, sub eo principe sub quo nocere non poterat* ['For now clearly he could have lived without being a public threat, under this *princeps* under whom he could not have done harm']).

In letter 6.2, Pliny primarily expresses regret over losing an orator of Regulus' calibre and commitment; Regulus cared greatly about his speeches, a value apparently lacking in many of Pliny's contemporaries (6.2.2–3). Pliny also misses the rivalry he had with Regulus, whom Pliny once recorded as saying that he always went for the jugular (1.20.14, *ego iugulum statim video, hunc premo*), a style worthy of a former *delator* (informant). Yet Pliny's longing is not just for Regulus but also for the oratory of the past. He writes of his present that there is a neglect and disrespect for oratory and its dangers (6.2.5, *tanta neglegentia tanta desidia, tanta denique inreverentia studiorum periculorumque est*).

The structure of letter 6.2 is worth noting, for it represents another method that Pliny uses to convey pessimistic and critical comments. I would describe it as 'critical ring composition', the inverse of embedded pessimism. He begins with the surprising, and forceful, comment that he misses Regulus, and the reasons why (6.2.1–3). Almost in the middle of the letter (6.2.4), he praises the emperor as someone who would prevent the excesses of a character such as Regulus, which makes it clear that he is not critiquing the *princeps*. Nor is he critiquing himself, since he writes of how he tries to follow the best practices whether he is a judge or advocate – again, Pliny as exemplar (6.2.7–8). He closes, however, with another strong critique of the vices of his times, which are resistant to real reform (6.2.9 *sed de his melius coram ut de*

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pluribus vitiis civitatis. nam tu quoque amore communium soles emendari cupere quae iam corrigere difficile est ['But about these things, as with the many faults of the state, it is better to discuss in person. For you are also accustomed through your love of the community to desire things to be corrected which it is now difficult to restore.']). The structure of the letter thus allows Pliny to drive home his critical point, while exonerating the *princeps* and himself.

Pliny and the state of politics

Pliny's pessimism towards contemporary society is not limited to literary malaise or the decline of oratory. It also extends to contemporary political life, which is the necessary corollary to literature and oratory, as seen from letter 3.7, dating from sometime after 99, in which Pliny combines the critique of literary and political stagnation in his comments on the death of Silius Italicus, another luminary from the previous regime.[27] Finding hope in Silius Italicus' literary achievement,[28] and perhaps some despair in his political ignominy, Pliny exhorts Caninius Rufus and himself to put their energies into literary work, since political action is no longer open to them (3.7.14):

sed tanto magis hoc, quidquid est temporis futilis et caduci, si non datur factis (nam horum materia in aliena manu), certe studiis proferamus.

So much more then we should extend whatever there is of time, vain and fleeting though it is, if not by actions (for the opportunity for these is in the hands of another), then certainly by literary pursuits.

Such encouragements seem harmless enough, but Pliny is admitting that political action worthy of remembrance is no longer possible under one-man rule, however benevolent he may be. These are powerful words when we consider where they are coming from: Pliny is a consular senator, who has held all the significant offices of the *cursus honorum*, and yet he feels powerless to achieve anything politically of lasting glory even under the *optimus princeps*. The close of the letter is particularly striking; he quotes Hesiod's *Works and Days* 24: ἀγαθὴ δ'

[27] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 226, 228.

[28] Griffin (n. 6), 462, also notes Pliny's admirable portrayal of Silius Italicus' philosophical death.

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ἔρις (3.7.15 'strife/competition is good'), suggesting a desire for more political contention in Roman society.

Pliny promises to provide a glimpse of such political contention in letter 3.20, which records an animated senatorial debate over consular elections. In this letter, dating from roughly 103–4,[29] Pliny discusses the merits and demerits of the secret ballot for votes in the Senate. While he acknowledges its usefulness, particularly in resolving this most recent Senate debate, his opposition to such a procedure echoes his republican forebear Cicero, who also wrote about the potentially harmful effects of the secret ballot in *De legibus* 33–9.[30]

All these comments about the activity of the Senate and allusions to Cicero give the letter a very republican feel, yet Pliny ends the letter on a pessimistic note by remarking that current public affairs provide less material worthy of discussion than in prior times (3.20.10 *haec tibi scripsi, primum ut aliquid novi scriberem, deinde ut non numquam de re publica loquerer, cuius materiae nobis quanto rarior quam veteribus occasio, tanto minus omittenda est.* [I have written these things to you, so that first of all I might write of some news and secondly that I might mention something about politics, whose subject matter provides so many fewer opportunities for us than it did for our ancestors, so much more it must not be passed over.']). In his final sentence, Pliny provides the reason why there are few opportunities for remarkable political activity (3.20.12):

sunt quidem cuncta sub unius arbitrio, qui pro utilitate communi solus omnium curas laboresque suscepit; quidam tamen salubri temperamento ad nos quoque velut rivi ex illo benignissimo fonte decurrunt, quos et haurire ipsi et absentibus amicis quasi ministrare epistulis possumus.

Indeed, all things are under the authority of one man, who alone has taken up the cares and responsibilities of all for the common good; nonetheless, certain things in a salutary moderation trickle down to us just as streams from that most kindly fount, which we ourselves are able both to draw from and furnish so to speak to our absent friends by letter.

These words may sound like praise for Trajan and the status quo, and in fact they echo Pliny's sentiment at *Panegyricus* 72.1.[31] Yet they

[29] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 259.

[30] For more on Cicero and the history of the secret ballot, see A. Yakobson, 'Secret Ballot and its Effects in the Late Roman Republic', *Hermes* 123 (1995), 426–42.

[31] *Pan.* 72.1: *obsecrare ut omnia quae facis quaeque facies prospere cedant tibi rei publicae nobis, vel si brevius sit optandum, ut uni tibi in quo et res publica et nos sumus?* ('to pray that everything that you do and will do may turn out successfully for you, the state, and ourselves, or if the prayer may be shortened, that it may be so for you alone, upon whom the state and ourselves rely?').

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seem a far cry from his famous words elsewhere in that speech: 'you order us to be free: we will be' (*Pan.* 66.4, *iubes esse liberos: erimus*). Moreover, they are weak evidence of what has been seen by Duff as Pliny's 'acquiescence in the system of control by one ruler working for the general weal'.[32] Indeed, they may be words of praise for Trajan, but no more. In fact, Pliny's words reveal the predicament of the Principate: if such is the state of Roman politics under the *optimus princeps*, then how much worse under any other *princeps*. Further, it is not that Pliny is praising the *princeps* for ridding the Senate of any tedious or disagreeable labour, but rather that he is asserting that the *princeps* has assumed (*suscepit*) for himself the meaningful work that Pliny and his peers might find ennobling.

Pliny's words in 3.20 seem to foreshadow his sentiments from his next letter, 3.21, which was discussed above regarding the paucity of worthy material for poets. In fact, we can see him making a direct connection between politics and literature in these two letters. Because of the Principate, there is little space for Romans to display their traditional *virtus*; this in turn leaves little to write about, since no-one is accomplishing anything worthy of memory. In letter 3.7, Pliny suggested that there was little to achieve in politics and so literature should be pursued as a means of achieving glory, but in letters 3.20 and 3.21 he suggests that political stagnation leads to literary stagnation; there is no way out. Moreover, he is quite explicit, noting that this lack of political engagement stems from everything resting on the will of the *princeps*, who looks after every responsibility and care (3.20.12). This letter has been sorely neglected regarding Pliny's political thought, largely obfuscated by the glow of the *Panegyricus*. Rather than reading it as evidence of Pliny's acceptance of the Principate and its ups and downs of good and bad emperors, this letter should be read as an indication that, while Pliny admires Trajan, he nonetheless recognizes and voices the shortcomings of the Principate as a system.

It is again worthwhile to note the structure of letters 3.7 and 3.20, both of which are taken up largely with their proper subject matter, Silius Italicus and the secret ballot respectively, and then close with

Tacitus also expresses a similar idea in the *Dialogus*, wherein Maternus, whose tone is much debated, suggests that there is no need for senatorial debate or public assemblies when there is one very wise individual who can manage everything on his own (*Dial.* 41.4, *quid multis apud populum contionibus, cum de re publica non imperiti et multi deliberent, sed sapientissimus et unus*).

[32] J.W. Duff, *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age from Tiberius to Hadrian*, third edition, rev. by A. M. Duff (New York, 1964), 440.

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a 'pessimistic diminuendo'.[33] In both letters, such a diminuendo is not the obvious conclusion to be drawn from the prior content. In his discussion of Silius Italicus, there is no need for Pliny to mention the state of contemporary politics, just as there is no need for him to lament the lack of letter-worthy political events in the account of the Senate meeting in 3.20. The effect of this structure is different from the two structures mentioned above, embedded pessimism and critical ring composition; the pessimistic diminuendo provides Pliny with a means to catch the reader off guard and leave a lingering thought that takes the reader in a different direction from the general content of the letter. They are intended for the serious reader who reads closely all the way to the end of the letter.

Conclusions: Pliny and the fall of the Republic

I readily admit that countless examples could be provided to contradict the sentiments in the selections that I have focused on here, maybe even from these very selections.[34] Nevertheless, by raising the passages discussed herein to visibility, our understanding and appreciation of Pliny are made more complex and nuanced, and Pliny himself should thereby be credited with revealing a more profound literary persona than he is generally considered to have possessed. Throughout this article, I have suggested that his pessimism stems from such things as nostalgia, the poor condition of education, a decline in morals, and the political enervation of the senatorial class. I would like to pursue this last point a little further, since the other causes of Pliny's pessimism are something of a commonplace in critiques of Roman literature, oratory, and politics. The enervation of political life is a concern that rises to a higher level of significance and is thereby deserving of closer scrutiny.

It has been argued that, since he writes so favourably of Nerva and Trajan, Pliny must have recognized the merits and necessity of the

[33] In contrast with the 'optimistic diminuendo' of Hoffer (n. 2), 43, 46, for which see letters 1.3.5, 2.9.6, 4.1.7.

[34] To cite but a few examples: praise for Nerva, Trajan, and the times in general can be found at 1.12.11, 3.18.6–7, 4.8, 6.2.4, 6.31; praise of contemporary literature at 6.21, 7.33, 8.4, 8.12; optimism for the state of oratory at 3.18, 4.16, 4.24, 6.11, 6.23, 9.23; and for political optimism, see 1.23 and the *Panegyricus*.

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Principate, despite occasional scoundrels such as Domitian.[35] There is no doubt that Pliny did recognize its merits, but I would like to turn that thinking on its head and suggest that, while Pliny clearly admires Nerva and Trajan, he is nonetheless keenly aware of the limitations that result from the Principate, particularly the difficulty of reversing the inertia created by a *princeps* such as Domitian. Such lasting damage is perhaps best exemplified by letter 8.14 (dated as late as 105),[36] wherein Pliny sketches the inability of his generation's Senate to function autonomously and confidently following its debilitation under Domitian.[37] There is a sense pervading his writings that Pliny had high hopes for Roman society following the assassination of Domitian, not all of which were fully realized, despite the just governance of Nerva and Trajan and the hard work of senators and writers like Pliny himself.

The letter that most poignantly captures Pliny's recognition of this limitation is 4.22, in which he recounts a dinner party attended by the Emperor Nerva, who was accompanied by the infamous *delator* Fabricius Veiento, Pliny's opponent in the Senate debate on Publicius Certus (9.13.13, 19–21), and the dissident Junius Mauricus, just returned from exile (4.22.4). The conversation turned to the *delator* Valerius Catullus Messalinus and his crimes.[38] Nerva, perhaps with some courage, raised the question of where Messalinus would be if he were still alive (4.22.5). Mauricus took the bait and responded that he would be dining with them, a clear reference to the presence of Veiento, whom Pliny describes as leaning on Nerva's shoulder (4.22.6). Syme writes perceptively that Nerva might have deliberately raised the question to elicit Mauricus' response and thus put the matter to rest.[39] Clever *princeps* aside, the point that Mauricus and Pliny are making is that *principes*, good and bad, come and go, but little else changes.[40] It is important to note that this letter shows optimism and pessimism alike: Pliny could take umbrage that his political opponent Fabricius Veiento remained close to the *princeps*, yet he would have to

[35] M. Hammond, 'Pliny the Younger's Views on Government', *HSPh* 49 (1938), 115–40; M. P. O. Morford, '*Iubes esse liberos*: Pliny's *Panegyricus* and Liberty', *AJPh* 113 (1992), 575–93.

[36] Sherwin-White (n. 5), 461.

[37] For this letter, see Griffin (n. 4), 152.

[38] For Messalinus, see Tac. *Agr*. 45; Juv. *Sat*. 4.113; for Veiento, see Pliny *Ep*. 9.13.13, 19–20; Tac. *Ann*. 14.50; Juv. *Sat*. 4.113; for Mauricus, see Pliny *Ep*. 1.5, 1.14, 2.18, 3.11, 6.14; Tac. *Agr*. 45; Tac. *Hist*. 4.42.

[39] Syme (n. 21), 5–6.

[40] For the continuity between Domitian and Trajan in particular, see K. A. Waters, '*Traianus Domitiani Continuator*', *AJPh* 90 (1969), 385–405.

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concede, as I do, that a former dissident, Junius Mauricus, also had access to the *princeps*, to whom he spoke frankly and survived.[41] This is not what Pliny chooses to emphasize, however; he takes it as a given that Mauricus and Nerva should dine together. For Pliny the presence of Veiento is what is noteworthy.

Pliny's admiration for Nerva and Trajan and his pessimism are closely linked. Under an autocrat such as Domitian, anyone could reasonably argue that, if Domitian were simply removed and a more beneficent and moderate *princeps* come to power, then Roman society would be reinvigorated and political and literary life would undergo a renaissance. With Nerva and Trajan, indisputably wise and thoughtful *principes*, Romans such as Pliny and Tacitus were faced with the undeniable reality that even under the best and most just *principes* Roman political and literary life could only be resuscitated to such a point. This is the source of Pliny's pessimism. The position of *princeps* had fundamentally altered Roman society in such a way that, no matter who was the *princeps*, opportunities for demonstrating *virtus* through political actions were circumscribed, and consequently material for authors to record displays of *virtus* were also limited. Pliny's passionate words from his *Panegyricus*, *iubes esse liberos: erimus*, are revealed as hollow, not because Trajan did not indeed want his fellow Romans to be free but rather because Trajan and his fellow Romans lived under a political system that precluded the traditional Roman idea of what it meant to be free, the realization of which for Pliny was certainly a cause for pessimism.

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[41] For this last point, see Griffin (n. 6), 452–3.

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