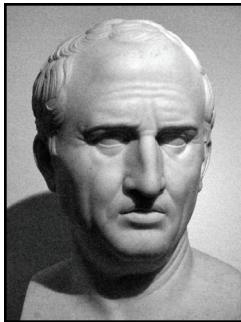


**A PHILOSOPHER IN INTERESTING TIMES
AND AN EMPEROR'S BENEVOLENT
SERVANT
CICERO AND PLINY THE YOUNGER (106-43
BCE AND C. 61-C. 113 CE)**



More than two thousand years ago, before the nations of modern Europe existed, the upper class citizens of a highly civilized empire sustained their friendships and advanced their careers through the art of letter writing. Friends, servants, and slaves carried missives between Rome's imperial provinces and the country villas and urban mansions of Italy. Two major bodies of correspondence from Roman antiquity have survived: the letters of Cicero and those of Pliny the Younger. Reading Cicero's effusions and following the course of his rending emotions through turbulent times, one can readily understand how Renaissance scholars found his society had a strong appeal for their own changing world. Europe, moving on from the fading civilization of the Middle Ages, was ready to learn from the architecture, landscape gardening, legal system, political constitution, and love (for a time) of liberty of ancient Rome.

Cicero is renowned as the great orator of his era. Often he is torn between the pride he feels in his triumphant pleading in difficult cases in the law courts and his desire for a retired life devoted to literature. In his correspondence, the personal and the political intermingle. We learn of his family relationships, his difficulties with debtors and creditors, and his delight in buildings, sculpture, books, friendship, and dinner parties. His professed allegiance to Stoicism and contempt for Epicureanism clash with his pride, with his enjoyment of wealth, and with his disproportionate wailing when the machinations of the blasphemer and demagogue Publius

Clodius force him into temporary exile. They run counter even to his sorrow when the Senate compels him to leave the pleasures of Rome to govern the province of Cilicia in what is now southern Turkey, yet, once there, he finds himself committed to just and compassionate government and the conscientious conduct of military operations, even while pleading that his term of office not be extended. He is no more stoical and equally human when the counsel of his friend Atticus eases his tormented conscience as he must give his allegiance to one of two power-hungry leaders, Pompey or Caesar, either of whom presents a deadly threat to the Roman Republic. In the end, gratitude compels him to side with Pompey, who promotes his return from exile, despite the latter's faltering leadership.

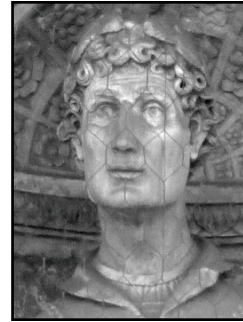
After Caesar defeats Pompey and replaces constitutional government with one-man rule, Cicero advises his intellectual friends to follow his example by taking refuge in literary pursuits, though he still tries to believe in the Stoic doctrine – that true happiness lies in a virtuous life and is independent of external circumstances.

Cicero's grief after the death of his daughter Tullia in childbirth is compounded by his desolation at the destruction of the Republic; he attempts to find solace in literary composition and the study of philosophy while he desperately urges Atticus, the most intimate of his many friends, to arrange the purchase of gardens in which to build a temple to commemorate his daughter for all time. Anxiety about his son's expenditure is accompanied by horror that his nephew should slander him to the all-powerful Caesar. For a short time, he rejoices at the assassination of Caesar (who has treated him generously, and has even sent him a letter of condolence on Tullia's death), before he realizes that it has left Antony, a man more tyrannical than his predecessor, as his immediate successor. By re-entering public life with all his eloquence, he seeks to promote the resurrection of the Republic, an enterprise in which the youth Octavian, Caesar's adopted son, seems at first to participate. His rollercoaster emotions as he writes of the day-to-day fortunes of the war against Antony, along with his defence of Octavian against the contention of his dear friend Brutus that another despotism is in the making pervade his last letters. In the end, it seems that, deprived of his daughter and the Republic, he makes little attempt to resist his murder carried out on Antony's orders.

In Cicero's letters, we meet characters known from history, Brutus seems as haughty, sincere and judgmental as in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, but Antony in Cicero's view, is no more than a debauched gladiator detested by all but hirelings. Yet, while the correspondence reveals much about human character, it conveys little of the texture of daily experience. It does not picture the rooms these Romans lived in, the furniture they used, the clothes they wore or the kind of life an expatriate encountered in a prov-

ince like Cilicia, all that a novelist is expected to conjure up.

The other upper class wealthy Roman famous for his letters is Pliny the Younger. Like Cicero, whom he takes for his model, Pliny wins distinction as a lawyer, holds a series of public offices, and acquires a great love for literature. Though less vain than Cicero, he longs for posthumous fame and carefully revises many of his legal and political speeches to be published along with his poems and nine books of letters. He is well aware that Cicero's correspondence has



gained interest from the events of the last years of the Republic and that, except for Domitian's three-year reign of terror, the memory of which remains an ever-present shadow in his mind, his own life passes in a period of imperial calm. This, indeed, suits his temperament, which is more tranquil than passionate. Rational and sensitive, he possesses a discriminating judgment, which the Emperor Trajan recognizes and which pervades his letters. In these epistles we find an appreciation of the return of liberty and freedom of speech after the assassination of Domitian; an enjoyment of fine houses, landscapes, and the arts; an admission that slaves, too, are humans; and contempt for the multitudes' childish enjoyment of chariot races. It is characteristic of Pliny that while he laments that the simple living, sound morality, and widespread love of literature that Rome once knew have passed away, he rejoices that the art of rhetoric has been revived and refuses to allow his adoration of old authors to blind him to living merit. Similarly, on the death of the unscrupulous and superstitious rival lawyer Regulus, he admits that the man at least valued oratory.

In the first nine books of Pliny's collection, we have a pioneer example of letters selected and probably edited by the writer for publication. His correspondence with the just Emperor Trajan, who sends him at the end of his life as legate to Bithynia and Pontus in what is now northern Turkey, is added as a posthumous tenth volume. His amiable personality, high intelligence and good sense win the reader's regard and affection. Yet to the modern mind it is astonishing that, like his master Trajan, he can be totally deceived by the widespread belief that Christianity is a "contagious superstition" whose adherents are committed to a life of evildoing; he totally disbelieves those accused who tell him that Christians swear to abstain from theft, fraud and adultery and that the food they take together is innocent.

Pliny has a power of description denied to Cicero which adds an extra dimension to his letters. It enables him to create concrete pictures of every-

thing from the construction of a breakwater to treatment for his inflamed eyes and the eruption of Vesuvius:

My house, although at the foot of a hill, commands as good a view as if it stood on its brow, yet you approach by so gentle and gradual a rise that you find yourself on high ground without perceiving you have been making an ascent. Behind, but at a great distance, is the Apennine range. In the calmest days we get cool breezes from that quarter, not sharp and cutting at all, being spent and broken by the long distance they have travelled. The greater part of the house has a southern aspect, and seems to invite the afternoon sun in summer (but rather earlier in the winter) into a broad and proportionately long portico, consisting of several rooms, particularly a court of antique fashion.