

## PLINY AND THE ART OF (IN)OFFENSIVE SELF-PRAISE

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If there is an art of praising the self inoffensively, then Pliny may be felt not to have mastered it. Few of his letters lack an element of self-praise.<sup>1</sup> Entirely typical of the forthright manner of this self-praise are the remarks made to Maximus in *Epistles* 9.23.1–2:

frequenter agenti mihi evenit, ut centumviri cum diu se intra iudicum auctoritatem gravitatemque tenuissent, omnes repente quasi victi coactique consurgerent laudarentque; frequenter e senatu famam qualem maxime optaveram rettuli.

It has often happened to me when speaking in the Centumviral Court that my hearers have preserved their judicial dignity and impassivity for a while and then suddenly jumped to their feet with one accord to congratulate me as if driven by some compelling force. From the senate, too, I have often had all the applause my heart could desire. (trans B. Radice)

The manner can be even less disarming. In the course of Pliny's correspondence with a female relative Calvina (2.4), in which he informs her that he

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<sup>1</sup> For self-satisfaction as a characteristic feature of Pliny's letters, see Sherwin-White 1969.80–81.

has paid off the debts on her deceased father's estate so as to be sole creditor and is now relieving her of the whole subsequent debt to himself, Pliny not only reminds Calvina that he contributed HS 100,000 to her dowry during her father's lifetime, but incidentally reveals that the contribution her father made was, in fact, a loan from the present writer. Even the normally sympathetic A. N. Sherwin-White is moved to comment that "Pliny spares Calvina no detail" (1966.149). The author finishes the letter with an assurance that the addressee need not worry about the effect on his finances (2.4.3–4). For, although his "resources as a whole are not very great and my position is expensive to keep up," nevertheless Pliny can make-up the shortfall with modest living. More typically disarming, however, is no less self-approving, is Pliny's account of the worshipful silence which greeted him on his return to the lecture hall (2.18), or his retelling of the stories which the "over-generous" Artemidorus has been spreading of Pliny's many services to the former at a time of great peril under Domitian (3.11).<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the actual manner of its expression, modern readers may feel uncomfortable with Pliny's enthusiasm for lauding himself and his achievements. Standards and expectations in modern life—including modern academic life (to take an arena familiar to readers of this journal)—often appear to be rather different. Self-praise is legitimate in some contexts: when applying for promotion or a post in another institution, for example. But context and format are strongly determined, often to the extent that we may feel bound to write about ourselves "impersonally"; allowing our "achievements," as it were, "to speak for themselves" (however artfully we allow this to happen). Similarly, when composing autobiographical notes for the dust jacket of a book, one is required to write in the third person ("Dr. Gibson is the author of . . ."). Academic presses, if the texts accompanying Author Questionnaires are anything to go by, even assume (perhaps flatteringly) an inclination to modesty in their authors.<sup>3</sup> Modesty in academic life, as in other professional or domestic contexts, will attract praise: witness the approval given by John Chadwick to the studious self-effacement of Michael

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2 For an analysis of the self-praise in this letter, see Rudd 1992.31–32.

3 CUP Author Questionnaire 2001: "Short autobiographical note: Information from this section may be used for the book jacket and other publicity (in catalogues or on our web site). Please include: academic and other distinctions; positions held; travels; other books; journals or other media written for; membership of professional associations/learned bodies. DO NOT BE UNDULY MODEST. Please provide us with any additional autobiographical information which may help us to sell your book" (emphasis added).

Ventris following a rapturous reception at the conference which marked the turning point in the acceptance of his decipherment of Linear B:

In August 1954 Ventris' lecture to the International Classical Congress at Copenhagen was a triumph; when he showed the slide of the tripod tablet deciphered, the whole of the large audience burst into applause, before he said a word. After he had finished, a number of prominent Greek scholars publicly congratulated him and declared themselves convinced. I myself was not present, and it was only gradually that I learnt from others the extent of this success; Ventris himself was too modest to tell me more than that it "went off all right."<sup>4</sup>

Few academics, perhaps, get the opportunity for such modesty. More common is the negotiation of opportunities for indirect self-praise, such as the writing of an "acknowledgements" page for a book. According to one recent critic, this is an opportunity negotiated by academics with increasing immodesty: "What used to be a simple procedure of thanking others for permissions, access, etc., has turned into an indecorous display of favour and sentiment. They have converted discreet gratitude into solicitations of regard, professional aggrandizement" (Bauerlein 2001.17). The writing of an "acknowledgements" page perhaps presents particular problems because—unlike promotion applications and book-jacket "blurbs"—they are usually written entirely in the first person

To contrast Pliny's apparent "immodesty" with the protocols observed (and negotiated) by modern academics, particularly with the modesty of Michael Ventris, would be, in many ways, quite unfair; self-effacement is not regarded as a virtue at any stage of pagan classical culture.<sup>5</sup> But neither was self-praise regarded as unproblematic. Consider, for example, Pliny's own words on the problems presented by the publication of a speech on his benefactions to Comum (*Epistles* 1.8.5–6, to Pompeius Saturninus):

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4 J. Chadwick, *The Decipherment of Linear B*.<sup>2</sup> Cambridge 1960.88.

5 E.g., Aristotle *NE* 1123b2ff. (not without irony?): "A person is considered magnanimous if he thinks that he is worthy of great things, provided that he *is* worthy of them" (trans. J. A. K. Thomson). For a recent attempt to revive the example of Aristotle's *megalopsychos* in modern ethics, see Kristjánsson 2001.

... est enim paulo quasi gloriosius et elatius ... anceps hic et lubricus locus est, etiam cum illi necessitas lenocinatur. etenim si alienae quoque laudes parum aequis auribus accipi solent, quam difficile est obtinere, ne molesta videatur oratio de se aut de suis disserentis! nam cum ipsi honestati tum aliquanto magis gloriae eius praedicationique invidemus, atque ea demum recte facta minus detorquemus et carpinus, quae in obscuritate et silentio reponuntur.

... it makes me seem rather carried away by my own praises ... This puts me in a very difficult and delicate position, though somewhat justified by being inevitable. Even disinterested praise is very rarely well received, and it is all the harder to avoid a bad reception when a speaker refers to himself and his family. We feel resentment against merit unadorned, and still more when pride publishes it abroad; in fact it is only when good deeds are consigned to obscurity and silence that they escape criticism and misconstruction. (trans. B. Radice)

Pliny neglects to mention the fact that his self-praise is, in fact, designed to draw the attention of the emperor to his own participation in imperial schemes for the support of Italian towns (Hoffer 1999.93–110). But his words do bear some witness to scruples about praise of the self. Similar scruples, as will be seen below, are widely attested elsewhere in the ancient world.

### SELF-PRAISE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

It was conventional for the Greek encomiast to preface a speech of praise for another with the observation that his audience disliked hearing others praised (e.g., Pindar *Pyth.* 1.81–85, Thucydides 2.35.2, Callimachus fr. 384.57–58). A similar touchiness can be detected in contexts of self-praise. Glenn Most notes (1989.119, 131–32) that when characters in Homer and the Greek novel talk about themselves to strangers, there appears to be pressure to deliver tales of personal woe—most obviously in the autobiographical narrative given by Odysseus to Alcinous and Arete in *Odyssey* 9–12. Self-defence, it appears to have been commonly agreed, was one of the

few legitimate pretexts for praising oneself in public—as in the case of Demosthenes in the pressured circumstances of the *de Corona*. Self-praisers lacking such pressures might have to invent them, as Isocrates largely did in his *Antidosis* (see Most 1989.124–25). Related to this phenomenon, it may be argued, is the strong—if not invariable—preference among Greek historians for discussing their own deeds in the third person rather than in the (potentially offensive) first person (Marincola 1997.175–216). Yet praise of the self was too valuable a piece of rhetorical equipment for the Greeks not to evolve a set of stratagems which might allow a speaker to praise himself in public. The subject of περιαντολογία (“speaking about oneself”) is a topic of discussion in rhetorical handbooks, where various tactics are developed for avoiding the giving of offence: engineering the appearance of necessity, including oneself within general praise, changing the addressee from audience to opponent so as to appear forced to defend oneself, and asking pardon from the audience for lauding oneself.<sup>6</sup> Plutarch’s essay περὶ τοῦ ἑαυτὸν ἐπαινεῖν ἀνεπιφθόνως (“On Self-Praise Without Envy,” *Mor.* 539a–47f), suggests numerous stratagems parallel to those in the rhetorical handbooks, but, typically, an ethical element is injected: the self-praiser, according to Plutarch, must have some other (moral) end in view when speaking about himself. Furthermore, the essay begins with an emphasis on the highly offensive nature of περιαντολογία and ends with a detailed review of those circumstances when self-praise must be avoided. However, the rhetorical manuals and Plutarch are united in citing necessity, an apparent need for self-defence, as a legitimate context for self-praise.

Taken together, this evidence appears to suggest a Greek sensitivity to self-praise. Such sensitivity, as Most suggests, may have its roots in αὐτάρκεια (“self-sufficiency”)—a cultural ideal which acted to discourage a “generous” attitude to the success of others (Most 1989.127–33). Yet, as we turn to Pliny, we need not assume the Romans shared the Greeks’ hostility to praising oneself; αὐτάρκεια, after all, is hardly a Roman cultural ideal. In fact, there is some evidence that Romans felt rather more comfortable with the whole idea of talking about oneself in public. Roman historians,

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6 περιαντολογία in rhetorical manuals: ps. Hermogenes *Meth.* 25 = *RG* 2.446f. Spengel (much amplified in the commentary of Gregory of Corinth *RG* 7.2.1298–1301 Walz); Alexander περὶ ῥητορικῶν ἀφορμῶν *RG* 2.558 Spengel; ps. Aristides *Rhet.* 2.506.8–20 Spengel.

unlike their Greek counterparts, show a strong, if not invariable, preference for discussing their own deeds in the first person.<sup>7</sup> But that is not to say that self-praise was regarded as unproblematic. One thinks here, of course, of Cicero and the consulship which, according to Seneca, was “non sine causa, sed sine fine laudatum” (*Dial.* 10.5.1).<sup>8</sup> The great orator was not unaware of these criticisms and, on his return from exile, insists that the only reason he has ever spoken in praise of himself is, “naturally,” self-defence (*de Domo suo* 92–93, 95):<sup>9</sup>

hic tu me etiam gloriari vetas: negas esse ferenda quae soleam de me praedicare . . . et quoniam hoc reprehendis, quod solere me dicas de me ipso gloriosus praedicare, quis umquam audivit, cum ego de me nisi coactus ac necessario dicerem? . . . dicendum igitur est id, quod non dicerem nisi coactus—nihil enim umquam de me dixi sublatius adsciscendae laudis causa potius quam criminis depellendi.

In this connexion, you go so far as to bid me cease from boasting; you declare that the assertions I am in the habit of making about myself are intolerable . . . And since you blame me for being too boastful in sounding my own praises, who, I would ask you, has ever heard me speak of myself, save under the constraint of an inevitable necessity? . . . I must say, then, what I would not say save under compulsion—for any self-congratulatory remarks I have ever uttered have been made rather to repel insinuations than to claim credit for myself. (trans. N. H. Watts)

Several generations later, Cicero constitutes the focus of interest in Quintilian’s discussion of the orator’s proper attitude towards self-praise (*Inst. Or.*

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7 Marincola 1997.193–98, 200–05. For Greek criticism of a Roman historian’s self-praise, cf. Plut. *Cato* 14.1–2. Contrast Sall. *Catil.* 8.5.

8 For Cicero’s praise of his own consulship and the negative reaction of others to it, cf., e.g., Cic. *Sull.* 21–35, *Harusp.* 17, *ad Brut.* 1.17.1, [Sall.] *Inv. in Cic.* 3, Plut. *Cic.* 24.1–2, Dio 37.38.2. A full survey of Cicero’s self-praise in both the political and rhetorical spheres is provided by Allen 1954.

9 For Cicero and the resort to self-defence, cf. also *Harusp.* 17, *Prov.* 44, *Phil.* 14.13; Allen 1954.129–30.

11.15–26): a circumstance of double interest given that Quintilian was Pliny's admired teacher (*Epistles* 2.14) and that the latter modelled himself quite consciously on Cicero, even in minor details (*Epistles* 3.15.1, 4.8.4; Cugusi 1983.223–25). Quintilian defends Cicero against his many detractors on the same grounds as Cicero himself had done (*Inst. Or.* 11.1.17–18):

reprehensus est in hac parte non mediocriter Cicero . . .  
plerumque illud quoque non sine aliqua ratione fecit. aut  
enim tuebatur eos, quibus erat adiutoribus usus in  
opprimenda coniuratione, aut respondebat invidiae (cui  
tamen non fuit par, servatae patriae poenam passus  
exilium), ut illorum, quae egerat in consulatu, frequens  
commemoratio possit videri non gloriae magis quam  
defensionis data.

Cicero has been severely censured in this connexion . . . as  
a rule he had some sound reason for his self-praise. For he  
was either defending those who had assisted him to crush  
the conspiracy of Catiline or was replying to attacks made  
upon him by those who envied his position; attacks which  
he was so far unable to withstand that he suffered exile as  
the penalty for having saved his country. Consequently,  
we may regard his frequent reference to the deeds accom-  
plished in his consulship as being due quite as much to the  
necessities of defence as to the promptings of vainglory.  
(trans. H. E. Butler)

Once more adverse criticism is countered with an insistence on the orator's need to defend himself. (Precisely the opposite point is made by Plutarch at *Moralia* 541a: "Cicero boasted not from necessity but for glory.") In general, however, Quintilian is uncomfortable with Cicero's self-praise and, suggesting that "all kinds of boasting are a mistake," expresses the preference that praise should come from others (*Inst. Or.* 11.1.15, 22).<sup>10</sup>

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10 Even in death, self-praise might attract criticism. Epitaphs are sometimes written in the first person (e.g., that for Scipio Hispanus: *CIL* 12.2.15), but those written in the third person might prove offensive too: of Naevius's epitaph ("The Romans forgot to speak the Latin tongue"), Aulus Gellius comments: "[it] might have been regarded as a just estimate, if he had not written it himself" (Gell. 1.24.2).

## THE CONTEXT FOR PLINY'S PRAISE OF THE SELF

Some of the material glanced at above, perhaps especially the Greek material, may be used to throw an unkind light on Pliny. Certainly a passage from Plutarch's essay on the special inclination of "courtiers" to self-praise could almost have been written with Pliny in mind. For, in a letter to Tacitus, we hear Pliny's account of his involvement with Herennius Senecio in the successful prosecution of Domitian's former agent Baebius Massa for extortion during his tenure as proconsul of Baetica in C.E. 92–93 (7.33). Senecio was keen to see the penalty for the crime exacted, although this was not technically the duty of the prosecutors. In response, Massa appealed to the law of *calumnia*, which dealt with those who showed too much zeal in their prosecution. Pliny was not included in this indictment, which Pliny says was tantamount to accusing him of the opposite of *calumnia*, namely collusion with the defendant Massa. It was these words which earned him, as he relates to Tacitus, the respect of his fellow senators and of the future emperor Nerva (7.33.8–9):

quae vox et statim excepta, et postea multo sermone celebrata est. Divus quidem Nerva (nam privatus quoque attendebat his quae recte in publico fierent) missis ad me gravissimis litteris non mihi solum, verum etiam saeculo est gratulatus, cui exemplum (sic enim scripsit) simile antiquis contigisset.

These words were acclaimed at once and subsequently much talked about; indeed, the deified Emperor Nerva (who never failed to notice anything done for the good of the state even before he became emperor) sent me a most impressive letter in which he congratulated not only me but our generation for being blessed with an example so much (he said) in the best tradition. (trans. B. Radice)

Compare this account with Plutarch's warning that a special circumstance of danger looms when we tell of praises received (*Mor.* 546d–e):

For once they come to talk of some victory or political success or act or word of theirs that found favour with leading men, they get out of hand and go too far. To this



sort of self-glorification, one may observe that courtiers and the military most readily succumb. But it may also attack those who have returned from a governor's banquet or from handling affairs of state. For with the mention of illustrious and royal personages, they interweave certain gracious remarks that these personages have addressed to them, and fancy that they are not praising themselves but recounting praise received from others. (trans. P. H. De Lacy and B. Einarson)<sup>11</sup>

Throwing an unkind light on Pliny is a critical strategy not without benefits—as Hoffer's recent book has demonstrated so well.<sup>12</sup> But it is worth attending more closely to the context for Pliny's self-praise. Most of the sources covered so far deal with self-praise in the context of public speech—often public and formal speech. Indeed, this is precisely the area in which Pliny expressed his own scruples in *Epistles* 1.8 (quoted above). There he puts himself on display as one who “properly” agonised in private about praising himself in public. But what about self-praise within letters? How might contemporaries have viewed self-appraisal in this context? Ancient epistolary theory offers nothing explicit on the subject, but a few scattered hints may be found elsewhere. A passing remark in Quintilian's discussion

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11 Contrast also Plutarch's warning that those with a craving for glory must be especially careful to abstain from self-praise when praised by others (*Mor.* 547b–c) with Pliny's retelling of the praises of Artemidorus in *Epistles* 3.11 (discussed at the beginning of the paper). Furthermore, many letters inform us of the success of Pliny's speeches in senate and law court (e.g., 1.18, 2.11, 3.4, 3.9, 3.18, 4.5, 4.9, 4.16, 5.20), often concentrating on the role played by the author to the virtual exclusion of the other speakers. Cf. the criticisms made by Plutarch in his essay *On Talkativeness* (*Mor.* 513d–e): “Again, as one might expect, those who have scored a victory in the law courts or have had some unexpected success at the courts of governors or kings are attacked, as it were, by a malady which never leaves them, by the desire to call to mind and tell over and over again how they made their entrance, how they were presented, how they argued, how they held forth, how they confuted some opponents or accusers, how they were applauded” (trans. W. C. Helmbold). For the importance to Pliny of his speeches, see Mayer above, pp. 228–34.

12 There are, however, some extenuating circumstances here. Pliny is writing to an historian with the raw material for an episode in the historian's forthcoming work, and it is quite in order in this context to relate the episode in some detail. Thus the letter foregrounds the whole issue of self-praise by presenting an awareness that such praise is less effective than praise from another. (But note that, unlike 6.16, on the eruption of Vesuvius, Tacitus has not asked for this particular letter from Pliny.)

of Cicero's attitude to his own rhetorical powers may imply mitigation for forthright self-praise when it takes place in the context of a letter to an intimate *amicus* (*Inst. Or.* 11.1.21): "in epistolis aliquando familiariter apud amicos, nonnunquam in dialogis, aliena tamen persona verum de eloquentia sua dicit" ("In his letters to intimate friends, and occasionally in his dialogues, he tells the truth of his own eloquence, though, in the latter case, he is careful always to place the remarks in question in the mouth of some other character"). This is, in fact, no more than what Cicero himself declares in a letter to Atticus while relating a recent crucial intervention made at an important trial (*ad Att.* 1.16.8): "non enim mihi videor insolenter gloriari cum de me apud te loquor, in ea praesertim epistula quam nolo aliis legi" ("I don't feel that I'm bragging offensively when I talk about myself in your hearing, especially in a letter that I don't wish to be read by other people"). Self-praise may, perhaps, be condoned when it takes place in private among intimate friends. This suggestion may receive some support from an unexpected source. It was observed earlier that there is a generic tendency within both Homer and the Greek novel for first-person narrative to assume the character of a tale of woe; for example, in the case of Odysseus's narrative on Phaeacia of his disastrous wanderings after the fall of Troy. The crucial context here is that such tales are almost invariably told to strangers such as Alcinous and Arete. Where Odysseus's autobiographical tales do end happily, they are usually told only to people he knows and whose trustworthiness he has determined by testing.<sup>13</sup> The cultural pressure exerted on the narrators in Homer and the Greek novel to reserve tales of successful exploits for the company of intimates coheres with the mitigation awarded by Quintilian to Cicero and by Cicero to himself for self-praise in the context of private letters to friends.

This is, perhaps, the cultural context which we must aim to recreate for the kind of statements made by Pliny in the letter quoted at the beginning of this paper. The addressee of *Epistles* 9.23, the elder Maximus, is in many respects an ideal audience for Pliny's private narration of his own success in court and senate (and, later in the letter, of how his literary fame is linked with that of Tacitus). Maximus is the recipient of numerous intimate letters which convey his interest in literature and in Pliny's career.<sup>14</sup> How could he

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13 E.g., Telemachus (16.226ff.), a pair of slaves (21.207ff.), Penelope (23.306ff.), and Laertes (24.321ff.); see Most 1989.132.

14 See further Sherwin-White on *Epistles* 9.1, 9.23; Syme 1958.56.

be offended by Pliny privately telling him more about the very subjects in which he was most interested? Nor is Pliny crass about his self-praise. Throughout the collection, as will be made clear below, he is careful to soften the impact of his own self-praise.

### PLINY'S ART OF INOFFENSIVE SELF-PRAISE

Pliny's art of self-praise employs a number of techniques to ensure that, within an ancient context, it avoids giving direct offence. The list of these techniques given below is representative, if hardly exhaustive:

1. Tell us that the praise you receive is (only) the (considered) opinion of others, and emphasise your careful selection of addressee.
2. Candidly admit to us your faults.
3. Tell us your misgivings about letters in any case.
4. Tell us about the dangers endured in winning the praise.
5. Praise others—all the better if they resemble yourself.
6. Praise yourself in order to inspire others.

The first technique is illustrated in 9.23, the letter to Maximus discussed above, where the author advertises his sensitivity towards the issue of the character of the addressee (9.23.5–6):

ego vero et gaudeo et gaudere me dico. neque enim vereor ne iactantior videar, cum de me aliorum iudicium non meum profero, praesertim apud te qui nec ullius invides laudibus et faves nostris.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, I *am* glad and admit it. For I'm not afraid of appearing too boastful when I have other people's opinions to quote and not only my own, especially when talking to you; for you are never envious of anyone's reputation and are always furthering mine. (trans. B. Radice)

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15 Cf. 5.1.12 (to Annius Severus): "haec tibi scripsi, quia de omnibus quae me vel delectant vel angunt, non aliter tecum quam mecum loqui soleo; deinde quod durum existimabam, te amantissimum mei fraudare voluptate quam ipse capiebam" ("I have told you this tale since I always talk about all my joys and sorrows as freely to you as I would to myself, and then because I thought it cruel to deny my best friend a pleasure which I was enjoying").

He does not praise his successes to just anyone, he implies, but does so here to a supportive addressee who both shares his literary and rhetorical tastes and is, furthermore, marked by his freedom from jealousy over the triumphs of others. (Pliny's addressees, in fact, rather conspicuously lack *invidia* as a group.) In addition, Pliny is careful to point out that he is not praising himself as such but relating the *iudicium* of others.

The technique of candidly admitting your faults is deployed in a letter to Annius Severus (5.1.13): "neque enim sum tam sapiens ut nihil mea intersit, an iis quae honeste fecisse me credo, testificatio quaedam et quasi praemium accedat" ("Nor am I enough of a philosopher to remain quite indifferent as to whether what I believe to be a good deed of mine is to win some just reward"). Here Pliny modestly affects the character of the *non perfectus homo* and his attitude to "right actions" as described by Cicero (*de Fin.* 5.69).<sup>16</sup> Who could fail to forgive this display of knowledge of one's own limitations? Plutarch suggests that the self-praiser deploy a similar stratagem of readily confessing to a feeling of ambition (*Mor.* 543f., 544a).

A rather different technique is used in *Epistles* 5.7. Here, in a letter addressed to Calvisius Rufus, Pliny requests that the addressee convey *verbally* to the decurions of Comum Pliny's intention to make good, from his own funds, the share of a legacy granted to the town council from a will that has now been declared legally invalid. Why has Pliny not conveyed this intention in a letter? (5.7.5–6):

verebar ne modum, quem tibi in sermone custodire facile est, tenuisse in epistula non viderer. nam sermonem vultus gestus vox ipsa moderatur, epistula omnibus commendationibus destituta malignitati interpretantium exponitur.

I was afraid that a letter might seem lacking in the restraint which you will have no difficulty keeping in a speech. There the tone is set by the expression, gestures, and voice of the speaker, whereas a letter lacks such

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16 "And whereas the wise, under nature's guidance, make right action their aim, on the other hand, men not perfect and yet endowed with noble characters often respond to the stimulus of honour, which has some show and resemblance of moral worth" (trans. H. Rackham). In the *pro Archia*, Cicero himself confesses a desire for glory before praising his own consulship (28)—in which he lauds himself in common with the audience.

recommendations and is liable to wilful misinterpretation. (trans. B. Radice)

This letter airs once more proper scruples about the ethics of talking about oneself in public and the attendant dangers of praising oneself (cf. 1.8, discussed above). But I suspect that we readers are meant to infer that this same plea for mitigation should apply not only to letters read out to the Comum town council but also to the letter we are now reading.

Elsewhere Pliny employs some of the stratagems recommended in Plutarch and the rhetorical handbooks, such as telling the addressee (and reader) of the dangers he endured in winning his praise. Such a stratagem may be detected when Pliny recycles the stories which Artemidorus has been spreading abroad of the former's risky visit to him after Domitian had banished philosophers from Italy (3.11.2, 3, to Julius Genitor):

fui apud illum in suburbano, et quo notabilius (hoc est, periculosius) esset fui praetor . . . atque haec feci, cum septem amicis meis aut occisis aut relegatis, occisis Senecione Rustico Helvidio, relegatis Maurico Gratilla Arria Fannia, tot circa me iactis fulminibus quasi ambustus mihi quoque impendere idem exitium certis quibusdam notis augurarer.

I went to see him in his house outside the city, and as I was praetor at the time, the visit involved some risk for the attention it attracted . . . I did this at a time when seven of my friends had been put to death or banished—Senecio, Rusticus, and Helvidius were dead, and Mauricus, Gratilla, Arria, and Fannia were in exile—so that I stood amidst the flames of thunderbolts dropping all around me, and there were certain clear indications to make me suppose a like end was waiting for me. (trans. B. Radice)

As Plutarch points out, those who have “suffered” attract no envy: “For it is with reputation and character as with a house or an estate: the multitude envy those thought to have acquired them at no cost or trouble; they do not envy those who have purchased them with much hardship and peril” (Plutarch *Mor.* 544d; cf. Cicero *de Orat.* 2.209–10). Earlier in the same treatise on self-praise, Plutarch notes that it is a good idea for the self-praiser to praise

others like himself: an intelligent audience will soon spot the resemblance (*Mor.* 542c–d):

Some, when the occasion allows, are in the habit of praising others whose aims and acts are the same as their own and whose general character is similar. In this way, they conciliate the hearer and draw his attention to themselves; for although they are speaking of another, he at once recognises in the speaker a merit that, from its similarity, deserves the same praises. (trans. P. H. De Lacy and B. Einarson)<sup>17</sup>

An “intelligent” reader may detect Pliny’s version of this stratagem in the praise heaped upon Pompeius Saturninus in 1.16. Here Pliny praises the latter’s “Asian tempered by Attic” oratorical style (cf. Sherwin-White 1966.122: “[his] taste seems to be akin to Pliny’s”); the *suavitas* of his histories (cf. *Epistles* 5.8 for Pliny’s own ambitions here);<sup>18</sup> his excellent verses in the tradition of Catullus and Calvus (cf. *Epistles* 4.14 for Pliny’s efforts); and his literary wife (cf. *Epistles* 4.19.4).<sup>19</sup> Elsewhere, Pliny may be found employing Plutarch’s favoured technique of praising oneself in order to inspire others (*Mor.* 544d). *Epistles* 1.8 (discussed above), for example, while no doubt intended to draw attention to Pliny’s support for Nerva and Trajan’s scheme of *alimenta*, might be defended on the ground that the benefactions which Pliny praised in himself might act also as an inspiration to others.<sup>20</sup>

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17 Compare the rhetorical manuals on praising the general figure one wishes to resemble (Hermog. *Meth.* 25), or praising oneself in common with many others (Gregory of Corinth *RG* 7.2.1299 Walz, ps. Aristides *Rhet.* 2.506.15–16 Spengel). Praise of oneself in Pliny takes place in the context of constant praise of others; cf. Rudd 1992.26: “Perhaps the only disadvantage in knowing Pliny was that, whatever your faults, you were likely to appear in his letters as a moral paragon or literary genius.” For Pliny’s use of the technique of praising oneself in common with others, cf. *Epistles* 4.16.1, 7.33.9 (quoted above).

18 For Pliny as “historian,” see further Ash’s paper in this volume.

19 Pliny may well have been already married to the literary Calpurnia at the dramatic date of this letter, even if she is not mentioned until the fourth book; see Hoffer 1999.232–33.

20 Cf. the slightly different angle offered by Hoffer 1999.100: “His colleagues will read his letter [1.8] . . . for the same reason they will read his *Panegyric*, not to lap up Pliny’s praise of Trajan or of himself, but to learn how to do the job themselves when their turn comes.”

## PLINY AND OFFENSIVE SELF-PRAISE

Yet, for all Pliny's attempts to air his scruples and to mitigate the effects of his self-praise, there is, it may be suggested, something unsettling about the volume and intensity of Pliny's self-praise and his appetite for it. First, the main legitimate context for self-praise, namely self-defence, is missing in the letters. Of course, self-defence is considered legitimate by the rhetorical manuals, Plutarch, and others in the context of formal, public discourse. Pliny is not making a speech in court, so we can hardly criticise him for failing to supply a context of self-defence in his letters. But the complete absence of this context is unsettling. In fact, the most obvious "context" for Pliny's praise of himself is his obsession with *fama*—to which he openly confesses throughout the collection (note especially *Epistles* 7.4.10).<sup>21</sup> This desire for *fama* may be seen at its oddest in 9.23, where it leads to a bizarre distortion of a well-known anecdote about Demosthenes' desire for praise and recognition. To justify his delight at being recognised by a *municeps* of fellow diner Fadius Rufinus, Pliny asks "an si Demosthenes iure laetatus est, quod illum anus Attica ita noscitavit: οὐτός ἐστι Δημοσθένης, ego celebritate nominis mei gaudere non debeo?" ("If Demosthenes had the right to be pleased when the old woman of Attica recognised him with the words, 'That's Demosthenes!' I may surely be glad when my name is well known.") This anecdote was available to Pliny from a number of sources, but he will certainly have been familiar with it from Cicero's version in the *Tusculan Disputations* (5.103–04):

leviculus sane noster Demosthenes, qui illo susurro delectari se dicebat aquam ferentis mulierculae, ut mos est in Graecia, insusurrantisque alteri: *hic est ille Demosthenes*. quid hoc levius? at quantus orator! sed apud alios loqui videlicet didicerat, non multum ipse secum. intellegendum est igitur nec gloriam popularem ipsam per se expetendam nec ignobilitatem extimescendam.

Surely it was petty of my favourite Demosthenes to say he was delighted with the whispered remark of a poor woman who was carrying water, as is the custom in Greece, and

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21 See also Mayer above, pp. 227–29 on Pliny's urgent desire for *gloria*.

whispering in her fellow's ear—"Here is the great Demosthenes." What could be more petty? "Ah, but how consummate an orator!" Yes! but assuredly he had learnt how to speak before others, not to commune much with himself. It must be understood, therefore, that neither is popular glory to be coveted for its own sake nor is obscurity to be sorely feared. (trans. J. E. King)

In this version, Cicero uses Demosthenes' delight at being recognised by a woman of "inferior" status (*muliercula*) as an illustration of the orator's shallowness. Yet Pliny uses it in an opposite sense: if the Greek orator acted thus, surely it is permissible for a latter-day Demosthenes to follow his example? There is a gesture towards proper modesty here, to be sure, but the Ciceronian intertext has been quite shorn of any moralising content. Indeed, if anything, Pliny seems to tie this originally negative anecdote even more closely to his own situation. Cicero simply indicates *Graecia* as the setting, while Pliny specifies *anus Attica*. That is to say, just as Demosthenes was identified by a woman outside (or from outside) the metropolis of Athens, so Pliny is delighted to be recognised by a provincial who has only just arrived in Rome that day for the first time; cf. *Epistles* 9.23.4: "recumbebat mecum vir egregius, Fadius Rufinus, super eum municeps ipsius, qui illo die primum venerat in urbem; cui Rufinus demonstrans me: 'vides hunc?' multa deinde de studiis nostris; et ille 'Plinius est' inquit" ("I had a distinguished neighbour at dinner, Fadius Rufinus, and, on his other side, was someone from his native town who had come to Rome on his first visit that same day. Pointing to me, Rufinus said to him, 'Do you see my friend here?' Then he spoke at length about my work, and the man exclaimed, 'It must be Pliny!']"). Pliny rather appears to compound Demosthenes' lack of *gravitas*.

However, it is not only the absence of the context of self-defence which proves unsettling for Pliny's self-praise. For Pliny is surely having his epistolary cake and eating it too. Cicero, as we saw above, excuses his boasting on the grounds that it takes place within a letter which he does not wish to be read by others (*ad Att.* 1.16.8: "non enim mihi videor insolenter gloriari cum de me apud te loquor, in ea praesertim epistula quam nolo aliis legi"). Pliny's letters, in the first instance at least, are not public letters addressed to all, but are meant for the eyes of the addressee. But they are hardly of the kind he does not wish to be read by others.<sup>22</sup> Hoffer 1999.102 is

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22 See further Henderson above, p. 117 and de Pretis above, pp. 130–34.



no doubt right to suggest that Pliny was more or less obliged to praise himself: “[Pliny and the addressee] live in a culture of praise, and they depend on the free circulation of praise for their status and success.”<sup>23</sup> Praise of oneself takes place in the context of the praise of others. But Hoffer has been inadvertently generous to Pliny here. Andrew Riggsby has drawn attention to the significance of *Epistles* 6.17 to show that part of the point of Pliny’s praise of his addressees—mostly made up (Book 10 aside) of equals and inferiors<sup>24</sup>—is to make his own achievements appear all the greater. Addressed to the senator and advocate Claudius Restitutus, the letter complains about the behaviour of “two or three clever persons—or so they seemed to themselves and a few others” at a recent recitation by a friend of Pliny’s, where they sat completely immobile “like deaf mutes.” Pliny condemns their arrogant behaviour on the following grounds (6.17.4):

denique sive plus sive minus sive idem praestas, lauda vel inferiorem vel superiorem vel parem: superiorem quia nisi laudandus ille non potes ipse laudari, inferiorem aut parem quia pertinet ad tuam gloriam quam maximum videri, quem praecedis vel exaequas.

In fact, whether your own performance is better or worse or on a par, you should show your appreciation; for if your superior does not meet with applause neither will you, and it is in your own interest that anyone you equal or surpass should be well received. (trans. B. Radice)

As Riggsby comments (1998.88): “The strategy is to artificially inflate the reputation of others to whom one stands in some fixed relation . . . without regard for any concrete standard of behavior.” The strategy for praising one’s superior perhaps recalls Pliny’s praise of Tacitus (and the former’s attempts to bracket himself with the latter in a slightly junior capacity). The reasons put forward for extolling one’s equals and inferiors—that it makes one’s own achievements appear all the greater—suggest that Pliny’s ha-

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23 Cf. Hoffer 1999.108: “[the] mutual exchange of letters, advice and praise with his friends gets [Pliny] out of the solipsistic conundrum of self-praise and into the profitable circulation of praise,” and 96: “The hierarchical system of his time was based on praise, as much as modern democracies often seem to be based on blame.”

24 See Syme 1958.87–88, Sherwin-White 1966.65–69, also Henderson above, pp. 115–17.

bitual praise of the talents, achievements, and *dignitas* of others (many his equals or inferiors) is, in fact, part of a broader strategy of the inflation and praise of the self.

There are grounds, then, for believing that Pliny's taste for self-praise may have appeared excessive even to contemporaries. Certainly Ronald Syme—unless this is another example of the projection of Syme's own tastes—constructs for Tacitus a “morbid fear of self-glorification” in opposition to Pliny's character.<sup>25</sup> Why, then, was Pliny prepared to indulge himself in self-praise so openly and at such length? One answer is that he was a vain and tiresome man who liked nothing better than to talk about himself in vain and tiresome terms. But this will not do. As Riggsby (1998.89) has recently shown in a related context, such responses neglect the fact that Pliny, in his own eyes above all, is operating in an ethical world “in which the most legitimate measure of his worth is whether he fills an appropriate place in the order of the community.” Unlike some of his forerunners and contemporaries, Pliny displays a decided preference for cultivating his standing over the cultivation of his inner self. Rather than “turning inwards” to interrogate and improve his character, Pliny adheres to a more old-fashioned community-based system of ethics, where all actions, even “private” ones, are given value by their public reception. Compare with this the views of Seneca on the difference between *fama* and the judgement of the *vir bonus* (*Epistles* 102.11–13):

nos bonos bonus iudicat. “quid ergo?” inquit, “et fama erit unius hominis existimatio et infamia unius malignus sermo. gloriam quoque” inquit, “latius fusam intellego; consensum enim multorum exigit.” diversa horum condicio est et illius. quare? quia si de me bene vir bonus sentit, eodem loco sum quo si omnes boni idem sentirent; omnes enim, si me cognoverint, idem sentient . . . “ad gloriam aut famam non est satis unius opinio.” illic idem potest una sententia quod omnium, quia omnium, si perrogetur, una erit: hic diversa dissimilium iudicia sunt. difficiles adsensus, dubia omnia invenies, levia, suspecta.

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25 Syme 1958.113 on Pliny *Epistles* 9.14.1 and Tacitus *Ann.* 11.11.

It is one good man who decides that we are good. The retort is: "What? Would you define reputation as the esteem of one individual and ill repute as the rancorous chatter of one man? Glory, too, we take to be more widespread, for it demands the agreement of many men." But the position of "the many" is different from that of "the one." And why? Because if the good man thinks well of me, it practically amounts to my being thought well of by all good men; for they will all think the same, if they know me . . . "One man's opinion," you say, "is not enough to create glory or reputation." In the former case, one judgement is a universal judgement, because all, if they were asked, would hold one opinion; in the other case, however, men of dissimilar character give divergent judgements. (trans. R. M. Gummere)

For the good man, the judgement of the *vir bonus* will suffice, as it represents the universal standard of all *boni*. By contrast, *gloria* and *fama* are dependent on the chance consensus of the diverse and necessarily fickle judgements of a disunited range of people. Standing against Seneca's denigration of the latter is Pliny's delight in the praise heaped on his poetry, whether deserved or not, and his wish that future generations repeat this action, whether or not the poetry warrants it (*Epistles* 7.4.10). The same basic attitude is expressed by Pliny in the moral sphere. In *Epistles* 5.13, Pliny congratulates himself on never having accepted fees or gifts for the conduct of legal cases. Since a ban on the latter has just been reaffirmed by imperial decree, it might appear that Pliny has all along been consulting interior moral standards stricter than those prevailing in the community. But a comment at the end of the letter is revealing (5.13.9–10):

iucundum . . . si prohiberi publice videas, quod numquam tibi ipse permiseris. erit fortasse, immo non dubie, huius propositi mei et minor laus et obscurior fama, cum omnes ex necessitate facient quod ego sponte faciebam

It is a pleasure . . . to find an official ban on a practice one would never have permitted oneself. Perhaps I shall lose some of the credit and reputation I won from my resolve—in fact, I am sure to do so, when everyone is

compelled to behave as I did of my own free will. (trans.  
B. Radice)

It now appears that Pliny has been consulting not the moral standards supplied by his interior self so much as the *laus* and *fama* of the community for a standard of behaviour loftier than that commonly practised by his contemporaries.

In this broad context, Pliny's obsession with the praise of the self is the more readily comprehensible. Praise of the self is a key mechanism for exercising control in advance over the reception of your deeds by society. The letters provide, as it were, a commentary on Pliny's public achievements and talents which guides readers towards positive assessments of the same (all in an intimate context which, to some extent, legitimises the praise of the self). This is less shallowness and more a thorough-going commitment to the old-fashioned republican standard of the sovereign evaluation of the community.<sup>26</sup>

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