

THE EMPEROR AS *INSULA*: PLINY *EPIST.* 6. 31

Pliny has been praised for his clear view of natural beauty, his humor, his cameo-like history, and his crisp essay style.¹ One facet of his literary genius that seems to have gone unnoticed by editors, however, is his facile handling of metaphor, and this particularly in an exemplary instance in 6. 31.² For the letter is a unique panegyric in which a harbor constructed by Trajan (*portus Traiani*) is presented as a metaphor for the emperor himself.

To begin with a survey of the letter's contents, 6. 31 shows the following points essential to its interpretation. The entire letter is introduced as a view of Trajan in the privacy of his villa at Centum Cellae: it is in this retreat, Pliny says, that his virtues of *iustitia*, *gravitas*, and *comitas* are most clearly displayed (2). The display takes the form of a narrative of three legal cases brought before Trajan, followed by an account of the daily dinners he gave for his assessors (Pliny among them). Whether or not Pliny reports the real number of the cases, their actual order, and their true natures, the presentation conforms suspiciously well to an artistic scheme: they are progressively more lengthy and complex, calling forth increasingly greater powers of judgment from the emperor, and climaxing in a case requiring a Solomon-like verdict.

The first (3) concerns a minor *princeps*, a rich and popular magistrate of Ephesus. Trajan, recognizing envy (*invidia*) as the true accuser, frees the man, and the case is dismissed in only three lines.³ The second case runs to some fourteen lines (4–6) and contains a complicating shift in human emotions. A tribune whose wife has been seduced by a centurion declines to prosecute her (as demanded by the *Lex Julia*) once the centurion has been cashiered and exiled. In this the

tribune is governed by *amor*, the same reason for his wife's infidelity. He must be urged to prosecute and finally does so unwillingly. The third case (7–12), running to some twenty-two lines, is a snarl of shifting, conflicting motives and influences appropriately prefaced by its initial, pleonastic description: "multis sermonibus et vario rumore iactata." The subject of the case, a last will and testament, is partly false, partly authentic; the defendants are close to the emperor; the accusers bring the case, but, when the emperor agrees to hear it, ask to drop the action out of dubious motives; Trajan grants a delay; some of the accusers appear and demand that either all the accusers be summoned into court or they themselves be allowed to drop the case. So it goes up to the point that the accused themselves demand prosecution. The utter confusion of motives Trajan himself best sums up in a rhetorical paradox (12), that those charged wish to bring a charge on the grounds that they are not being charged ("isti enim queri volunt quod sibi licuerit non accusari")! Incredibly, the emperor renders a fair verdict satisfactory to all parties.

With this final case, the total impression of gathering complexity and disorder is achieved, so that against the tangle of the legal cases as foil the emperor emerges as firm and just, or possessing the announced virtues of *iustitia* and *gravitas* (cf. *summa gravitate*, 11), the character suggested in the transitional phrase, "vides quam honesti, quam severi dies quos iucundissimae remissiones sequebantur."

So introduced, the next portion of the letter illustrates the emperor's *comitas*, or the last of the announced virtues, with description of the *remissiones* (13–14). Here the emperor's balanced, affable humanity is displayed by his moderate dinners, tasteful

1. On natural beauty, Betty Radice, "A Fresh Approach to Pliny's Letters," *G and R*, XXXI / IX¹ (1962), 160–68; on humor, G. H. Thompson, "Pliny's Want of Humor," *CJ*, XXXVII (1942), 193–200; on history, H. W. Traub, "Pliny's Treatment of History in the Epistolary Form," *TAPA*, LXXXVI (1955), 213–22; on essay technique, R. M. Gummere "The English Essay and Some of its Ancient Prototypes," *CW*, XIV (1921), 154–60, especially 159.

2. Mention of metaphor is absent from such standard

stylistic studies as the brief but excellent introduction of J. H. Westcott, *Selected Letters of Pliny* (New York, 1898); J. P. Lagergren, *De vita et elocutione C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi* (Upsala, 1877); or general appreciations such as that of J. W. Duff, *A Literary History of Rome in the Silver Age*³ (New York, 1964), pp. 440–43.

3. References throughout are to numbers of sections in the text of R. A. B. Mynors, *C. Plini Secundi epistularum libri decem* (Oxford, 1963).

musical entertainments, long, pleasant conversations, and thoughtful gifts. Trajan's naturalness, openness, and simplicity in his entire mode of living (*convictus*, 14) equals, Pliny says, his *gravitas*. The statement (14) is another transition, this time to the character of Trajan's villa and surroundings: "sed mihi ut gravitas cognitionum, consilii honor, suavitas simplicitasque convictus, ita locus ipse pericundus fuit."

So prefaced, this portion makes only passing comment on the villa, then settles on its central interest, a lengthy description of the harbor being developed out of a natural bay adjacent to the villa (15–17). The two arms of the bay are artificially extended; beyond these in the sea an island is being constructed as a breakwater to render safe the waters of the bay. The construction will provide a haven on an otherwise treacherous coast.⁴ The feature of this project marked by Pliny is its uniformly natural character. For, like the extended horns of the bay which merely augment the bay's natural arms, the island is not thoughtlessly imposed upon existing features but is made to imitate a natural island (*enatam insulam imitentur*, 17). Thus, while suited to the native surroundings in appearance, the island controls the bay's waters in a natural fashion.

The difficulty with this description of the engineering project is that it appears *prima facie* as an appendage to the rest of the essay concerning Trajan's virtues.⁵ We might suppose that the description is not meant to have any integral connection with the rest of the letter, that Pliny was simply led into a digression by his interest in construction, that he merely wished to fill out the picture of the villa's surroundings with some poetic commonplaces,⁶ or that he wished to show by the description, however poorly integrated, the

industry of Trajan as a complement to his other virtues. Analysis of the letter, however, taking into account some of Pliny's techniques in essay, demonstrates that the description is designed primarily as a metaphor for the emperor. As such, the description is fully integral to the rest of the letter and forms in fact its final, most important member, capping and unifying the whole essay.

Analysis should begin with two observations on style. We know that one of Pliny's techniques in the total structure of essays (as in individual parts) is tripartite arrangement in which three parts serve as a climactic series or function, by their separate, graded movements, to develop the point of the essay at the conclusion. The three ghost stories (7. 27), for example, concerning two others and finally Pliny himself, comprise a triad; the three episodes about Regulus (2. 20), recounting progressively more outrageous deeds, form a climactic series; the dolphin story (9. 33), with its three main groups of characters (boys, adult townspeople, and finally officials), is similarly graded, with the intensifying series producing finally a profound comment on human nature.⁷ The tripartite arrangement, as observed here in 6. 31, has the description of the port as the third member following the accounts of (1) the emperor in court, and (2) his entertainments. Thus the arrangement indicates that the port's description has a cardinal, or at least an integral, part in the essay as a display of Trajan's character.

A second favorite technique of Pliny is to begin an essay with a key idea, a word or phrase having an orthodox meaning, and, in the course of the essay, to develop and redefine the initial idea so that it emerges again at the conclusion infused with a new meaning that is always personal, sometimes profound. Exam-

4. For a description of the bay from archaeological evidence, see R. Meiggs, *Roman Ostia* (Oxford, 1960), pp. 59 ff.

5. With the exception of A.-M. Guillemin (n. 6), none of the commentaries discusses the nature of the last section or its relationship to the other parts. Cf., e.g., G. E. Gierig, *C. Plinii Caecilii Secundi epistolarum libri decem*, II (Leipzig, 1802); A. N. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny* (Oxford, 1966). Surprisingly, the letter is not included in the selections of Merrill, Westcott, or Sherwin-White, *Fifty Letters of*

Pliny (Oxford, 1966).

6. A.-M. Guillemin in *Pline et la vie littéraire de son temps* (Paris, 1929), p. 118, suggested unconvincingly, as noted by Sherwin-White (*The Letters of Pliny*, p. 396), that the description was a literary commonplace with precedents in Vergil, Livy, and Lucan.

7. See C. L. Miller, S.J., "The Younger Pliny's Dolphin Story," *CW*, LX (1966), 6–8.

ples are plentiful, but one of the best is the letter on hunting (1. 6), which develops the conclusion that hunting is worthwhile when the hunter follows Minerva as diligently as Diana, when the hunter's weapons are pen and notebook as much as lance and nets, and when the hunt is as much exercise of mind as of muscle. A short essay, 4. 6, begins with monetary profit from villas, but ends with profit redefined as the benefits of study and self-cultivation enjoyed at the villa. Another skillful development of an ordinary idea is 9. 6, the essay on the races: at the conclusion there emerges a new, subjective meaning of *otium* totally transformed from that of the circusgoers at the beginning.

In 6. 31, the technique is employed again, except that here the initial idea receives a metaphorical treatment in the third member of the essay. The initial idea is the "emperor in retreat," *in secessu* (2), and transformation of the phrase through a series of related phrases traces the metaphorical identification of Trajan with the bay. At the beginning, *in secessu* is underscored by rhetorical paradox: it is "in the retreat," Pliny says, that the virtues of the emperor are best revealed. Now *secessus* not only means a "retreat," like Trajan's private villa, but also suggests and is sometimes used to mean a bay or port like Cumae.⁸ Thus there is another level of meaning to *in secessu*, that is, the "emperor in his bay," the emperor expressed in the actual, physical features of the bay constructed by him. This idea, the port as a metaphor for Trajan, or the emperor as *portus*, is the new idea indicated in the last member of the essay. For the first phrase corresponding to *in secessu* is *in sinu* (15); the full phrase, *portus in sinu*, stands in close conjunction with the transitional sentence to the bay's description. The *portus in sinu* is then followed by the *portus* and *receptaculum* on a havenless (*importuosum*) coast (17). There is also a second, reinforcing idea in the transformed name of the bay. In the initial sentence of the

essay, Pliny stresses by the stylistic device of parentheses *Centum Cellae* as the present name of the place (*hoc loco nomen*, 2).⁹ In the last part then the identification of port and emperor is conspicuously put forward in the transformation of the name of the port (reserved until the final sentence). No longer the *Centum Cellae* of the beginning, no longer a bay but a port, it will henceforth have the name of its builder, Trajan (*portus Traiani*).

Between *Centum Cellae* and *portus Traiani*, between beginning and ending, the metaphorical identification of emperor with bay indicated by the play on words is less briefly explained. In the first place, the reader's tendency to regard the port as a metaphor for the emperor is encouraged and grows naturally out of regarding the bay as a manifestation of Trajan's qualities. That is, the port, regarded even in a straightforward, unimaginative way, approaches metaphor simply in that the construction is an impression on the landscape of the emperor's character, as any work on the natural features of a place conveys the characteristics and principles of the builder. This nearly metaphorical technique is employed by Horace, for instance, in *Odes* 3. 1. 33–37, where the builder, contemptuous of nature (*terrae fastidiosus*, 37), casts down great moles into the sea and unnaturally extends the land, until the fish, natives of the sea, feel the water compressed about them. The mode of construction is a graphic example of the builder's arrogant, impious attitude to all things natural and (within the context of the Ode) truly Roman. The same technique is familiar from one of Herodotus's best episodes concerning Xerxes. The king's unnatural tyrannical character, his lack of harmony with nature, is displayed in his construction of the bridge over a Hellespont whose very waters oppose with a storm the forced yoke of East and West, Greek and Persian (7. 34–35). The bridge's significance for Xerxes' character is reinforced by his scourging, fettering, and

8. On *secessus*, Lewis and Short cite Iuv. 3. 5, "et saepe."

9. For parentheses, Westcott, introduction, p. 36. As regards the name of the place, *Centum Cellae* seems to have been the

name familiar to Pliny's readers. Cf. Sherwin-White, *The Letters of Pliny*, p. 391.

even branding of the rebellious waters. By contrast, however, Trajan's construction manifests only concern for and harmony with nature in the natural mode of construction followed for the moles and island which, instead of being ruthless, excessive impositions, merely augment and imitate native features. At the risk of using an anachronistic term, we might say that Trajan's construction is in the best spirit of modern ecology.

To move from the emperor's construction as a record of his character engraved on the topography to the same as a full metaphor for the emperor involves only a slight, barely perceptible shift of focus. And if we still doubt that Pliny would employ construction as a metaphor for character, we find a good parallel in his famous essay on the villas Tragedy and Comedy (9. 7). For there the construction conveys not one but two contrasting moods, or individual psychic states, of the builder. Comedy is all flexibility, ease, and expansiveness: low-lying on the landscape, cheek by jowl with one of Lake Como's bays, enfolding it with a gentle curve, bending easily about the margin with a wide, generous terrace, and finally, in total intimacy with the bay, even allowing the owner to fish from his cot as from a dinghy. Tragedy, by contrast, is all rigidity, dignity, and formality: erect as on buskins, commanding rather than embracing the water, cutting across two bays on a high, rocky ridge, aloof from the waves, and allowing the owner to look down from a distance on those fishing below.¹⁰ To different ends, the construction of *portus Traiani* is a metaphor in which Pliny says a great deal about the character of Trajan.

In the metaphorical construction of the port, the prominent feature is the artificial island used as a breakwater. Writing centuries later, John Donne would begin a famous poem by asserting that "no man is an island," thus exploiting the metaphor by denying it. By skillfully maintaining just the opposite, Pliny presents the island as the central meta-

phor for Trajan; for the purpose of the island is to create for man's benefit a safe port on a wild, havenless coast. The island is created by sinking great rocks that are then held fast together by pilings so that the wild waters are broken and made smooth on its rigid surface. To the Roman literary consciousness, the island, appearing as a rocky ridge (*saxeum dorsum*, 17) in the sea, would perhaps recall another such rock in a famous simile. In his resistance to the tide of political *furor*, King Latinus is compared to a great rock (*rupes*) in the sea (*Aen.* 7. 586 ff.). And both Greek and Roman literary tradition held it well established, virtually axiomatic, that the unsettled sea could serve as an image of human turmoil, whether political or spiritual. It may be that Pliny, having seen Domitian's reign and being familiar enough with the rule of Nero, visualized Trajan generally as exceptional, as a safe port, in a series of rulers whose times resembled a rugged, forbidding coastline without haven. Certainly, Pliny takes the trouble to contrast Nero and Trajan in the narrative of the law cases (9). In the total context of the essay, however, it seems more likely that the port is meant primarily as the haven provided by Trajan's firm judgment, the judgment here available in the retreat to those caught up in the difficulties displayed in the legal narrative. There is the general impression created by the form of the bay, all symmetry and balance compared to the snarl of the legal cases. The bay's mouth, protected by the island, with arms extended left and right and firmly reinforced, affords safe passage into smooth waters fairly and equally, as it were, to those approaching from either side (*ab utroque latere*, 16). The island as a metaphor responds best and most directly to the character of Trajan in court, standing forth solid and constant in *gravitas* amid the swirl of confused human and legal problems. The impression is supported by emphasis on the solidity and firmness of the island: the repetition of *saxa*, *saxeum*, and *saxis*, extend-

10. Cf., for other instances in Pliny of construction used metaphorically, the excessive, disordered building and landscaping of Regulus (4. 2. 5); the ordered, serene construction about Clitumnus matching the nature of the stream (8. 8).

For a brief study of an exemplary instance of construction expressing character and mood in Vergil, cf. the writer's "Toy Troy: The New Perspective of the Backward Glance," *Vergilius*, XVI (1970), 26-28.

ing like a stony ridge through description of the sea, answers to the stress on *gravitas* in the firm, settling verdicts given amid the fluid, shifting details of the three legal cases. This is especially true in the third case where *gravitas* (*summa gravitate*, 11) appears centered in the account of the most complex issues of the series. In the description of the port, the account of the sinking of the island's rocks, which settle and remain firmly placed by their own weight (*ipso pondere*, 16), is central. The word for the rocks' weight, *pondus*, commonly used in its metaphorical sense of "constancy," "firmness," or "weight of character," corresponds to the emperor's *gravitas* emphasized in the legal narrative.

Along with *gravitas*, Trajan's other major virtue, the quality displayed in the second member of the essay describing the emperor's entertainment, is *comitas*, or his naturalness and humanity. This virtue finds its correspondence in the second major characteristic of the port already mentioned: its naturalness of construction in which there is nothing superfluous, imposed, or discordant, but simple intensification of native features. Yet here we come to the greater function and significance of the metaphor in the total structure of the essay. For Pliny presents in the preface as program for the essay the triad, *iustitia, gravitas, comitas . . . per plures species . . .*, where *iustitia* must appear redundant at first glance because it is not overtly stated in the essay. That is, although we have assumed provisionally in the preliminary survey of the essay that *iustitia* is focused upon along with *gravitas* in the legal narrative, it is impossible to document it formally. Pliny does not once mention *iustitia* in the narrative, while

gravitas and *comitas* are conspicuously mentioned and often emphasized by synonyms. On the other hand, there is the unevenness, not typical of Pliny, if *iustitia* were in fact omitted. There is also the tripartite division of the essay suggesting that, since *gravitas* and *comitas* are displayed in the first and second parts respectively, *iustitia* should be illustrated in the third part. Here the answer is evident from the character of the metaphor itself, in which *gravitas* and *comitas* are not merely independent of one another, but integrated so as to display *iustitia*. That is, the island in form and function, with firmness and naturalness, provides an image that unites both Trajans, the Trajan firm in law and the Trajan natural at dinner. As the island orders nature in a firm but natural manner, so too, the metaphor suggests, Trajan with combined firmness and humanity gives order to human nature through law. In this way the metaphor, while describing Trajan as a whole individual, serves primarily to define his justice. It emerges as similar to the justice of Plato's *Republic*, which, as that dialogue urges, is human and natural rather than imposed on nature from without. And then too, the definitions of justice given by Justinian and Cicero taken together contain firmness and humanity as cardinal ingredients.¹¹

In summary then, the description of the port's construction, so far from being an appendage, is the climax that integrates the whole in accordance with Pliny's techniques in essay. He employs the special feature of metaphor, the emperor as *insula*, in order to achieve this unity.

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11. Cic. *Fin.* 5. 23. 65, "...societatem coniunctionis humanae munifice et aequae tuens, iustitia dicitur, cui sunt

adiunctae...comitas"; Just. *Inst.* 1. 1. 1, "iustitia est constans et perpetua voluntas ius suum cuique tribuendi."

SAEVITIA AMORIS: PROPERTIUS 1. 1

Those who read the poetry of Propertius cannot fail to be struck by the prominent role played by words like *durus*, *duritia*, *saevus*, *saevitia*, *crudelis*, *dolor*, etc.,¹ and to multiply

instances of scholars who have referred to it would be otiose.

Two studies concerned with the first poem of the first book can be given particular

1. For usage, cf. R. Pichon, *De sermone amatorio apud latinos elegiarum scriptores* (Paris, 1902), s.vv.