

Pliny the Younger and his Suicide Ethos

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Abstract. Pliny's letters contain reliable historical records of his period. While efforts have been made to study the ethics of suicide in some of these letters, especially the Stoics' attitude towards suicide, little, if any, have been made to study a selection of those suicide letters drawing out reasons behind the suicide, beyond the apparent ethical and moral grounds. This paper, therefore, selected and discussed four of the letters, specifically on suicide of prominent ancient Roman citizens of Pliny's time, to ascertain the motivating factors behind the suicides. Thomas Joiner Interpersonal-Psychological theory of suicide behaviour, which emphasises, among others, hopelessness as one of the major reasons for suicide formed the theoretical basis. The four letters, purposively selected, based on the theme of suicide, were content-analysed to study the reasons and circumstances of the suicide and the attitude of Pliny to the victims. These were supported with corroborative evidence from relevant literature. Findings revealed that the victims were passing through excruciating physical pain, mental anguish, emotional stress, and socio-political frustrations; and that while the Greeks would not accord a proper burial to the fellow who died of suicide without the permission of the State, the Romans recognised suicide as courageous, almost in all cases. The paper concluded by recommending that concrete efforts should be made to reduce, to the barest minimal, all those factors which make suicide attractive.

Keywords: Suicide, Pliny the Younger, Ancient Romans, Pliny's Letters, Interpersonal-Psychological Theory.

1. Introduction

Suicide, from the Latin *sui caedere*, means to kill oneself. In other words, to, deliberately, carry out

action that is sure to lead to one's death. Suicides and suicidal attempts are now very prominent, negating a general belief that self-preservation is the first law of nature. It is reported that about 800,000 to a million people die by suicide every year, while there are around 10 to 20 million attempted-suicide in the same period. Modern studies of suicides reveal that over 90% of suicide victims suffered from mental imbalance and disorder caused by depression, despair, alcoholism, financial difficulties, stress, drug abuse, among others. Mann and Currier assert that the brains of those who died through suicide show certain glaring differences, after death, from the brains of those who died due to other reasons. If this is true, it means that a number of factors must have affected the brain prior to a suicide. Suicide is, therefore, a health problem; thus, preventable. Pliny the Younger, in his letters, records some of the most famous suicides of his days. Whether such acts are courageous or cowardly depend on several circumstances. Pliny, however, present all as highly commendable and worthy of emulation. What can we learn from Pliny about the attitudes of his contemporaries to suicide? Did they actually consider suicide as courageous? Why would a Roman of Pliny's era commit suicide? Can we discourage, or even eliminate, this reprehensible act, through lessons from the ancient accounts? This paper discusses the suicide accounts in Pliny's letters with a consideration of circumstances leading to such suicides. The paper begins with some accounts of the ancients' attitudes to suicide, notes on Interpersonal-Psychological Theory, Pliny's life and works. It proceeds to cover the theme of death and suicide in the selected letters and concludes with useful recommendations to prevent suicide.

Suicide and the Ancients

In his work on the *10 Famous Suicide of the Ancient World*, Scott McCulloch provides a list of famous suicides of the ancient world, both from historical records and mythological accounts. He mentions Queen Dido of Carthage, about 1180 BC; Lucretia, 508 BC; Socrates, 399 BC; Hannibal Barca, Carthaginian General, 182 BC; Cato the Younger, 46BC; Marcus Junius Brutus, 42 BC; Cleopatra and Antony, 30 BC; Seneca the Younger, 65AD; Nero, 68 AD; and Otho, 69 AD. However, some of these famous suicides were not 'real' suicides when we consider the fact that the victims were compelled to commit the act. Notable are those of Socrates, who was forced by the State to drink the hemlock; and Seneca, the Younger, who had to commit suicide by the order of the Emperor Nero. When Nero himself, about three years after the death of the Younger Seneca, committed suicide, he could not carry out the act and had to instruct his private secretary to do this; yet, the death of Nero is recorded as a suicide. Other famous suicides of the Roman world include those of the Emperors Gordian, Magnentius, Maximian and Quintillus.

At present, one of the main arguments against suicide is that such individuals who commit suicide lack sufficient courage to put their affairs in order, regardless of the reasons behind such act. Thus, these people take the easy way out. However, does it not show some level of courage for one to kill oneself; especially since most people are secretly afraid of death? The ancients had diverse opinions concerning suicide and this had a lot to do with circumstances. Available records show that the Romans, and indeed most of the ancients, did not consider suicide as disgraceful or as the outcome of a mental-*cum*-psychological imbalance. The ancient Romans were very much concerned about their image in the minds of the people after death and the effects of those pictures on their descendants. They commended military generals who would rather take to the 'most honourable' path of suicide instead of returning home to report defeat. While the Ancient Greeks frowned at suicides, they also encouraged it under certain circumstances, especially in the face of military defeats. Most of the ancient suicides, therefore, were actually in protection of honour, or of property, as reputable individuals would commit suicide rather than face a disgrace or jeopardise the interests of the families and relatives. In this way, suicide was seen as a courageous act of nobility to rectify disgraceful and shameful conducts very similar to the Japanese *hara-kiri* or to simply escape from unfavourable circumstances. McCulloch maintains that, prior to the Council of Arles in 452 AD, suicide was not

officially condemned, even by the Christians, as a sin.

Pliny's Life and Works

Pliny's name was Publius Caecilius Secundus prior to his adoption by his maternal uncle, Gaius Plinius Secundus. After the adoption, about 79 AD, he changed his name to Gaius Plinius Caecilius Secundus. Pliny was born at Comum in late 61 or early 62 AD during the reign of the Emperor Nero. His father's name was Lucius Caecilius Secundus while his mother was Plinia. His father died when Pliny was still very young. Pliny studied under Quintilian and Nicetes Sacerdos and was already a lawyer at the age of 19. He started his career at the bar of the *Centumviral* Court where he was appointed as one of the ten assistants of the praetor in charge of the court. Pliny became a Tribune in 81, *quaestor caesaris* in 89, praetor in 93 and *praefectus aerarii militaris*, Treasurer of the Military Treasury, during the reign of terror. In the time of the Emperor Nerva Pliny got the post of *praefectus aerarii Saturnii*, the officer of the State Treasury. He occupied this position between 98 and 100. Pliny was Consul from September to October of 100 and was Governor of Bithynia in 110 to 113. He died around 113 AD aged 51. He married three times for he lost his first two wives. For his third wife he married Calpurnia, the granddaughter of Calpurnius Fabatus. Pliny was a rich man, having inherited a lot from his parents and uncle. The most important interest of Pliny was literature. He started writing when he was around 14 years old and gave public recitations of his works. He wrote a Greek comedy, delivered speeches and composed verses. Most of these did not survive except the few quotes mentioned in the letters. He encouraged literary works and had the desire to be recognised alongside Tacitus in the field of literature. He advocated translations of languages for, in his opinion, this makes for the best understanding since what escapes a reader cannot escape a translator. Pliny achieved the highest position of his career during the reign of Emperor Trajan. His prominent position in the society therefore made him a valuable source of information on his period of Roman history.

2. The Letters of Pliny

One of the most important genuine contributions of the Romans to Literature is in the area of letter writing. Although the Greeks wrote letters, the letters were not only scanty but also not historical; for the situation in Greece was very different from that of the Roman Empire. The city-state was not the type of place where one would write to someone likely to be

seen a few hours after. Thus, while the emphasis in Greece was on speaking, letter writing flourished among the Romans. Virgil, Ovid, Seneca, Cicero, Horace and Pliny the Younger all composed verse epistles. Seneca wrote philosophical letters, Cicero's were personal letters not originally meant for publication but Pliny's letters were written deliberately for publication. In fact, nine out of the 10 books were published before his death. As he wrote in Letter number one of the very first book addressed to Septicius Clarus:

frequenter hortatus es ut epistulas, si quas Paulo curatius scripsissem, colligerem publicaremque. college non servato temporis ordine (neque enim historiam componebam), sed ut quaeque in manus venerat. superseset ut nec te consilii nec me paeniteat obsequii. ita enim fiet, ut eas quae adhuc neglectae iacent requiram et si quas addidero non supprimam.

Many a time, I have been encouraged by you to assemble and publish those of my letters composed with rather more care. This I have done, without retaining chronological order (since I was not writing history) but as each had come into my hands. What remains is for you not to regret mentioning the idea and for myself not to regret having complied with it. For the outcome will be that I shall look out those letters which have been initially neglected and shall not keep back any one written afterwards.

Pliny composed his letters, modeled on Cicero's, during the Silver Age of the Roman Literature, a period that followed that of Emperor Augustus' Golden Age, about A.D. 14 – AD 138. He wrote most of the letters during the reign of the Emperors Nerva and Trajan. The letters were historical and didactic. They contain a number of episodes about Domitian, Nerva and Trajan administrations. Pliny educates and entertains his readers, praises some people and criticizes others. Each letter contains single subject matter. Pliny lived through the period of Nero, his birth, until the time of Trajan, his death. Thus, certain events of these periods influence the mood of the letters especially concerning Paetus and Arria.

Pliny's Latin has been said to be unsurpassed during the Silver Age. The Silver Age, during which period Pliny composed his letters, is the term applied to the post-Augustan period of Latin literature when the language was beginning to decline, about AD 14 – AD 138. During this age there lived in Rome notable literary men such as Juvenal, Tacitus, Martial, Quintilian, Lucan, the Elder Seneca, Petronius, the Younger Seneca, Persius, the Elder Pliny, and many others. Pliny was as good as any of these, if not

better. This age witnessed the reigns of 13 emperors with Pliny's public life spanning the periods of three of these: Domitian, Nerva and Trajan. There are 368 letters of Pliny published in 10 books; nine of these by Pliny himself and the tenth posthumously. The first nine books contain 247 letters written from AD 79 to AD 109. *Book X* has 121 letters mainly to the Emperor and from the Emperor, written between 111-113 AD. The letters were composed in rhythmic prose, containing a number of quotes and allusions, with conscious efforts to make them appealing to the public. They were addressed to several diverse recipients, with various subjects. The recipients were friends and colleagues while the themes include illness, stories, suicide, criticisms, praises, advices, and recommendations, among others. The letters present the Roman society at the height of her power in a somewhat contrary dimension to the bitter positions maintained by Martial and Juvenal. Pliny attempts to balance his appraisal and judgment of the society trying, apparently, as much as possible, to be fair to all concerned.

3. Suicide in Pliny's Letters

Pliny, in his letters, makes several references to death as a theme. In fact, in more than 40 of these letters, death is directly referred to, whether by execution, through accident, and attempted murder and manslaughter; Martial's death and the death of Regulus's son, among several others. These mainly have to do with the reports of death of several notable men of his era. Sadly, the causes of death, in most of these, except in the cases of suicide and a few others, are not mentioned. Pliny discusses incidences of suicides in Letters i: 12, iii: 7, iii: 16 and vi: 24. In Letter i: 22 to Catilius Severus about Titius Aristo's prolonged illness, Pliny considers the problem of suicide. Aristo suffers from a protracted disease, calls his friends to request of the doctor if he had any hope of survival. If yes, he would gladly continue to endure, and if not he would love to quickly put an end to his own life:

mirareris si interesses, qua patientia hanc ipsam valetudinem toleret, ut dolori resistat, ut sitim differat, ut incredibilem februm ardorem immotus opertusque transmittat. nuper me paucosque mecum, quos maxime diligit, advocavit rogavitque, ut medicos consuleremus de summa valetudinis, ut si esset insuperabilis sponte exiret e vita; si tantum difficilis et longa, resisteret maneretque: dandum enim precibus uxoris, dandum filiae lacrimis, dandum etiam nobis amicis, ne spes nostras, si modo non essent inanes, volutaria morte desereret.

His patience throughout this illness, if you could only see it, would fill you with admiration; he fights against pain, resists thirst, and endures the unbelievable heat of his fever without moving or throwing off his coverings. A few days ago, he sent for me and some of his intimate friends, and told us to ask the doctors what the outcome of his illness would be, so that if it was to be fatal he could deliberately put an end to his life, though he would carry on with the struggle if it was only to be long and painful; he owed it to his wife's prayers and his daughter's tears, and to us, his friends, not to betray our hopes by a self-inflicted death so long as these hopes were not in vain.

This summarises the average mindset of a Roman of Pliny's era concerning suicide. Something to be deeply considered and thought of, to be avoided if the situation could still be helped, but to be greatly encouraged, recommended and approved in helpless and hopeless situations. Clearly, the influence of stoicism on this concept and philosophy of suicide is pronounced and, though encouraged, each suicide must be studied separately, avoiding undue generalisation and pessimistic dogmatism.

4. Corellius Rufus' Suicide – Book I: 12

During the reign of Nerva, in the year 97, two of Pliny's mentors died: Corellius Rufus and Verginius Rufus. This letter was written in that year, addressed to Calestrius Tiro, on the suicide of Corellius Rufus. Pliny here expresses the opinion that when men die of diseases, fate and other natural causes, it is never as sad as when they die of their own accord. Pliny laments the more in this letter, not only on account of the death of Rufus but more importantly because the death was due to suicide:

decessit Correlius Rufus et quidem sponte, quod dolorem meum exulcerat. Est enim luctuosissimum genus mortis, quae non ex natura nec fatalis videtur. Nam utcumque in illis qui morbo finiuntur, magnum ex ipsa necessitate solacium est; in iis vero quos accersita mors aufert, hic insanabilis dolor est, quod creduntur potuisse diu vivere.'

Corellius Rufus has died, and died by his own wish, which makes me even sadder; for death is most tragic when it is not due to fate or natural causes. When we see men die of disease, at least we can find consolation in the knowledge that it is inevitable, but, when their end is self-sought, our grief is inconsolable because we feel that their lives could have been long.

The reason for the suicide, according to Pliny, is pain from an illness. The description of the disease is terse and poignant in Pliny's hand. The description contributes to the pessimistic feeling that encompasses one while reading the letter. One wonders what Pliny's attitude would have been towards euthanasia. From about the age of 32 Corellius had been afflicted with a disease in his feet and he bore the pain until the ripe age of 67; when the pain was no longer bearable for him, he decided to escape by killing himself. In fact, the disease had spread, over the years, from his feet to the whole limb. He refused to eat for several days and starved himself to death. As a young man, it was not difficult for him to manage the infection, but the older he became the more difficult it was. Pliny explains that Corellius was forced by circumstances beyond his control, as well as absolute necessity, to make this decision and not for a lack of courage. Furthermore, there is the fact that giving himself up for death was even in itself a courageous act for someone who had several things to gain from life. Corellius had several reasons to continue to hold on to life: good reputation and influence, wife and sisters, daughter and grandchild, relatives and friends. Corellius would really have preferred to continue to live for all these people but for the unbearable pain. In short, according to Pliny, his suicide was a reasonable one since the reasons behind the actions outweighed all that life could give him. Corellius had actually decided to endure the pain because he wanted to outlive the Emperor Domitian.

cur' inquit 'me putas hos tantos dolores tam diu sustinere? – ut scilicet isti latroni vel uno die supersim.' *Dedisses huic animo par corpus, fecisset quod optabat.*

Why do you suppose I endure pain like this so long?' he said. 'So that I can outlive that robber if only by a single day.' Had his body been equal to his spirit he would have made sure that he had his desire.

If he had been endowed with sufficient physical strength, according to Pliny, perhaps he would have contributed to the downfall of the Emperor Domitian, described by Pliny as 'that robber.' Domitian was the Roman Emperor from 81 to 96. He was a totalitarian despot, popular with the people of Rome but detested by the elite and the Roman senate. The officials of the court, Maximus and Stephanus, eventually assassinated Domitian in the year 96, which brought in the reign of the Emperor Nerva. When Domitian was assassinated, the senators rejoiced and Corellius felt he could now depart the world. Pliny visited Corellius during the reign of Domitian and witnessed the man's determination to outlive the Emperor.

Pliny appears to deprecate suicide in this letter contrary to his opinion about suicides in, for example, vi: 24 and other places. Here, he disapproves suicide because it has shortened the life of a close friend and that if it were not approved by the Stoic doctrine, perhaps Corellius would have lived longer. This appears really not a disapproval in the plain sense of it but only a literary skill to praise the victim and exaggerates the loss. Corellius was a stoic, and to the stoics there was no harm in a man taking his own life in as much as there were sufficient reasons why the life has to be taken. Seneca, a famous stoic, buttresses this in one of his letters:

morbum morte non fugiam, dumtaxat sanabilem nec officientem animo. non afferam mihi manus propter dolorem: sic mori vinci est. hunc tamen si sciero perpetuo mihi esse patiendum, exibo, non propter ipsum, sed quia impedimento mihi futurus est ad omne propter quod vivitur; imbecillus est et ignavus qui propter dolorem moritur, stultus qui doloris causa vivit.

I shall not avoid illness by seeking death, as long as the illness is curable and does not impede my soul. I shall not lay violent hands upon myself just because I am in pain; for death under such circumstances is defeat. But if I find out that the pain must always be endured, I shall depart, not because of the pain but because it will be a hindrance to me as regards all my reasons for living. He who dies just because he is in pain is a weakling, a coward; but he who lives merely to brave out this pain, is a fool.

This was argued by scholars, even in those era, within the fold of ethical discourses when the Roman's knowledge of philosophy was restricted to ethics with a little touch of metaphysics, basically for religious purposes. 'When philosophy came to Rome through the Greeks, the speculative aspect of it was suppressed. The ethical part of it, especially Stoic ethics, found a close parallel in the moral standards cherished among the Romans'

5. Suicide of Silius Italicus – Book III: 7

This is another suicide committed through starvation as recorded in *Pliny's Letter 7 of Book III*, addressed to Caninius Rufus. Apparently starvation was one of the most highly recommended means of suicide to the Romans. Silius had to commit suicide because he had a tumor, which was incurable and painful. Pliny calls these cases of suicide an 'escape'. Tiberius Catus Asconius Silius Italicus was a Roman senator and orator. His date of birth is not certain but it could be anything from AD 23 to AD 35. Pliny says that Silius was an informant during the reign of Nero. Nero was the Roman Emperor from year 54 to 68AD.

The Romans considered Nero a corrupt and wicked Emperor. A number of Romans also believed that Nero was responsible for the Great Fire that destroyed Rome in 64 AD. Nero himself committed suicide in 68, having been driven away from the throne in order to avoid possible public execution. Silius was also a consul in the year 68, the same year that Nero died. After the death of Nero, Silius became a confidant of the Emperor Vitellius. He was also the Proconsul of Asia in year 77. Silius, like the stoics of those periods, believed so much in suicide and did not hesitate in putting it to practice. He was already 75 years old before the suicide. He was the last consul of Nero, the last to die of those consuls while Nero himself died during his consulship. Pliny sermonized on birth and death, speaking of Silius' suicide:

Quod me recordantem fragilitatis humanae miseratio subit. Quid enim tam circumcisum tam breve quam hominis vita longissima? An non videtur tibi Nero modo fuisse? cum interim ex iis, qui sub illo gesserant consulatum, nemo iam superset. Quamquam quid hoc miror? Nuper L. Piso, pater Pisonis illius, qui Valerio Festo per summum facinus in Africa occisus est, dicere solebat neminem se videre in senatu, quem consul ipse sententiam rogavisset. Tam angustis terminis tantae multitudinis vivacitas ipsa concluditur, ut mihi non venia solum dignae, verum etiam laude videantur illae regiae lacrimae; nam ferunt Xerses, cum immensum exercitum oculis obisset, illacrimasse, quod tot milibus tam brevis immineret occasus.

The thought of this fills me with pity for human frailty; nothing is so short and fleeting as the longest of human lives. It must seem to you only the other day that Nero died, yet not one of those who held consulships in his time is alive today. I suppose I should not find this remarkable when only recently Lucius Piso, father of the Piso who was so criminally put to death in Africa by Valerius Festus, used to say that none of those he had called on to speak when he was consul could still be seen in the Senate. So narrow are the limits set to life, even in a large community, that it seems to me that the Persian king should be forgiven, or even admired for his famous tears; for it is said that after Xerxes had reviewed his vast army, he wept to think of the end awaiting so many thousands in so short a time.

Pliny ends the letter by admonishing men to make use of the fleeting life in literary pursuits for that would, in all probability, lead to immortal life. In his book, *Punica*, Silius praises suicide. In 103 AD, Silius starved himself to death.

6. Arria and Caecina Paetus – Book III: 16

One of the most interesting letters of Pliny, number 16 of Book III, is addressed to Maecilius Nepos. This letter contains the suicide account of both the husband, Caecina Paetus and the wife, Arria.

Emperor Augustus had ruled the Roman Empire until AD 14 and he had succeeded in restoring political order.

When Augustus died, Tiberius became the emperor. There were two mutinies during the reign of Emperor Tiberius. Tiberius died in 37 AD, leaving two grandsons as heirs to the throne: Caligula by adoption and Gemellus by birth. Gaius Caligula succeeded in becoming the Emperor and executed Gemellus a few months after. This led to his own assassination in AD 41 when Claudius became the emperor. These series of events forced a number of senators to rise up advocating for a return to republican government, thereby opposing the Emperor. At this time, in AD 42, there was a revolt against Claudius, led by the stoic Lucius Scribonianus. Caecina Paetus, the subject of this letter, also took part in this revolt, which was aborted. Scribonianus was murdered during this revolt and Caecina had to commit suicide. Pliny tells the story of this suicide with the heroic acts of Arria Major, the Elder Arria.

Arria was the wife of Caecina, and when the husband was condemned, she stabbed herself and handed over the knife to Caecina with the words: *Paete, non dolet*. Caecina Paetus and the Elder Arria gave birth to a daughter called the Younger Arria, who married the Stoic leader Thrasea Clodius Paetus; and they were the parents of Fannia. In 62 A.D., the year of Pliny's birth, Thrasea retired from the court. In year 65 there was an abortive coup against Nero by Piso which was followed by the execution of Thrasea in 66. In A.D. 68 there was a rebellion in Gaul led by Gaius Vindex with the support of Sulpicius Galba, governor of Hither Spain, which Verginius Rufus, army commander of Upper Germany stopped, forcing Vindex to commit suicide. The senate and the praetorian guards supported Galba so Nero committed suicide. However, even Galba could not rule for long; hence, the year of the four emperors, 68-69: Galba-Otho-Vitellius-Vespasian. Flavius Vespasianus ruled from December 69 to June 24, 79 A.D. During his reign, the clash which had taken place during Nero's rule, between Nero and the stoic leaders, resurfaced under the leadership of Helvidius Priscus. Priscus married Fannia, the daughter of Thrasea and the Younger Arria.

This letter describes Pliny's conversation with Fannia, granddaughter of Arria where Fannia recounts several heroic actions of her grandmother including her encouragement of her husband in their suicide, mentioned above.

praeclarum quidem illud eiusdem, ferrum stringere, perfodere pectus, extrahere pugionem, porrigere marito, addere vocem immortalem ac paene divinam: 'Paete, non dolet.'

It was a glorious deed, I know, to draw a dagger, plunge it into her breast, pull it out, and hand it to her husband with the immortal words: 'It does not hurt, Paetus.'

Indeed this suicide is one of the most celebrated, not only by Pliny but by several Roman historians. The determination of Arria contributed to the popularity. It is true that Pliny is known to have praised very many people. In fact, some of his contemporaries criticized him for over praising and flattery of individuals. However, the praise of Arria and her husband appears to be so well deserved and merited. Especially of note is the statement that her suicide was not impulsive but a well thought out premeditated action:

eadem apud Claudium uxori Scriboniani, cum illa profiteretur indicium, 'ego' inquit 'te audiam, cuius in gremio Scribonianus occisus est, et vivis?' ex quo manifestum est ei consilium pulcherrimae mortis non subitum fuisse. quin etiam, cum Thrasea gener eius deprecaretur, ne mori pergeret, interque alia dixisset: 'vis ergo filiam tuam, si mihi pereundum fuerit, mori mecum?', respondit: 'si tam diu tantaque concordia vixerit tecum quam ego cum Paeto, volo.'

Again, when she came before Claudius and found the wife of Scribonianus volunteering to give evidence of the revolt, 'Am I to listen to you, 'she cried, 'who could go on living after Scribonianus died in your arms?' This proves that her determination to die a glorious death was not a sudden impulse. Indeed, when her son-in-law Thrasea was trying to persuade her not to carry out her resolve, in the course of the argument he asked her whether if he ever had to die she would wish her daughter to die with him. 'If she lives as long and happily with you, 'she said, 'as I have with Paetus – yes.'

7. Comum's Couple – Book VI: 24

This is a rather short letter addressed to Calpurnius Macer in Book 6, letter 24. It speaks about the suicide of a certain husband and wife, led and encouraged by the wife. Here Pliny emphasizes that

many unrecorded notable events occurred, including suicides, amongst the unknown common populace: *navigabam per Larium nostrum, cum senior amicus ostendit mihi villam, atque etiam cubiculum quod in lacum prominet: 'Ex hoc' inquit 'aliquando municeps nostra cum marito se praecipitavit.' Causam requisivi. Maritus ex diutino morbo circa velanda corporis ulceribus putrescebat; uxor ut inspiceret exegit; neque enim quemquem fidelius indicaturum, possetne sanari. vidit desperavit hortata est ut moreretur, comesque ipsa mortis, dux immo et exemplum et necessitas fuit; nam se cum marito ligavit abiecitque in lacum.*

I was sailing on our Lake Como with an elderly friend when he pointed out a house with a bedroom built over the lake. 'From there,' he said, 'a woman of our town once threw herself with her husband.' I asked why. The husband had long been suffering from ulcers in the private parts, and his wife insisted on seeing them, promising that no one would give him a more candid opinion whether the disease was curable. She saw that there was no hope and urged him to take his life; she went with him, even led him to his death herself, and forced him to follow her example by roping herself to him and jumping into the lake.

Pliny compares this double suicide with that of Arria and her husband, pointing out the difficulty of noting and recording those acts of suicide by not too famous set of people. There seems to be no ambiguity in Pliny's admiration for the wife here, which he describes as '*non minus illo clarissimo Arriae facto*', 'no less heroic than Arria's famous deed.' Nothing further is known about this couple – a representation of the majority of unknown cases. This letter is, however, important for it shows that what Pliny has recorded concerning the elite's admiration of suicide was not peculiar to the aristocrats.

8. Conclusion

Pliny's letters are widely read. As a result of their literary qualities and historical contents, they have become some sort of legacy in the field of literature and Christian history. That Tertullian, an early Christian writer, objected to the letters of Pliny written to the Emperor Trajan concerning the Christians means that he must have read those letters. Literary letters were again composed during the 4th Century with the writings of Symmachus and those of the poet, Ausonius. Afterwards, there were the writings of Augustine, Jerome and many others.

Furthermore, in the 18th Century, there was the resemblance between the letters of the Younger Pliny and those of Cowper and Horace Walpole. Depression, madness, alcoholism, drug abuse, stress, financial challenges, grief, disappointment in love, and others, are some of the causes of suicide. Victims commit the act by taking poison, hanging, stabbing themselves, drowning, use of firearms, and so on. The Romans of Pliny's time did not see anything seriously negative in suicide and did not consider it as action of a coward. This is especially true of the stoics. We have also noted Seneca's approval of suicide in cases of incurable diseases. Pliny's respect and praises for the 'courage' of his suicidal people is infectious. Even he praises their relatives who had lost their lives through execution: Thrasea Paetus, executed in 66; Helvidius Priscus, husband of Fannia, Thrasea's daughter, executed by Vespasian, among others. For a politician and a writer, who craved public approval, sympathy and love, to have praised suicide victims as Pliny has done, says a lot about the Roman society of the first century AD. Suicide was also not seen as a health case requiring medical assistance. It is probably wrong to judge suicide victims, as the feeling appears subjective. In fact, one must see the world from that person's perspective, which is not possible, to be able to pass judgments for or against the fellow. It is, however, clear that most of the victims considered themselves incapable of bearing certain pain, physical or otherwise, as a result of despair, mental or moral suffering. These explain the cases of those suffering from incurable diseases or a physical disability as well as those passing through various disappointments in love, marriage, profession and family, leading to stress, depressions and nervous breakdown. Cases of euthanasia, which involve external agents and instruments, are outside the scope of this work. Nevertheless, instances of suicide bombers, bothering on various levels of religious and ideological fanaticism, may have to be studied from diverse perspectives, ranging from psychological, sociological, philosophical and economical dimensions, among several others. The greatest weapon for any terrorist is to be ready to give his life, for whatever reasons. Anyone who is ready to die, who, in fact, desires death, willingly, is dangerous and can only be an enemy of the state. Thus, whatever we can do to eradicate suicidal tendency would be a welcome development. Nevertheless, a major 'advantage' of suicide is that victims know the places of death, manner and the time of death. Facts which are, perhaps, *terra incognita* for the rest of us.

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