Divine Comedy? Accession Propaganda in Pliny, *Epistles* 10.1–2 and the *Panegyric*

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INTRODUCTION: THE 'SURPRISED-BY-PROVIDENCE' THEME IN IMPERIAL PROPAGANDA

The accession of a new emperor was not only the decisive political event in imperial Rome, but also the cardinal moment around which clustered the major elements of imperial propaganda and ritual, such as funeral and inauguration, deification and/or denigration of the predecessor, and the proclamation of a new age of ideal government under the ideal ruler. It was endlessly re-celebrated and re-enacted through such means as official visual art and monuments, annual oath ceremonies, and official speeches.[1] Pliny's letter of congratulations to Trajan on his accession (10.1) is therefore of supreme interest as a primary document of official accession propaganda in the guise of a private letter, and the rhetorical trope upon which it is built merits special investigation as a basic trope of imperial propaganda: Trajan wished to become emperor as late as possible, but the gods hastened his accession (10.1.1). This could be variously called the 'fortunate fall' (*felix culpa*) theme, or the 'divine comedy' theme, or perhaps the 'surprised-by-providence' theme.

This trope, which recurs in Pliny's letter on receiving the *ius trium liberorum* (10.2) and in the accession narrative of the Panegyric speech (*Pan.* 5–6, 10), has a dynamic and paradoxical quality which allows it to deal with some of the basic paradoxes in imperial propaganda, in particular the problem of evil in imperial government. On the one hand, the present world is an ideal world governed by an ideal and divinely qualified ruler. But the existence of evil in the form of the bad emperor was not simply an unfortunate though unavoidable fact. Rather, it was a leading element of official ideology, enshrined in the widespread topic of denigration of the preceding emperor. Indeed, we also find denigration of future emperors, and even the potential denigration of the present emperor who may turn out bad.[2] This was primarily because imperial ideology controlled the anti-tyrannical and republican heritage of Greek and Roman political thought not by suppressing it but by co-opting it.[3] Indeed, the possibility of tyrannicide even of the *current* emperor was elevated by Trajan into a propaganda topic for legitimizing his reign (Plin., *Pan.* 67.4, 67.8; Dio 68.16.1–2). Thus, an investigation into the panegyric trope of the fortunate fall can help us understand how the practitioners of imperial propaganda dealt with some of its main fault lines: between divine perfection and human fallibility, between republic and monarchy, and between the ideal of a providentially well-ordered world and the grim reality of past, future, and perhaps present tyranny. The ultimate goal of these conceptual efforts, as of most official propaganda, was the difficult task of strengthening the comparatively weak legitimacy of the Roman imperial regime.

The phrase *felix culpa* is known from the Christian description of the sin of Adam and Eve, fortunate in that it led to redemption through Christ.[4] This idea joins two related

[1] e.g. Plin., *Ep.* 10.35, 52, 100, 102; *Pan.* 5–11, 24; P. Herrmann, *Der römische Kaisereid*, Hypomnemata 20 (1968), 99–108. Work on this article was made possible through support by Tel Aviv University. I am grateful to Hannah Cotton for helpful comments.

[2] M. Durry, *Pline le Jeune, Panégyrique de Trajan* (1938), 23; G. Kennedy, *The Art of Rhetoric in the Roman World* (1972), 544.

[3] T. Whitmarsh, *Greek Literature and the Roman Empire* (2001), 217.

[4] Its patristic origins are give by A. O. Lovejoy, 'Milton and the paradox of the fortunate fall', *ELH* 4 (1937), 161–79; see Milton, *Paradise Lost* 12.469–78.

JRS 96 (2006), pp. 73–87.

elements: first, that a seemingly unfortunate event is actually for the best, and second, that the event seemed to be unfortunate only because of the limits of human wisdom in comparison with divine wisdom. These two elements are both prominent in the trope that Pliny uses. In Letter 10.2 Pliny refers to his limited understanding in not knowing that the bad emperor Domitian would be replaced by the good emperor Trajan, under whom it would be better to have children, and in 10.1 he refers to the limited understanding of Trajan in not knowing that he would be an ideal emperor in place of the imperfect Nerva. The phrase 'surprised by providence' emphasizes this contrast between human and divine knowledge, and indeed the term *providentia* expressed a cardinal imperial virtue, combining imperial ritual (for example, the *Ara Providentiae*), philosophic doctrine (the divine providential governance of the universe), and the intimation of divine qualities in the living emperor (*suggestio divini*) who embodied the divine care of the universe.[5] On the other hand, I use the phrase 'divine comedy' to suggest how imperial panegyric is situated on the generic axis between the 'tragic' and the 'comic' (or 'anti-tragic') modes. Pliny's insistent use of the *felix culpa* motif highlights the anti-tragic tendencies of imperial panegyric (noticeable, for example, in the rarity of the 'tragic mode' in Pliny's private letters), although because of its strong anti-tyrannical element a tragic undertone remains.

THE ACCESSION LETTER: PHILOSOPHIC JUSTIFICATION, *SUGGESTIO DIVINI*, AND THE FORTUNATE FALL

Pliny's first letter to Trajan (10.1) exemplifies accession propaganda for a relatively smooth succession. Pliny discreetly balances joy at the accession of Trajan, the ideal emperor, with not too much criticism of Nerva or celebration of his death, since he has just been canonized as a good emperor and as a god, and since it was his choice of Trajan as heir that gives the latter legitimacy.[6]

> C. PLINIVS TRAIANO IMPERATORI
>
> 1 tua quidem pietas, imperator sanctissime, optaverat, ut quam tardissime succederes patri; sed di immortales festinaverunt virtutes tuas ad gubernacula rei publicae quam susceperas admovere. 2 precor ergo ut tibi et per te generi humano prospera omnia, id est digna saeculo tuo contingant. fortem te et hilarem, imperator optime, et privatim et publice opto.
>
> 1 Although your pious nature, most venerable Commander, had wished for you to take your father's place as late as possible, the immortal gods hastened to bring your excellent qualities to the steering wheel of the government, and indeed you had already taken up the government to yourself. 2 I pray, therefore, that everything that is favourable may fall to your lot, and through you to the lot of the human race — that is, everything that is worthy of your Era. In both my private and my public capacity, most excellent Commander, I wish that you may be of good strength and good spirit.

[5] The republican virtue *providentia* ('foresight' of a magistrate or commander, e.g. Cic., *in Cat.* 3.14; Caesar, *BC* 3.76.4) was joined to the philosophic term πρόνοια (divine 'superintendence' of the universe) to become a canonical imperial virtue (e.g. Plin. 6.19.4, 8.17.2, 10.54.1, 10.108.2). On the explicit analogy between the superintendence by the emperor and by the gods, see e.g. Quint., *IO* 12.2.21; Dio Chrysostom 1.42; on the imperial sacrificial cult to *Providentia*, see *RE* Supp. 14.562–5 s.v. The philosophic-Stoic tradition, to be sure, had a more arduous approach to cosmic governance, fully recognizing the existence of 'ordinary' evils in the world, but asserting that they are lesser evils or not evils at all (e.g. Plat., *Crito* 44D; Sen., *Prov.* 2.1; Epict. 4.1.133; M. Aurel. 2.11, and, on divine providence, e.g. Plat., *Rep.* 379; *Theaet.* 176C; Sen., *Prov.* 2; Epict. 1.6.26–43; [Plut.], *de Fato* 573; A. Gell. 7.1.1).

[6] It is interesting to consider whether Pliny privately shared the plausible view of some recent scholars, that the 'choice' of Trajan as heir was forced on Nerva, and even that Trajan may have contributed towards coercing Nerva to choose him (e.g. R. Syme, *Tacitus* (1958), 13, 35; J. Bennett, *Trajan, Optimus Princeps: a Life and Times* (1997), 46; A. Berriman and M. Todd, 'A very Roman coup: the hidden war of imperial succession, AD 96–8', *Historia* 50 (2001), 328; W. Eck, 'An emperor is made: senatorial politics and Trajan's adoption by Nerva in 97', in G. Clark and T. Rajak (eds), *Philosophy and Power in the Graeco-Roman World* (2002), 211–26; J. D. Grainger, *Nerva and the Roman Succession Crisis A.D. 96–99* (2003), 99).

Pliny manages both to express joy at Trajan's accession and to restrain the tone of satisfaction at Nerva's death by using a subtle form of the fortunate fall motif. Trajan wanted to succeed to the place of his 'father' Nerva as late as possible, but the gods (in their greater wisdom) hurried his accession. We shall find almost every element of this trope reused and elaborated in the *Panegyric*, but for now we may note several peculiarities in its use here. First, at this moment of transition, the reigning emperor is cast on the side of the fallible humans whose 'misguided' wishes are overruled by the gods. The letter then shifts in mid-course to the conventional panegyric scenario which implicitly associates the reigning emperor with the providential gods who take care of the 'human race'.[7] The portrayal of a clean and sudden transition, however, is blurred by the complicating factor that Trajan was officially a (lesser) co-emperor already, and in reality probably the dominant of the two co-emperors.[8] This complication is dealt with by the slightly paradoxical intrusion 'quam susceperas'. Trajan had already 'taken up' the *res publica* (as adopted co-emperor); now the gods have brought his virtues to the helm. Trajan both was and was not emperor already; he had 'taken up' the republic as a task, but he was not yet at the 'helm' as the true emperor.[9] Pliny politely reflects, or helps create, the official propaganda, inverting the actual power relation between the old and weak Nerva, who had barely survived a praetorian uprising, and the young and dominant Trajan, supported by the legions of Germany.

By the time of the accession-day letters 10.52 and 10.102 more than ten years later, the paradox has disappeared: Trajan saved the *imperium* (imperial power/Roman empire) by taking it up.[10] The grey area of co-emperorship before the *dies imperii* has no place in this official provincial and military celebration of the day. On the other hand, the plan of the *Panegyric* depends on the lengthy recounting of the stages of Trajan's accession from before the adoption to the climactic entry to Rome (*Pan.* 5–24), so the ambiguity of the co-emperorship gets a full rhetorical work-up.

Pliny combines the 'fortunate fall' motif with the *recusatio* motif. The good emperor generates legitimacy by making a show of unwillingness to accept titles, powers, and, if possible, the imperial position itself. This modest refusal acts against the best interest of the human race, so it must be overcome, here by the providential action of the gods. Pliny has fabricated this scenario of Trajan's pious unwillingness and the gods' superior superintendence out of the raw fact of Nerva's death soon after the adoption. This element is also suppressed in the later accession-day letters but elaborated in the *Panegyric*, where the elaboration reveals its roots in Plato's *Republic* (345E–347D = Cic., *Offic.* 1.28). A good person gets no benefit, but only loss, out of holding power, so he will only rule under compulsion, under the threat of being ruled by someone worse. Pliny explains that Trajan wanted to remain in 'second place' (10.4) as co-emperor, since he had the 'more blessed' lot of being a 'private citizen under a good emperor' (7.2 'felicius … sub bono principe privatus esse …'). The near-collapse of the state was the only way to 'force' Trajan to

[7] As coins and inscriptions (e.g. *CIL* 6.2042a14, 6.2044d3) show, official commemoration of the *providentia* of the emperor and the gods centres around 'providing' for the continuity of the current (ideal) government through suppressing conspiracies, and especially through choosing a (good) successor; see e.g., Ovid, *Metam.* 15.834–6; Vell. Pater. 2.103.4–5; [Sen.], *Octav.* 279–81, 488; Josephus, *BJ* 4.622 δαιμονίου προνοίας. Epictetus reports an amusing parody of *providentia* propaganda at Nero's death and Galba's accession: 'Someone said to [Musonius] Rufus after Galba had been slain, "Is the universe being governed by Providence now?" And Rufus said, "Did I ever use Galba even as an accessory support for the argument that the universe is governed by Providence?"' (3.15.14). Trajan's accession was marked by coins with the legend *providentia, BMC* III.53–5; P. A. Roche, 'The public image of Trajan's family', *CP* 97 (2002), 53.

[8] Grainger, op. cit. (n. 6), 104; cf. Tac., *Hist.* 1.16 on Piso, 'Galba … tamquam principem faceret, ceteri tamquam cum facto loquebantur'. See also *Pan.* 57.3 on Trajan as subordinate co-emperor.

[9] *Suscipio* is a standard word for accession, as at 10.52 'diem … quo servasti imperium dum suscipis'; *Pan.* 5.6, 7.3; Fronto, *ad Antoninum Pium* 1.6.1; Suet., *Tib.* 17.2; *Claud.* 38.3; *Otho* 7.1; *Vesp.* 1.1; *Dom.* 13.6; Tac., *Hist.* 2.1; *Ann.* 1.13, 4.9, 13.6, 13.14.

[10] 10.52 'diem … quo servasti imperium dum suscipis'; cf. *Pan.* 5.6 'obstinatum enim tibi non suscipere imperium, nisi servandum fuisset', Durry, op. cit. (n. 2) ad loc. 'double sens'.

accept Nerva's choice of him as heir.[11] The Platonic hints supply the philosophic backing of the 'philosopher-king' to the Roman panegyric of the ideal emperor, just as the motif of the emperor's providence adds the Stoic-philosophic idea that the world is governed by divine Providence. The 'pilot' metaphor ('to bring your virtues to the helm') also goes back to Plato, who used the image to show that the ideal ruler rules for the benefit of the citizens, and should be chosen for his ability.[12] In its many appearances in Latin texts, it always keeps its overtones of meritocracy, of rule by the best.[13]

We should note that it is not Trajan's ignorance but his piety that causes him to wish for Nerva's late death. Here we find the only faint reminder that, in principle, the situation calls not only for congratulations for Trajan's accession, but also for a *consolatio* for the death of his 'father'.[14] We cannot know whether Trajan was unaware that he would be a better emperor than Nerva, because piety to the emperor is sufficient reason for anyone to wish for Nerva's long life; indeed, Trajan along with other upper-class subjects has been regularly making vows and prayers with *pietas* for the emperor's long-lasting *salus* and *incolumitas* (cf. 10.35, 52, 100, 102; see 10.52, 100 *pietate*, 10.35 *semper*). The (adopted) son has all the more reason to show *pietas* in wishing for his 'father's' well-being.

Furthermore, we might wonder about the implied portrayal of Pliny. Where is Pliny, the representative citizen, situated in relation to the comedy of divine providence and human piety or ignorance? Pliny recognizes now that Nerva's death was for the best, and not merely because whatever the gods do is done with providence: the meritocratic diction of 'bringing your *virtues* to the *helm*' shows why it was for the best. Trajan's pious wishes parallel those of Pliny the loyal courtier, who also piously wishes and makes vows for the well-being of the less-than-ideal Nerva. Indeed, since Pliny is not constrained by the imperial virtue of modesty that prevents Trajan from recognizing his own superior virtues, he can share the gods' omniscience even before Nerva's death.[15] The rule of the ideal emperor gives perfect security to his citizens, who are free from both the tragic irony of unexpected ruin and even from the comic irony of unexpected good fortune. The one area of dissonance or irony in the cosmic comedy of praise is the shadow of the worse emperor, either the imperfect Nerva (10.1) or the bad emperor Domitian (10.2), or in the *Panegyric*, the possibility that Trajan will be succeeded by a bad emperor, or become one.

After the accession (10.1.2), the diction suggests an association between the providential ruler and the providential gods: Pliny prays for good fortune for Trajan, and through

[11] 5.6 'recusabas, quod erat bene imperaturi. igitur cogendus fuisti. cogi porro non poteras nisi periculo patriae et nutatione rei publicae'. Compare, for example, Suet., *Tib*. 24.2 'quasi coactus'; *Otho* 7.1 'quasi ... vi coactus'; Vell. Pater. 2.124.2; A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'Civilis princeps: between citizen and king', *JRS* 72 (1982), 32–48; J. Henderson, *Fighting for Rome: Poets and Caesars, History and Civil War* (1998), 294.

[12] e.g. Plat., *Rep*. 342E; *Rep*. 488 = Cic., *Off*. 1.87; *Politicus* 298E = Arist., *Rhet*. 1393B7 = Cic., *Rep*. 1.51.1; Xen., *Mem*. 1.2.9; cf. Theognis 675–6.

[13] e.g. Cic., *de Domo* 130; *in Piso*. 20; *Phil*. 2.92; *Rep*. 1.45.2, 2.51.1; *Div*. 2.3; *Off*. 1.77; *Att*. 4.18.2; *ad Brut*. 2.1.2; *Fam*. 16.27.1 by Quintus; Liv. 4.3.17, 24.8.12; Val. Max. 9.15.5. The other standard use of the 'pilot' metaphor is to describe the gods' rule of the world; this may add to the divine overtones of the letter, e.g. Pind., *Pyth*. 4.274; Plat., *Symp*. 197B; Ter., *Eun*. 1044; Lucr. 1.21; Cic., *in Catil*. 3.18; *harusp*. 19; Ovid, *Trist*. 5.14.29; Val. Max. 9.12 pr.; Manil. 1.247, 494; Sen., *HF* 459; A. Gell. 7.1.1; Apul., *de Mundo* 35. The superhuman ruler is the highest form of meritocracy. Cicero provides a proto-imperial example of this topic of ruler-divinity: it takes an 'almost divine' man to be an ideal ruler-helmsman (*Rep*. 1.45.2; compare Pliny's divine orator-helmsman 'nearest to the gods of the sea', 9.26.4). The topic of the unity of the virtues at *Pan*. 59.5 adds another philosophical element to the portrayal of the 'philosopher-king'.

[14] In the *Panegyric*, Pliny provides an appropriate, though perfunctory, scene of tears, 11.1. For a new emperor's show of grief, see Suet., *Tib*. 23.1; *Calig*. 15.1. The closing wish for Trajan to be of 'good strength and good spirits' may have a consolatory hint; in the second miscarriage letter, Pliny's wife has recovered her good spirits (8.11.2 'iam hilaris'). But the closing salutation to Fabatus (4.1.7 'fortes ... hilares') suggests that the combination was a fixed, though rarely attested, combination.

[15] On Trajan's 'imperial' modesty, see e.g. *Pan*. 21.2 'beneficiorum tuorum parcissimus aestimator'.

Trajan for the human race.[16] The term 'human race' conveys not only the propaganda of a world-wide empire but also *suggestio divini*, a hint that the emperor is the vice-regent of the gods in tending to humanity.[17] The association between Trajan and the gods in bringing good fortune to humanity is explicated in the *Panegyric*: Jupiter has delegated the function of caring for the 'human race' to Trajan, and so he is freed up to take care of the heavens (80.5).[18]

This letter with its panegyric 'comedy' of imperial governance elegantly shows how to extract the maximum of providential good fortune at the cardinal imperial moment, the accession of an emperor. There is no need for a pretence of grief and consolation, and scarcely a hint of death. After all, the emperor has hardly died, but rather 'left the earth for you, you to the earth' (*Pan.* 10.6) and been 'claimed by the gods for heaven' (10.5). Trajan's 'reign/(golden) age' (*saeculum*) has begun, and the citizen needs only to pray for the 'best' emperor's good fortune to be in keeping with the new era (*digna saeculo tuo*); the well-being of humanity will automatically follow (e.g. *Pan.* 23.5, 67.3, 94.2). Behind this prayer, however, lurks the only tragic note, the death of the ideal emperor, possibly followed by the accession of a bad emperor.

THE REPRESENTATIVE CITIZEN'S ENCOUNTER WITH THE DIVINE COMEDY OF ACCESSION

Letter 10.2, also from the start of Trajan's reign, uses this surprised-by-providence motif in thanking him for the grant of the *ius trium liberorum*. Pliny desired children 'even in that very grim era (of Domitian) ... but the gods (ordained) better', in keeping him childless so that he could receive the grant, and become a father, under Trajan instead.[19] The appearance of this rather uncommon motif in both letters could be seen as a verbal-logical tic, something that lodged in Pliny's memory for re-use shortly afterwards. But if we consider the conceptual pose of the two letters, we shall find that similar situational and propagandistic demands underlie both passages — the need to manoeuvre among the forces of good and bad fortune, divine and human wishes and powers, and to situate the ideal and 'divine' emperor in this complex of forces.

There is a certain tension between the main body of the letter, in which Pliny expresses his thanks with unspeakable joy, and the final section, in which Pliny speaks of his continuing (and therefore unfulfilled) wish for children. The elaboration of the wish for children, to be sure, appears to be conventional, to preserve the appearances that the grant of the *ius III liberorum* was not a tool for avoiding the law, but a rectification for those whose failure to have children was due to natural infertility.[20]

The 'gods willed for the better' motif enters the letter to deal with this dissonance between the obligatory expression of joy and the equally obligatory reference to the personal misfortune that led to the imperial favour. To smooth over this friction, Pliny has

[16] A three-level continuous analogy (the gods are to the emperor as the emperor is to humans) is persistent in the *Panegyric* (5.1, 24.4–5, 52.2, 52.6, 74.4; Domitian failed in this analogical role, 33.4). See J. R. Fears, *Princeps a Diis Electus: The Divine Election of the Emperor as a Political Concept at Rome* (1977), 232.

[17] For the use of the phrase *genus humanum* to suggest the emperor's (divine) superintendence of the entire world, see Ovid, *Met.* 15.759; Sen., *Clem.* 1.1.4; Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 130, 150; P. A. Brunt, *Roman Imperial Themes* (1990), 298–302. Compare Greek adulation on Republican Rome's divine superintendence of the human race at Livy 37.45.9; D. S. Levene, 'God and man in the classical Latin panegyric', *PCPS* 43 (1997), 83. Levene argues that the divinity of the emperor is often restricted to ambiguous hints in panegyric texts, and suppressed entirely in second-order descriptions of panegyric in rhetorical or historical texts.

[18] Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 148; S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (1994), 163.

[19] 10.2.2–3 'eoque magis liberos concupisco, quos habere etiam illo tristissimo saeculo volui, sicut potes duobus matrimoniis meis credere. Sed di melius, qui omnia integra bonitati tuae reservarunt; malui hoc potius tempore me patrem fieri, quo futurus essem et securus et felix'.

[20] cf. the apparently conventional mention of Suetonius' 'unfortunate' (infertile) marriage in the request for the *ius III liberorum*, 10.94.2. The satiric poet, on the other hand, must (casually) dismiss his wife so as not to ruin Domitian's gift with real children: 'valebis, uxor. / non debet domini perire munus', Mart. 2.92.3–4.

imbued the entire letter with joyous tones. His joy is beyond his abilities to express it, and he appears to have achieved the sum of his wishes (2 'videor ergo summam voti mei consecutus').[21] And how does the childless Pliny reach inexpressible joy over a technical grant of inheritance rights and political seniority? First, the essence of what he has received is not privilege and profit, but rather, a sign of imperial favour. He thanks Trajan not for the rights, but for being *thought* worthy of them, as shown both by the grant itself and by the document explaining that Trajan granted it not just as a perfunctory favour to Servianus but because it was for Pliny (1 'quia pro me rogabat'; cf. 10.13). Second, the expression of imperial favour makes him want children even more; the *Panegyric* develops this topic in full (27–8). Under a good emperor, parents no longer need to fear that the emperor will kill their children (27.1 'nec inter insanabiles morbos principis ira numeratur'); and more importantly, the sign of the emperor's favour, as shown by the *congiarium* grant, in itself increases the birthrate by making people more eager for children (28.7).[22] Therefore the grant of the *ius III liberorum* will actually make it more likely for Pliny to have children. The logical reverse of this idea, the possibility that Pliny did not 'try' to have children as much as he could have, almost emerges from the rhetoric. He goes so far as to say that (even in those grim days?) he 'preferred'/'would have preferred' to have children now instead of then.[23] But his prior childlessness was 'actually' caused not by his weaker desire but by the provident gods, who ordained that it would be better to keep Pliny childless for Trajan's 'goodness', specifically the grant, but also, by means of the grant (as a sign of Trajan's favour), for greater desire for children and therefore fatherhood in the ideal reign. Whether by Pliny's greater desire or by the gods' providence, Trajan's ideal reign, as signified by the grant, has increased Pliny's chances of fertility. Thus, a pseudo-logical chain leads from the technical grant to the 'blessed' future when he will be both secure (under Trajan) and blessed (as a father); and the logical hinge is the superior wisdom of the gods, whose apparent curse of childlessness turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

In contrast with the previous letter, here the emperor is not a recipient of the gods' surprising providence but a co-giver. Whereas previously Pliny readjusted Trajan's status over the course of the letter as he moved from half-private citizen to emperor, here we can observe Pliny's art of *suggestio divini* from the start, in the placement of Trajan in the network of *beneficia* (patronage) that spans from the gods through Trajan and Servianus to Pliny.[24] Again he uses ambiguous terms, *precibus* ('prayers') and *voti* ('something prayed for'), which can be used in either divine or human contexts. On the other hand, the favourite Plinian-imperial term 'indulgence' (1 'indulseris'; 2 'peculiarem indulgentiam tuam') describes a human superior who forgoes the right of severity, and especially the emperor's favour.[25] Trajan, at the summit of the human patronage pyramid, answers

[21] Inexpressible joy (or sorrow) is a conventional device for augmentation: Plin., *Ep.* 5.14.2, 5.16.7, 7.8.1, 9.23.3; Fronto, *ad M. Caesarem* 1.7.3; *ad M. Antoninum* 1.2.2.

[22] For the trope of imperial favour or disfavour being more desired or feared than actual grants and punishments, see *Pan.* 80.2.

[23] If the text is correct, that is (*malui* a, Mynors; *maluerunt* Keil, Müller). Sherwin-White wrongly renders 'di … reservarunt; malui hoc potius tempore me patrem fieri' as 'the gods have acted thus, but my preference was for real paternity', *The Letters of Pliny: A Historical and Social Commentary* (1966), 560. His preference was not for real over fictitious paternity, but for paternity (first fictitious, and then real) under Trajan over paternity under Domitian.

[24] See n. 16 on the three-level analogy from the gods to the emperor, and the emperor to humans.

[25] *Indulgentia* is extraordinarily frequent in Book 10, used not only by Pliny but also by Trajan (10.24.1, and rather negatively at 10.40.2) and by Nerva (10.58.8). The 34 uses in Book 10 far outnumber the relative frequency of use in any other text, and equal the number in all of Cicero. In pre-imperial texts, *indulgentia* tends not to be used of the gods, but it *is* used of fortune (or Fortune — *fortuna, fatum, sors*), presumably because fortune is often thought to be naturally unfavourable. When we find it applied to the gods, we might suspect that imperial diction is penetrating the divine sphere rather than vice versa (*Pan.* 74.5 'deorum indulgentiam'). The meaning of *indulgentia* in human relations is discussed in H. Cotton, 'The concept of *indulgentia* under Trajan', *Chiron* 14 (1984), 245–66, and M. Griffin, '*De Beneficiis* and Roman society', *JRS* 93 (2003), 92–113.

prayers and fulfils 'vows' for things that are humanly possible. The gods, to be sure, have control over basic life conditions such as birth, sickness, and death, but Pliny imagines their efforts as being co-ordinated with or guided by the emperor: they decide to keep Pliny childless, and to kill off Nerva quickly, when they see the ideal emperor Trajan in the wings. Thus the 'blessedness' of Trajan's 'period of leadership' (2 'felicissimi principatus') returns as the final word (3 'securus et felix'), to describe Pliny's blessed state as father. The co-operative favour of Trajan and the gods (or among the gods) makes his citizens blessed despite seeming misfortune.[26]

It may seem striking how casually one childless man announces to another his expectation of becoming a father, but then again the protestations of wanting children may be partly perfunctory, since childlessness probably aided one's safety and promotion at the dizzying heights of imperial power. Trajan probably owed the throne, and Pliny possibly his success, to childlessness.[27] L. Julius Ursus Servianus, husband of Hadrian's sister, is the only father among the principals here, with a daughter (6.26.2), and he may have owed his death, along with that of her son, to that fact, which made him a threat to Hadrian at age ninety.[28]

The fortunate fall motif appears in several other letters to Trajan. Its rarity in Books 1–9 is therefore noteworthy: I have not found a single clear instance. We are obviously dealing not with a Plinian trope but a Plinian-imperial trope, in his official, ceremonial mode. The misfortunes that Pliny occasionally admits into Books 1–9 must provide the proper tragic shading to the idealized portrait of his private world, and not be swallowed up as rhetorical foil. Also, the divinity of the emperor is de-emphasized in the private letters.[29] In the official letters, echoes of the motif appear in 10.4 (the favour to Voconius Romanus was postponed to Trajan's reign) and 10.6 (ignorance of Arpocras' citizen status allows an additional favour). Here the motif adds not rhetorical celebration of past 'fortunate misfortunes', but rather, rhetorical leverage for extracting future favours. In 10.4, Pliny suggests that the problems in obtaining senatorial rank for Voconius were providentially fortunate. Pliny had requested Trajan's 'divine father' to advance Voconius to senatorial rank, but this wish/prayer (*votum*) of his has been saved for Trajan's goodness.[30] The technical problem of a legal delay (in Voconius' mother's transfer of property) is subsumed under the familiar topos that Nerva's death was for the best for the representative citizen, since it saved this favour for Trajan to perform in his (superior) goodness. The rhetorical leverage (or blackmail) strengthens the request by hinting that a good emperor such as Trajan will naturally grant the favour. The fact that the request was apparently not fulfilled[31] accords with the rhetorical strengthening here and elsewhere in the letter (e.g. in the *suggestio divini* in the opening *votum* and closing *compotem* and in the superlative *exoptatissimae*): we can sometimes gauge how much Pliny wants the favour and how big a favour he thinks it is by the level of importunity in his letters. By contrast, for example, 10.87, 104, and 106 are perfunctory or tentative requests.

In 10.6, Pliny similarly strengthens a request with the fortunate fall motif. He has no complaints about not having known that Egyptians need Alexandrian citizenship before

[26] On the reciprocal *felicitas* of the ruler and his citizens, see *Pan.* 2.8, 72.2, 74.4. In Letter 10.94, Trajan's 'goodness' is imagined as making up for the 'badness' of fortune simply by the grant, without any reference to future children ('impetrandumque a bonitate tua … habet quod illi fortunae malignitas denegavit').

[27] On the advantages of childlessness, see S. E. Hoffer, *The Anxieties of Pliny the Younger* (1999), 12, 230, and for Trajan, Grainger, op. cit. (n. 6), 127.

[28] Dio 69.17; SHA, *Hadrian* 15.8, 23.2, 23.8, 25.8; *PIR*² J631; A. R. Birley, *Hadrian, the Restless Emperor* (1997), 291. Cf. *Pan.* 94.5 on hopes for Trajan to have a son, like Martial's similar hopes for Domitian (6.3).

[29] The exceptions are mitigated by being marked as generic interference from philosophy (4.25.5 = Plat., *Phdo.* 95b) and poetry (8.4.5–6 *poetice*); see also 5.14.5 *voto*, 6.5.5 *propitium*. In Books 1–9, even the gods themselves appear more in tentative prayers and hopes than in confident descriptions of their providence.

[30] 10.4.2 'et a divo patre tuo petieram, ut illum in amplissimum ordinem promoveret; sed hoc votum meum bonitati tuae reservatum est, quia …'

[31] Syme, op. cit. (n. 6), 83.

they can get Roman citizenship, since that was the grounds for being obliged to Trajan more than once for the same person.[32] Trajan's *indulgentia* makes human errors harmless — if, that is, he will accede to the request. Here the motif functions not merely as rhetorical strengthening, but also as an apology: Pliny's own misdeed can be providentially advantageous if it is annulled by the ideal emperor.[33]

Finally, we might detect an echo of the motif in 10.17A, where he tells Trajan that despite travel delays he 'cannot complain' since he made it in time to celebrate Trajan's birthday (10.17A.2 'non possum de mora queri'; cf. 10.6.2 'de qua ... non queror'). The rigours of travel (duly predicted at 10.15) are made void since they caused him to enter the province 'most auspiciously' on Trajan's birthday.

SUGGESTIO DIVINI AND THE DENIGRATION OF PREDECESSORS IN THE ACCESSION NARRATIVE OF THE *PANEGYRIC*

Let us look now at the use of *suggestio divini* and the fortunate fall motif in the accession narrative of the *Panegyric*. The accession sequence occupies the first main section (5–10), after the introductory material (1–4) of prayers to Jupiter (1), a programmatic promise to offer sincere and moderate praise (2–4.3), and a flourish of general compliments (4.4–7). The accession narrative follows a chronological sequence: (a) Trajan's departure to his province of Upper Germany (5.2–5); (b) the praetorian uprising (5.6–6.3); (c) the adoption (6.4–8.6) along with (d) Trajan's response (9.1–10.2); (e) the period of the co-emperorship (10.3–4); and (f) Nerva's death (10.5–6).

In explaining why he begins with a prayer to Jupiter, Pliny explicitly establishes the religious framework of his imperial praise: Trajan the ideal emperor is a gift from the gods (*munus deorum*), indeed the outstanding example that rulers are given to the world not by fortune and chance but by some divine will,[34] since he is himself 'most similar to the gods' in his purity and sanctity (1.3–4), and omens proved the divine election (1.5). On the one hand, the counterfactual ('si adhuc dubium fuisset') implies that it was *not* in doubt that rulers are given to the world by divine will, and not by chance. But the constant denigration of prior emperors makes it clear why it might have been in doubt: were Domitian and Nero also divinely appointed? These problematic alternatives encapsulate the religious background of the speech, both the laudatory surface and the grim subtext. The virtues of the ideal emperor extend to the providentially perfect good fortune of the entire world; but the spectre of the bad emperor reminds us that we might be driven to doubt the existence of divine providence, or to understand it in a more arduous sense (as in the philosophic tradition). The accession narrative echoes this opening paradox, again in reference to imperial omens: Trajan is an emperor of the sort that one should be who was 'given to the earth' not by civil war, but by peace, adoption, and divinities that were *finally* won over by prayers (5.1 'et *tandem* exorata terris numina dedissent'): divine providence answered our prayers [*not* as under Domitian].[35]

The first step towards accession was the prophetic scene marking Trajan's departure to Upper Germany: a crowd shouted 'Imperator' to Iuppiter Imperator, 'as they thought'

[32] 10.6.2 'de qua ignorantia mea non queror, per quam stetit ut tibi pro eodem homine saepius obligarer'.

[33] One wonders whether the apology is covering up deceit. Did neither Pliny nor Arpocras know the rules about Alexandrian citizenship? Is Pliny tricking Trajan by asking for the easy favour first, or is Arpocras tricking Trajan through Pliny?

[34] 1.4 'ac si adhuc dubium fuisset, forte casuque rectores terris an aliquo numine darentur'.

[35] A standard motif is that others did the bloody job and so the *laudandus* came to power with clean hands, Isoc., *Euagoras* 25; Tac., *Ann.* 13.4; T. P. Wiseman, 'Calpurnius Siculus and the Claudian Civil War', *JRS* 72 (1982), 67; S. M. Braund, 'Praise and protreptic in early imperial panegyric: Cicero, Seneca, Pliny', in M. Whitby (ed.), *The Propaganda of Power: the Role of Panegyric in Late Antiquity*, Mnemosyne Supp. 183 (1998), 72; *CAH*² 11.153. The motif is often used to hide the actual involvement of the ruler. Accordingly, scholars have wondered whether Trajan was involved in the praetorian uprising in 97 C.E. (n. 6), and one could also imagine that Trajan knew about the conspiracy against Domitian.

(5.4).[36] This introduces the *recusatio* theme: the entire crowd understood the omen, but you yourself were *unwilling* to understand it — you refused to rule, a sign of someone who will rule well (5.5 'nam ipse intellegere nolebas; recusabas enim imperare ... quod erat bene imperaturi'). Therefore you had to be compelled (by the 'collapse of the republic', 5.6, 6.3). Pliny could almost 'shout out' that it was worth so great a price, if this was the only way to bring Trajan to the helm (6.2 'si tamen haec sola erat ratio, quae te publicae salutis gubernaculis admoveret, prope est ut exclamem tanti fuisse'). Pliny alternates between diminishing the disorder (to suggest the peaceful, rational choice of the ideal ruler, 5.1) and highlighting it (to emphasize the compulsion needed to overcome the ideal candidate's modest refusal, 5.6–6.2).[37] If Trajan had understood, if he had been readily willing to rule, the country could have been spared the near 'collapse', but he was *unwilling* to understand. We might compare Letter 10.1, where the co-emperor Trajan resists the divine plan due to *pietas*. Here, Trajan's resistance to the divine comedy comes from ignorance, but not simple human ignorance, but rather wilful ignorance due to the imperial virtue *modestia* (5.7); otherwise he could have understood as well as everyone else.

Another reflective passage on the mysteries of divine providence (5.8–9) interrupts the description of the praetorian uprising (5.6–6.3), and here both kinds of divine irony are explicit, unexpected misfortune as well as unexpected good fortune. 'Good fortune arises from bad fortune, and bad from good; God hides the seeds of each, and often the causes of good and evil lurk under the opposite appearance'. In this context of accession, it is natural to give a political meaning to both sides, both a deceptively strife-filled accession resulting in a good emperor, and a deceptively smooth accession leading to a bad emperor. The reigns of bad emperors are also part of the divine plan.

Pliny then subjects the idea of compulsion (5.6 'cogendus') to rhetorical-logical amplification. The essence of the bad situation which 'compelled' Trajan to accept the throne, was that Nerva himself was 'under compulsion' (6.1 'cogitur') — the antithesis of the emperor's role.[38] An emperor was 'compelled' to kill people, in order to produce an emperor who could not be compelled (6.2). The paradox highlights the opposition between private citizen and emperor. The ideal candidate must be forced to rule; the ideal ruler is omnipotent and cannot be forced. This opposition brings out the human nature of the impotent Nerva and the divine nature of the omnipotent Trajan. Thus Pliny uses the panegyric topic of 'parent of the human race' ironically, precisely at the moment that Nerva has lost the essential feature of the emperorship — power — and has virtually become a 'captive'.[39] Only through 'the divine and immortal deed' of adopting Trajan (10.5 'divinum et immortale factum') does Nerva gain the divine aura of a 'good emperor' worthy of deification.[40] In accordance with the emphasis on Nerva's impotence, the panegyric relationship between the gods and the emperor is reversed: Nerva is an agent of the gods, but not as an authoritative co-worker in tending to humanity, as Trajan is (80.5). He is their helpless pawn, their attendant; he obeyed them in adopting as much as Trajan

[36] Grainger calls it 'political theatre', op. cit. (n. 6), 36. If Pliny's report is correct, it may indicate plans for Trajan's adoption from the start of Nerva's reign. But the motif of pre-accession omens is so well-worked that it is hard to put much trust in it. We could compare the report of a pre-accession crowd shout for Pertinax, Dio 73.4.2; *CAH*² 11.193. Menander Rhetor recommends inventing omens if necessary, 371.11–12.

[37] Lucan also uses the cautious conditional and the financial metaphor to say paradoxically that the wicked crimes of civil war were worth it if that was the only way for Nero to rule (1.33–45 'quod si non aliam venturo fata Neroni / invenere viam ... scelera ipsa nefasque / hac mercede placent ...'), Durry, op. cit. (n. 2), 93; contrast 2.62–3, where an unnamed Roman says that civil war is scarcely worth it in order that neither Caesar nor Pompey will rule, that is, in order to preserve Republican government ('vix tanti fuerat civilia bella movere / ut neuter').

[38] The imperial system was indeed not well equipped to balance independent sources of power without collapsing into assassination or civil war (Grainger, op. cit. (n. 6), 72).

[39] 6.1 'imperator et parens generis humani obsessus captus inclusus'.

[40] In the letters, which present the side of the private citizen, the only 'divine and immortal' deeds are Arria's suicide (3.16.6) and Verginius Rufus' declining the emperorship (6.10.4). Under the Empire, a private citizen can win 'immortal' fame only through words (3.7.14), or through acts of renunciation, especially imperial renunciation.

did in being adopted (8.2); and they have laid claim to the glory of the deed — the glory is theirs, not Nerva's (8.2 'sibi ... gloriam ... di vindicaverunt'). Nerva is imagined as having called into his advisory council the judgement not only of people but even of the gods (8.1).[41] By contrast, in the imaginary scene of Trajan adopting his successor, only a god (Jupiter) is explicitly invited to the consultation (94.5 'in consilio sis eligenti'). The idea of human consultation for the consummate power-decision can be problematic, since the despotic power structure makes it almost inevitable that 'advice' on such a topic will take the form of flattery, undue influence, intimidation, or deceit.[42] It would be indelicate to urge the reigning emperor to consult with others on choosing an heir.

The adoption scene is presented by split screen, since Trajan is in Upper Germany. In cutting to Trajan's response, Pliny uses the time-lag of ancient travel to play on the human ignorance of a subject as opposed to the divine omniscience of the ideal emperor. The period of co-emperorship itself is a awkward liminal zone (10.3–4), but rather than downplay it, Pliny heightens it by rhetorical paradox. It would be remarkable enough to say that Trajan did not know that he would be emperor, but, in fact, he did not know that he *was* emperor (9.4 'magnum videretur, si dicerem "nescisti te imperatorem futurum": eras imperator et esse te nesciebas'). The rhetorical heightening deflects attention from the unseemly question as to what degree Trajan did know about, or influence, Nerva's 'choice'. The paradox of ignorance in the all-provident emperor is matched by the paradox of obedience in the all-powerful 'commander'.[43] The flawed emperor Nerva was demoted to the merely citizen/human level in suffering compulsion and in obeying (8.2), whereas Trajan became emperor through the private citizen's virtue, obedience. The paradox of obedience/command allows even more rhetorical play than the paradox of knowledge/ignorance, since it continues past the moment that the information arrives: the citizen Trajan obeys his commander Nerva in accepting the role of commander.[44] At the moment of transition, the split screen is within Trajan himself, as it were. Trajan the citizen obeys and allows Trajan the imperator to take over. Indeed, Trajan the citizen virtually obeys Trajan the imperator, since Nerva had already lost his grasp on the supreme power, and only got it back because of having Trajan as co-commander (e.g. 8.6).

The brief account of the co-emperorship emphasizes Trajan's continuing subservience to Nerva (10.3–4). At this point Pliny gives a fuller rendition of the accession letter 10.1. Despite the titulature of imperial power, Trajan laid no claim to anything from the adoption but the piety and obedience of a son, and prayed that 'this name' ('son') would have a 'long perpetuity and long glory' (10.3 'cum ... tuas aquilas ... anteires, neque aliud tibi ex illa adoptione quam filii pietatem filii obsequium adsereres, longamque huic nomini aetatem, longam gloriam precarere'). The providence of the gods had already brought you to the first rank, but you still wanted to remain, and even grow old, in the second rank (10.4 'iam te providentia deorum primum in locum provexerat; tu adhuc in secundo resistere atque etiam senescere optabas'). The echoes of the accession letter are clear, as is the elaboration. Again we have Trajan's 'piety' to his 'father', his 'wishes' to remain the imperial understudy, and the pluperfect indicating that he was already emperor in a sense (10.4 'provexerat'; 10.1.1 'quam susceperas'). Here Trajan, the mortal pre-emperor, not only 'wishes' but even 'prays', apparently to the gods, to remain (as if) Nerva's 'subject' (10.4 'privatus tibi videbaris'). And here the providential action of the gods in opposing Trajan's mortal wishes is explicit; only here does Pliny use the traditional phrase

[41] cf. 'hominum deorumque consensus', Val. Max. 1 praef. 1; Tac., *Hist.* 1.15; Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 133.

[42] For example, Tacitus maliciously contrasts Galba's edifying comment on Piso's being chosen by *consensus* and without prior constraints with the sinister string-pulling behind the scenes by Laco and Icelus against Vinius: *Hist.* 1.13 'Vinius pro M. Othone, Lacto atque Icelus *consensu* ...'; 1.15 'deorum hominumque consensu'; 1.16 'adoptandi iudicium integrum et, si velis eligere, consensu monstratur'; C. Damon, *Tacitus, Histories Book 1* (2003), 137, 140. Compare the insidious influences of step-mothers, *Pan.* 7.4; Tac., *Ann.* 1.3, 12.25.

[43] 'ut *imperator* fieret ... meruit et *paruit* ... principatum *obsequio* pervenisti' (9.2–3).

[44] 9.4 'an non obsequereris principi civis, legatus imperatori, filius patri?'

providentia deorum.[45] The action of the gods must be emphasized to cover the virtual vacancy on the throne: Trajan sees himself as if a private citizen, while Nerva's mystique of power has been fatally impaired by the all-too-human compulsion, obedience, and even *regret* (7.3 'paenitebat') that he has undergone; indeed, to share power is almost to relinquish it.[46] The dissonance between Trajan's human *modestia* and the gods' providential care is softened, or perhaps emphasized, by a rhetorical surprise. You prayed to remain merely Nerva's son ... the gods *heard* your prayers — but only so far as was in the interest of that best and most venerable old man (10.4 'audita sunt tua vota, sed in quantum optimo illi et sanctissimo seni utile fuit').[47] Trajan's prayers for Nerva's long life were *answered* by Nerva's early death; having fulfilled his function as the vehicle for the transmission of imperial power, his early death was in his *own* best interest, not Trajan's.

Only at Nerva's death does Pliny emphasize his providence: the gods claimed him for heaven, so that he would not do a mortal deed after that divine and immortal one. The one 'divine' deed of the all-too-mortal emperor Nerva was the adoption; any further action would be back on the mortal level of his prior emperorship. Therefore they decided that he must 'be deified' (die) at once, so that one day people would ask if he was already a god when he adopted Trajan (10.5 'ut quandoque inter posteros quaereretur, an illud iam deus fecisset'). In this *suggestio divini* Pliny applies Nerva's official deification retroactively back to the final period of his life, in a blurring of status between Nerva as god-emperor (virtually already dead/deified) and Trajan as emperor-private citizen. The concluding *sententia* plays on an etymological variant of providence, *prospexerat*: Nerva was all the more missed, because he 'had the foresight' / 'made provision' that he would not be missed (10.6 'eo ipso carus omnibus ac desiderandus, quod prospexerat ne desideraretur').[48] In sum, the early death of Nerva is a fortunate fall not only for the human race but for Nerva himself (10.4 'illi *utile* fuit').

Once the ideal emperor is installed in power, the fortunate fall motif is relatively uncommon, since under the ideal emperor there is neither misfortune nor even seeming misfortune. Even his judicial activities are presented not as punishing wicked deeds but as making people eager to become better through his inspiring example and the desire for his good opinion (80.2–3; cf. 46.5–6).[49] The main shadow over the reign, the spectre of bad emperors past and future, can hardly be treated as a fortunate fall in the manner of 5.8 ('bad weather makes us appreciate good weather'), since the basic plan of denigration requires making the past as bad as possible. Therefore we have to turn to a natural disaster, drought in Egypt (30–2), to find a full use of the motif, just as the (possibly) natural misfortune of Pliny's childlessness was turned to similar use in Letter 10.2. Not only was Egypt's misfortune quickly remedied by the emperor's speedy assistance, but the misfortune was even for the best in allowing us to see his greatness, and in restraining Egypt's pride. 'Although you deserve good fortune everywhere, clearly if any misfortune should befall, it is spread forth as material, as a field for your merits and excellences' (31.1 'nam cum omnia ubique secunda merearis, nonne manifestum est, si quid adversi cadat, tuis laudibus tuisque virtutibus materiam campumque praesterni ...' ; cf. 31.6). And until now, it had long been believed that our city could not be fed without Egypt's resources (31.2). The tone that all is for the best broadens into a justification for Rome's empire, which this misfortune has shown is for the best. '... we can do without Egypt, but Egypt cannot do without us; the most fertile nation was finished, if she had been free' (31.5–6 '... ut ... probaretur et nos Aegypto posse et nobis Aegyptum carere non posse. actum erat de

[45] First in Cicero, e.g. *Nat. Deor.* 2.73; πρόνοια θεῶν is from the fifth century B.C.E, LSJ s.v. πρόνοια.
[46] 8.4 'nam quantulum refert, deponas an partiaris imperium?'
[47] The shocking exaggeration led Schnelle to conjecture 'audita <non> sunt vota tua'.
[48] See Cic., *Rep.* 1.45.2; J. E. G. Zetzel, *Cicero: De Re Publica, Selections* (1995), 135 on *prospicere*.
[49] This is taken seriously at *CAH*² 11.79. We observed the opposite idea, that rewards are valued as a sign of his favour, at 10.2.1–2; cf. 10.13, Durry, op. cit. (n. 2), 204.

fecundissima gente, si libera fuisset'). By spreading out the risk of crop failure, the ideal emperor makes it beneficial for the provinces to have come under Roman sway (32.1). The ideal emperor has greater *benignitas* than the sky, since it never enriches all lands at the same time, whereas he can bring, if not fertility, then the benefits of fertility.[50] The term *caelum* (sky/weather), often used for 'gods' (e.g. 10.4, 35.4, 89.3), adds a *suggestio divini*, as does the earlier description of Egypt 'invoking' not its river but Caesar's help (30.5).[51] But the notion that drought and famine can be for the best is so shocking that Pliny needs to soften it before and after with a prayer for fertility for the future (31.1, 32.3).

THE THEORY OF TYRANNICIDE AS A METHOD OF GENERATING LEGITIMACY

Finally, let us turn to the one great evil in Pliny's ideal panegyric world that is never for the best: the bad emperor. At one point, to be sure, Pliny goes so far as to suggest that the evil done by a bad emperor (concerning the inheritance tax) can be corrected retroactively. 'You made it so that we *did not have bad emperors*' (40.3 'effecisti ne malos principes habuissemus'). But the finality of death quickly cuts off this cheerful wish of undoing the past: 'In this spirit, if nature would allow it, how willingly *would* you *have* poured back their property and blood into so many people who were plundered, who were slaughtered' (40.4 'quo ingenio, si natura pateretur, quam libenter tot spoliatis tot trucidatis bona et sanguinem refudisses!'). At best, Pliny can suggest that it was 'useful' (for Trajan) to reach the enjoyment of good fortune through misfortune, since it enables him to 'take up the role' of the emperor with the understanding of a private citizen who used to complain and pray about the bad emperor (44.1–2).[52]

Alongside the denigration of prior emperors we find the denigration of future emperors, and even potential denigration of the present emperor. The exaggerated praise of the current emperor as 'the best' implies that future emperors too will be worse (or at most, equal, 88.9). Right after a 'bad' reign, senators are especially aware of future dangers. Tacitus has both the delator Eprius Marcellus and the anti-delator Curtius Montanus tell the senators in the first days of Vespasian's reign that they should act with the possibility of future bad emperors in mind (*Hist*. 4.8 'I pray for good emperors, but I endure them however they are'; 4.42 'do you think Nero was the last of the *domini*?'). And at 9.13.11 Pliny describes terrified senators warning him that he will be marked out by future (bad) emperors. Throughout the *Panegyric*, Trajan is imagined as an example or benchmark for future emperors to follow *or not* (44.3–4). Future emperors will have to choose between Trajan's frugal travels with publicized accounts and Domitian's opposite example (20.6). Trajan's swearing the oath as consul-elect gives him equal glory whether or not future emperors do the same (64.3). The name *optimus* will always be recognized as Trajan's: in good emperors the name will be someone else's, in bad, it will be false (88.9). Until now Pliny never dared to hope for more than 'better than the worst', so grim were the expectations established by prior emperors (44.2). Pliny asks Trajan to hold the consulship in order to teach future emperors to give up their laziness and postpone their luxuries for a little while (59.2). Here it is presumed that (all) future emperors will have at least the second-order imperial vices of laziness and luxury, if not the first-order vices of arrogance and cruelty. Only occasionally do we find a general positive reference to future emperors:

[50] 32.2 'caelo ... numquam benignitas tanta, ut omnes simul terras uberet foueatque: hic omnibus pariter ... hic si non fecunditatem, at bona fecunditatis importat'.

[51] N. Méthy, 'Éloge rhétorique et propagande politique sous le haut-empire', *MEFRA* 112 (2000), 399; Braund, op. cit. (n. 35), 64; compare 32.3 on praying to rivers. See *TLL* 7.2.256.5–9 s.v. *invoco* for prefatory invocations of emperors with *suggestio divini*: Val. Max. 1 pr. 1; Stat., *Silv*. 4 pr.; Quint., *IO* 4 pr. 4; Plin., *Ep*. 8.4.5.

[52] 44.1–2 'quam utile est ad usum secundorum per adversa venisse! ... meministi quae optare nobiscum, quae sis queri solitus. nam privato iudicio principem geris'. Cf. 49.3, 'we have *learned from* experience that an emperor's innocence is his trustiest guard'. In reality, of course, Trajan, like Nerva and Pliny, was outstandingly loyal to Domitian (*Pan*. 14.2–3; Grainger, op. cit. (n. 6), 36; Bennett, op. cit. (n. 6), 42–3) — or at least until the plot to kill Domitian.

they merely have to stay on the road to glory established by Trajan (by keeping adulation away); they do not have to build the road themselves (by removing adulation), 75.5.

One of the passages above (59.4) has a striking allusion to the all-too-familiar prospect of the current emperor *becoming* 'bad' through holding power. 'Let us be allowed to experience whether that second consulship gave you any haughtiness.' Though it is only a rhetorical fancy shielded off by the implied contrafactual mode (Trajan had *already* held his third consulship), it is remarkable that Pliny should venture to suggest that Trajan could acquire the canonical imperial vice *superbia* in mid-reign.[53] We can compare Trajan's addition to the Senate's annual vows for the eternity of the *imperium* and the well-being of the emperor (67.3): '*if* he shall <govern> the republic well and in the interest of everyone' (67.4 'si bene rem publicam et ex utilitate omnium <rexerit>'). Pliny goes on to explain the subtext: death, or even tyrannicide ('that the gods should abandon you to vows that are *not* taken publicly', 67.5).[54] Later sources report that when appointing the praetorian prefect, Trajan said, 'Take this sword, to use for me if I rule well, but against me if I rule badly'.[55] Pliny reports similar words as Trajan's inner thoughts.[56] Whether Trajan actually said this, or whether the historical tradition was created out of this depiction of Trajan's thoughts, Pliny's use of it shows that it was an acceptable topic for legitimizing the current regime.

I use the term 'tyrannicide' with its ancient connotation, to refer not merely to the killing of a tyrant but to the assertion that it is justifiable and legitimate (and accordingly I refrain from speaking of the 'murder', or even of the 'assassination' of emperors so as not to prejudge the issue). The well-known tradition in praise of tyrant-killing went back to Harmodios and Aristogeiton (e.g. Cic., *Mil.* 80; Sen., *Ben.* 7.15.2), and the philosophical tradition claimed further justification for it by saying it was in the (unredeemable) tyrant's own interest.[57] Furthermore, the frequent use of laws supporting tyrannicide in the declamatory tradition made the theoretical justification of tyrant-killing a basic element in rhetorical education.[58] To Cicero, Caesar was a tyrant simply for having illegally seized sole power (e.g. *Att.* 14.6.2; *Fam.* 12.22.2; *Offic.* 3.19; also *rex*, e.g. *Att.* 10.7.1, 14.21.3; cf. Suet., *Tib.* 4.1). But within a few generations, widespread acquiescence to the imperial system gave rise to the distinction between good and bad emperors, of which only the latter were tyrants.[59] Free states can have laws against trying to *become* a tyrant, but since there is rarely a non-violent or legal way to remove a tyrant, tyrannicide acquires justification as the only available method. And with no orderly way of evaluating who is a 'bad' emperor, almost any attempt to kill the emperor might be claimed to be justified tyrannicide; the main question is the practical one of whether it will improve the government, and whether it will result in further deaths or civil war.[60] Imperial Rome was trapped in a system of government with a low level of legitimacy, but no clear way to change it to a more legitimate system.

[53] On *superbia* as a characteristic mark of a bad emperor, see e.g. 7.6 'superbum ... et regium', 63.6 'superbissimis dominis'.

[54] cf. Sen., *Clem.* 1.19.7 'vota non sub custode nuncupantibus'; Durry, op. cit. (n. 2), 187.

[55] Dio 68.16.1–2; Aur. Victor 13.9; P. A. Brunt, 'Divine elements in the imperial office', *JRS* 69 (1979), 172.

[56] 67.8 '... in me, si omnium utilitas ita posceret, etiam praefecti manum armavi'.

[57] In the tyrant's interest, Pl., *Gorg.* 473–480, 525B; Cic., *Fin.* 4.56; in both his own and the world's interest, Sen., *Ben.* 7.20.3. On the Athenian law of tyrannicide, see A. J. L. Blanshard, 'Depicting democracy: an exploration of art and text in the law of Eukrates', *JHS* 124 (2004), 1–15.

[58] e.g. Cic., *de Invent.* 2.144; *Att.* 9.4.2; Sen., *Contr.* 1.7; Petron. 1.3; Quint., *IO* 3.6.25; Calpurn. Flacc. 1; Dio 67.12.5 (Maternus under Domitian).

[59] e.g. Tiberius, Tac., *Ann.* 6.6.2; Suet., *Tib.* 75.3. Nero, [Sen.], *Octav.* 83, Juv. 8.223; Suet., *Poet.* fr. 47 *Lucan.* Domitian, Plin., *Ep.* 4.11.6. Seneca approves of the killing of Caligula (*Const. Sap.* 18) but not of Caesar (*Ira* 3.30.4; *Ben.* 2.20; M. Griffin, *Nero: the End of a Dynasty* (1984), 173–4). On the distinction between the good monarch and the tyrant see e.g. Plato, *Rep.* 562–9; *Politicus* 291E; Polyb. 5.11.6, 6.7.8; Cic., *Rep.* 1.50.2, 1.65.2; Sen., *Clem.* 1.11.4; Dio Chrys. 1.67; C. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Idea at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (1950), 145; Whitmarsh, op. cit. (n. 3), 206–7.

[60] Cic., *Att.* 9.4.2; E. Rawson, *Roman Culture and Society: Collected Papers* (1991), 492.

We can understand the various panegyric motifs as attempts to generate this much-needed legitimacy in the ruler by emphasizing his virtues, his good government, his military success, and especially the authority of the Senate and people. For example, the motif of divine election is sometimes favoured by rulers whose claim to power is particularly weak.[61] It might appear surprising, given the slippery nature of defining who is a tyrant, for Trajan or his panegyrist to tell people that he should die (or be killed) if he becomes a 'tyrant'. But Pliny (and Trajan) are confronting one of the strongest challenges to imperial legitimacy, the theory of justified tyrannicide, not by rejecting it, but by incorporating it into their ideological system; this approach is the inevitable result of the denigration of prior emperors that underlies the speech, especially of the slain Domitian. Pliny exults over Domitian's death (52.4–5; cf. Suet., *Dom.* 23.1), and implies approval of tyrannicide by deploring the punishment of the 'emperor-killers' Petronius Secundus and Parthenius, and Epaphroditus.[62] The approval of, and even complicity with, the killing of Domitian may seem to conflict with the oaths of loyalty that senators swore to all emperors, good or bad; but the principle of tyrannicide implies that forced oaths of loyalty to a 'tyrant' are non-binding. Thus, Pliny imagines Trajan as making this explicit, praying privately that the Republic may never have to take vows for him against its will, or if it does, that it not be obliged by them ('... obtestor ne umquam pro me vota res publica invita suscipiat, aut si susceperit, ne debeat', 67.8). Pliny and Trajan are attempting to add validity to a meaningless oath ritual by making the oath conditional on the emperor's not being a tyrant: 'if he should rule the republic well and in everyone's best interest' (67.4).

But the tyrannicide theme has a risky and subversive edge, and is suitable only for temporary propaganda among the upper class in a period of intense denigration of prior emperors. The emperor does *not* invite the armies and provinces to evaluate from year to year whether he has become a tyrant; the precedents of New Year's army revolts are bad enough without encouraging them.[63] The conditional oath formula never reached the provinces, and it was probably just a temporary publicity stunt in the Senate.[64] Only from the gods does Trajan ask for an annual evaluation (67.6–7). It is a slight *suggestio falsi* when Pliny implies that it is because the armies use this conditional oath formula that Trajan feels no anxiety to hear about the New Year's vows throughout the Empire (68.1–4); the 'correct' explanation for Trajan's calm is that since he is fulfilling his part of the condition by ruling well, he knows that the gods will preserve him.

The tyrannicide theory of legitimacy sits uneasily with the divine-election theory of legitimacy.[65] Yet Pliny does his best to join them: the fact that Trajan has not been killed proves that he is divinely protected, and therefore not a tyrant but rather a good emperor ruling for the benefit of the state (67.5, 68.1, 72.4). This join is possible because, unlike near-Eastern and other monarchical traditions, the Roman tradition used the divine-election theme for the person of the emperor and not for the office.[66] The current emperor was divinely chosen, but not all emperors were (*Pan.* 1.4), and though people said the same of Domitian during his reign, it turned out that this was false adulation.[67] Still, the prominence that Pliny gives to this potentially subversive motif is striking; the closing prayer to Jupiter is built around the tyrannicide motif (94.5), just as the opening prayer is built around the divine-election motif (1.4). Precisely in the closing prayer for 'perpetuity' does Pliny go back to Trajan's conditional formula with the spectre of tyranny and the

[61] Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 317–21. Compare Menand. Rhet. 370.21–8, 371.1–2 on using divine motifs for rulers of lowly family background; D. Kienast, 'Nerva und das Kaisertum Trajans', *Historia* 17 (1968), 65 n. 69.

[62] *Pan.* 6.2; Dio 68.3.3; *epit. de Caesaribus* 12.6–8. *Pan.* 53.4; Dio 67.14.4.

[63] Vitellius in 69 C.E. is the definitive example, Tac., *Hist.* 1.12, 1.55; for Saturninus in 89 C.E., see *CIL* 6.2066, *CAH*[1] 172.

[64] *Ep.* 10.35, 52, 100, 102; Herrmann, op. cit. (n. 1), 99–108.

[65] Brunt, op. cit. (n. 55), 172.

[66] Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 187.

[67] e.g. *Pan.* 72.5–7, 74.3; Bartsch, op. cit. (n. 18), 162–4.

instability of tyrannicide. This shows the strength of the traditional philosophical-republican opposition between good government and tyranny, which had been incorporated into imperial ideology in the form of the denigration of predecessors. It is unnecessary to ask whether this is imperial flattery or hidden senatorial criticism, since the official imperial policy itself flaunted senatorial independence, along with the attendant philosophical-republican baggage.[68]

CONCLUSION

Several useful oppositions have been suggested for categorizing types of panegyric works — for example, the 'charismatic'/'rational' opposition, with the 'charismatic' aspect emphasizing the benefits of autocracy (power, victory, stability, prosperity) and the 'rational' aspect emphasizing the liberty and authority of the Senate and the good ruler's restraint from exercising arbitrary power;[69] the 'constitutional'/'theocratic' opposition;[70] and the 'official-ceremonial'/'private-informal' opposition.[71] I have tried to show that these oppositions should be seen as intersecting axes of ideology, each with its spectrum of possibilities, rather than exclusive dichotomies. For example, Wallace-Hadrill says that the 'charismatic' imperial virtues such as *aeternitas* or *providentia*, familiar from the coinage, predominate in the letters of Book 10 but are absent from the *Panegyric*. It would be better, though, to say that the 'charismatic' voice alternates with the 'rational' voice, emerging especially at moments of oaths (67.3 'aeternitate') and prayers (94.1 'perpetuitatem'), and even blending with it, when the imperial oath is joined to the tyrannicide theme (67.4).[72] It should also be clear that both 'constitutional' and 'theocratic' aspects abound in the speech. The constitutional aspect, to be sure, like the 'rational' aspect, is expressed by the dominant voice, and the theocratic aspect tends to be expressed through innuendo (*suggestio divini*), metaphor, or outright denial, though that does not necessarily make it the weaker voice.[73] As we have seen, the surprised-by-providence motif portrays the human persona of the emperor encountering his divine context. Gamberini draws from both Book 10 and the *Panegyric* for examples of 'ceremonial' language as opposed to Books 1–9, whereas Fears contrasts Letter 10.1, a 'personal declaration', with the *Panegyric*, an 'official announcement'.[74] As I have shown, there is both a great deal of overlap and significant differences among the panegyric strategies used in Pliny's surviving works: Books 1–9, the various parts of Book 10, and the *Panegyric*. I would prefer to locate them all along a continuum between informal and public (or ceremonial) poles, with all of them being representatives of official propaganda in various generic settings. I would also suggest that we can consider the ceremonial writings of Pliny the expert orator as just as authentic a source of Trajanic propaganda as Trajan himself, if not more so. If the letters of Book 10 do tend to give a more straightforward version of the imperial voice, this is partly due to the extreme rhetorical elaboration of encomiastic themes in the *Panegyric*, which makes it the paradigmatic example of literary imperial propaganda of its time.

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[68] 'The two views are not mutually exclusive', Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 152–3; Méthy, op. cit. (n. 51), 371.
[69] A. Wallace-Hadrill, 'The emperor and his virtues', *Historia* 30 (1981), 317–19; Syme, op. cit. (n. 6), 12.
[70] Brunt, op. cit. (n. 55), 172; Kienast, op. cit. (n. 61), 69; H. M. Cotton and A. Yakobson, '*Arcanum Imperii*: the powers of Augustus', in Clark and Rajak, op. cit. (n. 6), 206–9.
[71] Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 151, 190; F. Gamberini, *Stylistic Theory and Practice in the Younger Pliny* (1983), 375.
[72] Wallace-Hadrill, op. cit. (n. 69), 317; contra, see Braund, op. cit. (n. 35), 64.
[73] Even Menander Rhetor introduces divine topics through innuendo; see 371.5–12, 377.20, 28, 369.5–7. The disparity between Menander and the *Panegyric* is generally over-stated (e.g. D. A. Russell, 'The panegyrists and their teachers', in Whitby, op. cit. (n. 35), 45).
[74] Fears, op. cit. (n. 16), 151.