

Letter from Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62? - c. A.D. 113)

LII to Domitius Apollinaris

Transl. William Melmoth, rev'd F.C.T. Bosanquet, The Harvard Classics, 1909-1914.

THE KIND concern you expressed on hearing of my design to pass the summer at my villa in Tuscany, and your obliging endeavours to dissuade me from going to a place which you think unhealthy, are extremely pleasing to me. It is quite true indeed that the air of that part of Tuscany which lies towards the coast is thick and unwholesome: but my house stands at a good distance from the sea, under one of the Apennines, which are singularly healthy. But, to relieve you from all anxiety on my account, I will give you a description of the temperature of the climate, the situation of the country, and the beauty of my villa, which, I am persuaded, you will hear with as much pleasure as I shall take in giving it.

The air in winter is sharp and frosty, so that myrtles, olives, and trees of that kind which delight in constant warmth, will not flourish here: but the laurel thrives, and is remarkably beautiful, though now and then the cold kills it—though not oftener than it does in the neighbourhood of Rome. The summers are extraordinarily mild, and there is always a refreshing breeze, seldom high winds. This accounts for the number of old men we have about; you would see grandfathers and great-grandfathers of those now grown up to be young men, hear old stories and the dialect of our ancestors, and fancy yourself born in some former age were you to come here.

The character of the country is exceedingly beautiful. Picture to yourself an immense amphitheatre, such as nature only could create. Before you lies a broad, extended plain bounded by a range of mountains, whose summits are covered with tall and ancient woods, which are stocked with all kinds of game. The descending slopes of the mountains are planted with underwood, among which are a number of little risings with a rich soil, on which hardly a stone is to be found. In fruitfulness they are quite equal to a valley, and though their harvest is rather later, their crops are just as good. At the foot of these, on the mountainside, the eye, wherever it turns, runs along one unbroken stretch of vineyards terminated by a belt of shrubs. Next you have meadows and the open plain. The arable land is so stiff that it is necessary to go over it nine times with the biggest oxen and the strongest ploughs. The meadows are bright with flowers, and produce trefoil and other kinds of herbage as fine and tender as if it were but just sprung up, for all the soil is refreshed by never-failing streams. But though there is plenty of water, there are no marshes; for the ground being on a slope, whatever water it receives without absorbing runs off into the Tiber. This river, which winds through the middle of the meadows, is navigable only in the winter and spring, at which seasons it transports the produce of the lands to Rome: but in summer it sinks below its banks, leaving the name of a great river to an almost empty channel: towards the autumn, however, it begins again to renew its claim to that title.

You would be charmed by taking a view of this country from the top of one of our neighbouring mountains, and would fancy that not a real, but some imaginary landscape, painted by the most exquisite pencil, lay before you, such an harmonious variety of beautiful objects meets the eye, whichever way it turns. My house, although at the foot of a hill, commands as good a view as if it stood on its brow, yet you approach by so gentle and gradual a rise that you find yourself on high ground without perceiving you have been making an ascent. Behind, but at a great distance, is the Apennine range. In the calmest days we get cool breezes from that quarter, not sharp and cutting at all, being spent and broken by the long distance they have travelled.

The greater part of the house has a southern aspect, and seems to invite the afternoon sun in summer (but rather earlier in the winter) into a broad and proportionately long portico, consisting of several rooms, particularly a court of antique fashion. In front of the portico is a sort of terrace, edged with box and shrubs cut into different shapes. You descend, from the terrace, by an easy slope adorned with the figures of animals in box, facing each other, to a lawn overspread with the soft, I had almost said the liquid, Acanthus: this is surrounded by a walk enclosed with evergreens, shaped into a variety of forms. Beyond it is the gestatio, laid out in the form of a circus running round the multiform box-hedge and the dwarf-trees, which are cut quite close. The whole is fenced in with a wall completely covered by box cut into steps all the way up to the top. On the outside of the wall lies a meadow that owes as many beauties to nature as all I have been describing within does to art; at the end of which are open plain and numerous other meadows and copses. From the extremity of the portico a large dining-room runs out, opening upon one end of the terrace, while from the windows there is a very extensive view over the meadows up into the country, and from these you also see the terrace and the projecting wing of the house together with the woods enclosing the adjacent hippodrome. Almost opposite the centre of the portico, and rather to the back, stands a summer-house enclosing a small area shaded by four plane-trees, in the midst of which rises a marble fountain which gently plays upon the roots of the plane-trees and upon the grass-plots underneath them. This summer-house has a bedroom in it free from every sort of noise, and which the light itself cannot penetrate, together with a common dining-room I use when I have none but intimate friends with me.

A second portico looks upon this little area, and has the same view as the other I have just been describing. There is, besides, another room, which, being situate close to the nearest plane-tree, enjoys a constant shade and green. Its sides are encrusted with carved marble as far as the dado, while above the marble a foliage is painted with birds among the branches, which has an effect altogether as agreeable as that of the carving, at the foot of which a little fountain, playing through several small pipes into a vase it encloses, produces a most pleasing murmur.

From a corner of the portico you enter a very large bedchamber opposite the large dining-room, which from some of its windows has a view of the terrace, and from others, of the meadow, as those in the front look upon a cascade, which entertains at once both the eye and the ear; for the water, dashing from a great height, foams over the marble basin which receives it below. This room is extremely warm in winter, lying much exposed to the sun, and on a cloudy day the heat of an adjoining stove very well supplies his absence.

Leaving this room, you pass through a good-sized, pleasant undressing-room into the cold-bath-room, in which is a large, gloomy bath: but if you are inclined to swim more at large, or in warmer water, in the middle of the area stands a wide basin for that purpose, and near it a reservoir from which you may be supplied with cold water to brace yourself again, if you should find you are too much relaxed by the warm. Adjoining the cold bath is one of a medium degree of heat, which enjoys the kindly warmth of the sun, but not so intensely as the hot bath, which projects farther. This last consists of three several compartments, each of different degrees of heat; the two former lie open to the full sun, the latter, though not much exposed to its heat, receives an equal share of its light.

Over the undressing-room is built the tennis-court, which admits of different kinds of games and different sets of players. Not far from the baths is the staircase leading to the enclosed portico, three rooms intervening. One of these looks out upon the little area with the four plane-trees round it, the other upon the meadows, and from the third you have a view of several vineyards, so that each has a different one, and looks towards a different point of the heavens. At the upper end of the enclosed portico, and indeed taken off from it, is a room that look out upon the hippodrome, the vineyards, and

the mountains; adjoining is a room which has a full exposure to the sun, especially in winter, and out of which runs another connecting the hippodrome with the house. This forms the front. On the side rises an enclosed portico, which not only looks out upon the vineyards, but seems almost to touch them.

From the middle of this portico you enter a dining-room cooled by the wholesome breezes from the Apennine valleys: from the windows behind, which are extremely large, there is a close view of the vineyards, and from the folding doors through the summer portico. Along that side of the dining-room where there are no windows runs a private staircase for greater convenience in serving up when I give an entertainment; at the farther end is a sleeping-room with a lookout upon the vineyards, and (what is equally agreeable) the portico. Underneath this room is an enclosed portico resembling a grotto, which, enjoying in the midst of summer heats its own natural coolness, neither admits nor wants external air. After you have passed both these porticoes, at the end of the dining-room stands a third, which, according as the day is more or less advanced, serves either for winter or summer use. It leads to two different apartments, one containing four chambers, the other, three, which enjoy by turns both sun and shade.

This arrangement of the different parts of my house is exceedingly pleasant, though it is not to be compared with the beauty of the hippodrome, lying entirely open in the middle of the grounds, so that the eye, upon your first entrance, takes it in entire in one view. It is set round with plane-trees covered with ivy, so that, while their tops flourish with their own green, towards the roots their verdure is borrowed from the ivy that twines round the trunk and branches, spreads from tree to tree, and connects them together. Between each plane-tree are planted box-trees, and behind these stands a grove of laurels which blend their shade with that of the planes. This straight boundary to the hippodrome alters its shape at the farther end, bending into a semicircle, which is planted round, shut in with cypresses, and casts a deeper and gloomier shade, while the inner circular walks (for there are several), enjoying an open exposure, are filled with plenty of roses, and correct, by a very pleasant contrast, the coolness of the shade with the warmth of the sun.

Having passed through these several winding alleys, you enter a straight walk, which breaks out into a variety of others, partitioned off by box-row hedges. In one place you have a little meadow, in another the box is cut in a thousand different forms, sometimes into letters, expressing the master's name, sometimes the artificer's, whilst here and there rise little obelisks with fruit-trees alternatively intermixed, and then on a sudden, in the midst of this elegant regularity, you are surprised with an imitation of the negligent beauties of rural nature. In the centre of this lies a spot adorned with a knot of dwarf plane-trees. Beyond these stands an acacia, smooth and bending in places, then again various other shapes and names. At the upper end is an alcove of white marble, shaded with vines and supported by four small Carystian columns. From this semicircular couch, the water, gushing up through several little pipes, as though pressed out by the weight of the persons who recline themselves upon it, falls into a stone cistern underneath, from whence it is received into a fine polished marble basin, so skilfully contrived that it is always full without ever overflowing.

When I sup here, this basin serves as a table, the larger sort of dishes being placed round the margin, while the smaller ones swim about in the form of vessels and water-fowl. Opposite this is a fountain which is incessantly emptying and filling, for the water which it throws up to a great height, falling back again into it, is by means of consecutive apertures returned as fast as it is received. Facing the alcove (and reflecting upon it as great an ornament as it borrows from it) stands a summer-house of exquisite marble, the doors of which project and open into a green enclosure, while from its upper and lower windows the eye falls upon a variety of different greens.

Next to this is a little private closet (which, though it seems distinct, may form part of the same room), furnished with a couch, and notwithstanding it has windows on every side, yet it enjoys a very agreeable gloom, by means of spreading vine which climbs to the top, and entirely overshadows it. Here you may lie and fancy yourself in a wood, with this only difference, that you are not exposed to the weather as you would be there. Here too a fountain rises and instantly disappears—several marble seats are set in different places, which are as pleasant as the summer-house itself after one is tired out with walking. Near each set is a little fountain, and throughout the whole hippodrome several small rills run murmuring along through pipes, wherever the hand of art has thought proper to conduct them, watering here and there different plots of green, and sometimes all parts at once.

I should have ended before now, for fear of being too chatty, had I not proposed in this letter to lead you into every corner of my house and gardens. Nor did I apprehend your thinking it a trouble to read the description of a place which I feel sure would please you were you to see it; especially as you can stop just when you please, and by throwing aside my letter, sit down, as it were, and give yourself a rest as often as you think proper.

Besides, I gave my little passion indulgence, for I have a passion for what I have built, or finished, myself. In a word (for why should I conceal from my friend either my deliberate opinion or my prejudice?), I look upon it as the first duty of every writer to frequently glance over his title-page and consider well the subject he has proposed to himself; and he may be sure, if he dwells on his subject, he cannot justly be thought tedious, whereas if, on the contrary, he introduces and drags in anything irrelevant, he will be thought exceedingly so. Homer, you know, has employed many verses in the description of the arms of Achilles, as Virgil has also in those of Aeneas, yet neither of them is prolix, because they each keep within the limits of their original design. Aratus, you observe, is not considered too circumstantial, though he traces and enumerates the minutes stars, for he does not go out of his way for that purpose, but only follows where the subject leads him. In the same way (to compare small things with great), so long as, in endeavouring to give you an idea of my house, I have not introduced anything irrelevant or superfluous, it is not my letter which describes, but my villa which is described, that is to be considered large.

But to return to where I began, lest I should justly be condemned by my own law, if I continue longer in this digression, you see now the reasons why I prefer my Tuscan villa to those which I possess at Tusculum, Tiber, and Præneste. Besides the advantages already mentioned, I enjoy here a cozier, more profound and undisturbed retirement than anywhere else, as I am at a greater distance from the business of the town and the interruption of troublesome clients. All is calm and composed; which circumstances contribute no less than its clear air and unclouded sky to that health of body and mind I particularly enjoy in this place, both of which I keep in full swing by study and hunting. And indeed there is no place which agrees better with my family, at least I am sure I have not yet lost one (may the expression be allowed!) of all those I brought here with me. And may the gods continue that happiness to me, and that honour to my villa. Farewell.