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SENECA'S *EPISTULAE MORALES* AS DRAMATIZED EDUCATION

JOHN SCHAFER

longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla
—*Epistulae morales* 6.5

idem facit ratio: non late patet; si aspicias, in opere crescit
—*Epistulae morales* 38.2

Introduction: The Letters as Dramatization

What are Seneca's *Letters*? Many things, evidently: they are letters, discussions of Stoic ethics, exercises in self-reflection, sermons, protreptic to philosophy, spiritual aids against death and misfortune, and much else besides. Some letters are set-piece discussions of particular philosophical topics in which the epistolary form all but vanishes, with merely the opening and closing formulae (*Seneca Lucilio Suo Salutem* and *Vale*) to mark them as such. Others are overtly epistolary, remarking on Seneca's receipt of a previous letter, providing details of his own goings-on, and inquiring into those of his correspondent Lucilius. Themes and issues emerge, fade, and return.

What are the *Letters* as a whole? What unity do they form over and above the sum of their 124 extant parts? This article is an attempt to answer these questions by posing and answering a related question: how should they be read? I will first describe and defend an approach, which I will call a *dramatic reading* of the *Letters*; then I will apply this reading to individual letters and themes.

Much attention has been devoted to the theme of spiritual guidance in the *Letters*; it is indisputable that one of their chief concerns is to examine how we can help each other emerge from vice and move toward a good moral state. To a large extent, the *Letters* are about moral guidance, reform, and education.[1] But they are not merely a discussion of these matters; they are also a representation, a dramatization, of an individual moral education. At the same time that it expounds in detail upon the tactics and strategies of moral suasion, the work itself dramatically instantiates this suasion.[2] Within the drama, Seneca's purpose is the moral improvement of his friend Lucilius. I will argue that the purpose of

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1. Especially important is the groundbreaking study Hadot 1969, esp. 99–141; see also Bellincioni 1978, 73–159 and Pire 1958, 71–127.

2. By "dramatization" and "dramatic reading" I do not mean to overemphasize a comparison between the *Letters* and actual drama, nor to raise the vexing issue of possible connections between Seneca's dramatic output and the *Letters*. I mean "drama" only in the broader sense, in order to pick out the collection's use of plotting, characterization, *mise en scène*, and the like.

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devising and depicting this particular course of moral education is to explore moral education in general; Seneca's didaxis on these matters emerges from reflection on the particular instructions, governed by particular circumstances and exigencies, which he depicts himself issuing to Lucilius.[3] The *Letters* teach teaching by example; they are a literary case-study, an articulated, carefully drawn *exemplum* of Stoic and Senecan pedagogy.[4]

This reading is suggested, in the first instance, by drawing together certain strands of thought in the *Letters*. For one, Seneca stresses that his contribution to moral education lies more in its modalities than in its matter. To borrow an established mode of expression from the *Letters*, the what of moral education is, for him, largely fixed: (Stoic) philosophy is our deliverance from vice. His endeavor (and his opportunity, as an adherent of a centuries-old corpus of doctrine) is to investigate the when and how of deliverance.[5] Closely aligned with this point is his repeated emphasis on the importance of situational variability: it is impossible to know what to do, let alone to give another person advice or counsel, except by intimate familiarity with particular facts.[6] A third theme is the effectiveness of *exempla*: lessons take much better when they are shown rather than said.[7] Finally, the *Letters*, as I will be arguing, are frequently self-referential, or, better put, self-applicable. For instance, Seneca instructs Lucilius on what and how to read; since one of the things Lucilius reads is the *Letters* themselves, it seems overwhelmingly likely that Seneca is signaling to us to apply his advice about reading to the text in which it is contained.[8]

Moral education, then, is subject to such great situational variability that a purely general account of it is impossible, and *exempla* are more effective than purely general accounts anyway. If the *Letters* as a whole are Seneca's teachings about moral education then, by application of their own stated doctrine, they ought to be conducted by example; the dramatic reading ought to be correct.

Approaching the *Letters* in this way offers a set of interpretive tools. When we read them, that is, we should continually ask why Seneca, as Lucilius' teacher and friend, writes what he does. We are to infer Lucilius' words from

3. The Seneca-Lucilius relationship is not a simple one. Friends, teacher/student, guru/disciple, confessor and confessant; I will usually use the term "education" to describe what Seneca's *Letters* do; by this I do not mean to privilege those aspects that are didactic in a narrow sense. Rather, by "education" and related terms I mean something like "training in virtue," which I take to be a safe characterization of what their relationship is for.

4. That the *Letters* as a whole function as an *exemplum* is claimed in Nussbaum 1994, 340: "What we are given in the *Letters* is in fact, for us, one long rich *exemplum*, an open-ended and highly complex story of two concrete lives." My reading, however, differs from Nussbaum's (at least in terms of emphasis) on the question of what the *exemplum* is of. On her reading, the *Letters* depict the philosophical life and the central role of reason in organizing it; my reading, by contrast, will treat Seneca's role as teacher/friend of Lucilius as the basic issue around which the dramatization is constructed.

5. 64.8: *sed etiam si omnia a veteribus inventa sunt, hoc semper novum erit, usus et inventorum ab aliis scientia ac dispositio. . . . animi remedia inventa sunt ab antiquis; quomodo autem admoveantur aut quando nostri operis est quaerere.* ("But even if everything was discovered by the ancients, the following will always be new, namely how to use, understand, and arrange the things discovered by others. . . . Effective spiritual therapy was discovered by the ancients, but it is our task to inquire how and when to apply it.") All translations are my own.

6. 71.1, 21.1.

7. 6.5, quoted at top of paper.

8. *Letter* 2; see below, p. 42.

Seneca's responses. Going further, we are to infer his life, his attitudes, his mental state. We are to think ourselves into Seneca's constant reappraisal of his student/friend's achievements and needs, his strengths and weaknesses.[9] The narrative hints, the details of Seneca's life, of Lucilius' life, of the various third-parties mentioned, are to be squeezed, wrung dry. We are to infer from how (the character) Seneca teaches Lucilius that Seneca (the author) wishes us to see the point of his methods and techniques. The *Letters* are to be read through these features.[10]

That is to say, of course, that they are to be read as a work of literature; and this, it seems, would imply a negative verdict on the much-debated issue of the *Letters'* genuineness. Indeed, I follow the clear majority of scholars since Griffin in believing that the correspondence is essentially fictional.[11] Nonetheless, it is worth emphasizing that literary interpretations of the *Letters* are also compatible with some degree of genuineness: the *Letters* may, in fact, have been sent to Lucilius, Seneca may, in fact, have made the various journeys he describes, and so on.[12] One simply cannot tell. The crucial methodological assumption for my reading is not that the correspondence is entirely fictional but that it is entirely governed by Seneca's authorial control: not only are the individual letters intended for publication, but the story as a whole and all of its inferable details serve Seneca's ambitions in writing them. Many of these details, including those about Lucilius, may well be historically veridical (as the fire at Lugdunum referenced in *Letter* 91 is), but the choice of which ones to include, as well as the choice of Lucilius as addressee itself, will have been deliberate.[13] Qua deliberate, they are both subject to interpretation in the light of Seneca's project and evidence for what that project is.[14]

One of the virtues of the dramatic reading is that it offers a literary explanation for Seneca's use of the epistolary form: letters are not only well suited to, but perhaps the only suitable medium for dramatizing a multi-year friendship

9. This approach necessarily assumes that the order of the *Letters* as we have them is the order in which (within the drama) they are sent. There is quite strong evidence for this position from the many coherent references to earlier letters (e.g., *Letter* 8 references 7; 57 alludes to 53 and 75 to 71; 95 completes a discussion started in 94; 33 comments on all the previous letters).

10. Hachmann (1995, chaps. 1–3) shows how much is gained from reading the *Letters* in terms of their depicted temporal sequentiality. Wilson (2001, 179–86), argues convincingly for reading closely into the developing relationship between Lucilius and Seneca. Inwood (2005, 346–47) attributes the extroversion of the Senecan self in the *Letters* to the author's need to present the Seneca-character vividly and realistically. My reading builds on, and is largely consonant with these (and see also Scala 2001, 278–82), although Wilson, pointing to the thematic multifacetedness of the collection, resists privileging the didactic mode. My response to him would be that Senecan didaxis, properly understood, is as broad as the *Letters* are.

11. Cf. Inwood 2005, 346: "It is now widely accepted . . . that the correspondence of Seneca with Lucilius is to a great extent fictitious." It is not possible to rehearse the many grounds for this judgment here (Griffin 1976, 416–19, is the classic statement of the case; Mazzoli 1989, 1846–55, is an excellent *status quaestionis*). I submit, however, that beyond the arguments adduced by Griffin et al., the fictional or literary camp (especially Maurach 1970, Henderson 2004, and Schönegg 1999, in addition to the scholars mentioned above at n. 10) has by now thoroughly vindicated its basic assumption by the valuable results derived from it. It would be remarkable if a private correspondence unintended for publication could plausibly sustain such close literary readings.

12. Wilson 1987, 119 n. 3.

13. The relative paucity of these details, as Henderson (2004, 1–7) sees, is itself an invitation to read authorial purpose into the ones that are included.

14. On a separate but related point, my reading of some passages of the *Letters* will rely on facts about Seneca's historical life and career. It seems clear that Seneca here and there invites such readings, and I do not think there is any particular awkwardness in assuming a fictional or literary correspondence with a relevant historical and biographical background.

and course of philosophical instruction. Depicting a face-to-face relationship of this kind would impose grave difficulties concerning choice of detail; by contrast, the necessary economy imposed by absence is already an essential feature of epistolary communication. Letters, like photographs, also have a memorializing quality: human relationships change and develop. But they do so gradually: even the people in them only sporadically notice and only imperfectly recall these changes. Letters, though, are kept and reread. A temporal series of letters between friends is like a flip-book of their friendship. Each letter is, roughly speaking, temporally static; the dynamics of the relationship emerge from backward and forward comparisons.[15] Letters both capture precise details of a given instant and collapse long expanses of time into a small and manageable corpus.[16]

The dramatic reading also explains both the order and the disorder of the *Letters*. There are multiple modes of spiritual guidance. Consolation is occasionally called for; sternness and rebuke are sometimes more appropriate. Learning philosophy involves wrestling with the intricacies of theory, but it also includes protreptic, exhortation, and in general the full battery of (respectable) persuasive technique. What method to use at a given moment, for pupils at different stages in their training, is a matter of expertise and is subject to great situational variability. There is sure to be no small amount of repetition, both in form and in content. Actual human relationships, moreover, whether face-to-face or epistolary, involve randomness. Events intervene: friends die, the correspondence is slowed by tardy couriers, people get sick, natural disasters strike. Thought proceeds by association, cannot be scripted in advance; friends share their thoughts.

Over and above these fortuitous elements, however, Lucilius progresses in Stoic wisdom throughout and is, hence, prepared for the heavier, more technical material that fills the later books. This movement, from chatty, breezy letters to dense and serious ones, is noticed by all students of the *Letters*. Even the later letters, though, include personal and nontechnical touches: Seneca and Lucilius are still friends, after all. And while certain large themes (contempt for fortune, liberation through suicide, the corrupting beliefs of ordinary people) appear and reappear, they do so haphazardly, sometimes in response to the goings-on in Lucilius' life, at other times generated by chance reflections on Seneca's part. Moral education has its trends, movements visible from a bird's-eye view; but it also cannot be reduced to a syllabus.

The *Letters*, understood in this way, also fill in a lacuna in the philosophical tradition. The usefulness of friendship for moral development is an established

15. Analyzing *Letter* 46, however, Wilson (1987, 104–7) brilliantly establishes the importance of temporal dynamism within the imagined composition of individual letters.

16. Seneca is undoubtedly also responding to multiple literary influences in choosing the epistolary form. The philosophical letter was already an established genre (of which Epicurus is the most important practitioner; letters purporting to be by Plato, Aristotle, and other figures also circulated in antiquity). Cicero's correspondence with Atticus had apparently recently been published (Seneca's references to it at 21.4, 107.3, and 118.1 are the earliest extant notice of these letters). Horace's *Epistles* have also been seen as a possible influence (Maurach 1970, 196–97). By his frequent engagement with either author, Seneca strongly hints that Epicurus and Cicero are the relevant models (roughly speaking, the former for the content, the latter for the form). Cicero's correspondence *Ad Atticum* will have shown to Seneca how a series of letters, published by their author, can reveal the interior life of the sender and hint strongly at the words and personality of their recipient.

theme in classical philosophy.[17] It is commonplace in antiquity to assert that the right sort of friendship is productive of virtue. Seneca, by contrast, shows us, in great imaginative detail, what a philosophical friendship might look like and how it might work. So for moral reform in general: προκοπή, or moral progress (*profectus* in Seneca's Latin translation), is a crucial concept in Stoicism. The promise of it is realistically all the Stoics have to offer a prospective adherent, since wisdom or sagehood is conceded to be almost unattainable. What does it look like, how does it happen, why should we care about it? On the dramatic reading, the *Letters* allow us to engage deeply with these questions, to consider how Lucilius is reacting to the treatment. To the extent that the representation rings true, we can be convinced that this sort of guidance is valuable. To read the *Letters* dramatically is to work through and test Seneca's pedagogical notions for oneself; the deep conviction that this sort of experiential success can instill is precisely what makes teaching by example so efficacious.

Finally, the dramatic reading makes the reader work. Seneca is keenly aware of the danger of passive, lazy reading. Within the drama, Seneca urges Lucilius to read and reread, to question authority, to learn philosophy rather than merely memorize it.[18] We may be confident that these lessons are meant to apply to our consumption of the *Letters* as well.[19] The dramatic reading offers a way for us to read Seneca as he tells us to read him: interactively, creatively.[20]

1. Trying It Out: *Letter* 1

The story begins not with *Letter* 1, but with a letter by *Lucilius* to Seneca; apparently, the former asked the latter for spiritual advice. That Lucilius wrote Seneca is clear from 1.2 (*quod facere te scribis)*. That Lucilius wrote with a request for spiritual guidance is also safely to be inferred. *Letter* 1 begins with the words *ita fac*; for a letter of reply to begin with the command "do this," it is all but necessary that the initial letter asked, "what should I do?" Seneca's answer: *vindica te tibi*: take control of your life, realize that you die a little every moment, that it won't be long before your life is over. Stop wasting time. Then, a break in tone: the first two-thirds of the letter build a frantic urgency, featuring no fewer than seven verbs in the imperative mood; in the final third of the letter Seneca turns inward, assessing how well he himself accords with his own teaching, confessing his own weaknesses. There are nine first-person singular verbs in this part. The letter moves from brash and second-personal to reflective and confessional.

17. Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 8–9 is the *locus classicus*. Seneca also wrote a treatise on friendship, the lost work *Quo modo amicitia continenda sit* (Vottero 1998, 38–41).

18. Cf. 33.7, 39.1, 45.2.

19. The distinction I am positing, between "Seneca the character," the producer of the extended speech act that the *Letters* are, and "Seneca the author," who, for his own reasons, conceives the dramatization and carries it out, is of course fundamental to the dramatic reading (*pace* opponents of inferring authorial intent). For the sake of simplicity, in what follows references to Seneca pick out the character unless otherwise specified.

20. In several passages, Seneca signals that the *Letters* have a third-person audience in view by adverting to his expectation that "posterity" will read them. In 8.1–2, he defends his own retirement by stressing the edification future generations will receive from his work: *posterorum negotium ago. illis aliqua quae possint prodesse conscribo; salutares admonitiones . . . litteris mando*. At 21.5–6, he promises Lucilius the sort of immortality that Cicero's letters give to Atticus. I take these passages as clear indications of the *Letters'* self-conscious literarity, though they leave open how that literarity is meant to work.

Letter 1 is fertile ground for the dramatic reading. One result: The educative relationship is asymmetrical. There is the student, and then there is the teacher. Another: The student should seek the teacher, not vice versa. First you have to recognize that you have a problem, first you have to want to change. A third thing: The teacher begins by nourishing the learner's pre-existing feeling of urgency. A fourth: Although the teacher should not be afraid to preach, neither should he present himself as radically superior to the student (although one is ahead of the other, they are both travelers on the same road). Otherwise he will be written off as a big-mouth, and his precepts, however correct in themselves, will be disregarded. Relatedly, the teacher should share himself with his student. He should conduct his examinations of his own conscience in his student's hearing: the relationship involves the radical extroversion of one's self. Finally, the correspondence, addressed to a late-middle-aged man, starts with an exhortation to take his life seriously; we infer that that is how Senecan Adult Education begins.

At this point, one will be attracted to this approach to the extent that one thinks the lessons gained from it are interesting, or true, or that Seneca probably thought them to be true, or that they provoke fruitful contemplation and so make the *Letters* more thoughtful and engaging a production. I think all of these things are true. But to clinch the point, to vindicate this procedure in the face of doubters, nothing works so well as to point out that Seneca just asserts, and repeatedly so, the lessons that it yields.

On the asymmetry of teacher and student, see *Letter* 7.8: *cum his versare qui te meliorem facturi sunt, illos admitte quos tu potes facere meliores*. On letting the student come to you, reflect on that *admitte*, and also this sentence from the same passage, just after Seneca warns Lucilius against street preaching (*Letter* 7.9): *aliquis fortasse unus aut alter incidet, et hic formandus tibi erit*. . . . On encouraging the student's pre-existing tendencies to goodness, here is *Letter* 94.29: *omnium honestarum rerum semina animi gerunt, quae admonitione excitantur*. . . . That a teacher must be willing to engage in the livelier sort of instruction, see *Letter* 25.1, where Seneca discusses a friend whose moral problems are particularly acute: *utar tota libertate: non amo illum nisi offendo*. That the teacher should also be wary of appearing self-righteous, see *Letter* 27.1, where Seneca anticipates this objection, claiming to be not a doctor but a fellow patient who has found effective treatment for a shared illness: *de communi tecum malo conloquor et remedia communicabo*. Finally, on examining one's conscience, and doing so with a friend as an audience, I trust that any reader of the *Letters* will recognize those themes. Among innumerable examples, 7.8: *recede in te ipse quantum potes* exemplifies the former; 3.2: *tam audaciter cum illo [sc. amico] loquere quam tecum*, the latter.

Finally, *Letter* 1 instantiates its own theme of conserving time. Seneca does not waste time describing the dangers of wasting time.

2. AN OVERVIEW: THE EDUCATION OF LUCILIUS

It is not possible, here, to carry out an exhaustive study of the *Letters*-as-drama. It will be useful, however, to consider the overall movement of the action, first of all to demonstrate that enough happens to the characters to justify speaking

of the "drama" of the letters, and then to isolate a few particular elements to which the reading may be applied.[21] As already noted, the story begins with Lucilius requesting spiritual guidance and Seneca responding with a mixture of exhortation and self-scrutiny.[22] We learn that Lucilius is somewhat younger than Seneca, a native of Pompeii, a poet, and currently procurator of Sicily. He is trying, with Seneca's persistent exhortation, to put aside his duties and devote his retirement to philosophy. At *Letter* 68, we infer that he has finally resolved to do so; from Seneca's subsequent silence, it seems that he has carried this resolution out.

There are suggestive, if relatively few, details about his daily life. More common are remarks about his ongoing moral progress, some of them amounting to explicit progress reports. Seneca is hopeful about Lucilius in *Letters* 2 and 16; in 31, he writes that Lucilius is starting to live up to his potential. Stronger praise in *Letter* 34 is corrected in 35: there, Lucilius is told that he is not yet morally competent truly to be Seneca's friend. In *Letter* 82, the last such explicit notice, we read that Seneca is no longer concerned (*sollicitus*) about Lucilius.[23] These positive reports are balanced by occasional rebuke (*Letters* 17, 28, 60, 93, 96).[24] Lucilius' greatest inferrable weakness is his lingering concern for material goods and his anxieties about losing them.

As the correspondence progresses, Lucilius' philosophical sophistication increases. The first twenty-nine *Letters* each end with a sententia for Lucilius to ponder. After stopping this practice in *Letter* 30, in 33 Seneca rejects Lucilius' request to reinstate it, calling on him to progress to a higher philosophical level.[25] While in *Letter* 6 Seneca offers to mark the most important passages in unnamed philosophical books he sends along (6.5, *imponam notas*), in 39 he only reluctantly agrees to send certain *commentarii*, since Lucilius should now study complete works rather than mere summaries of doctrine. Similarly, when Lucilius asks for copies of Seneca's writings (45.2), Seneca agrees, but immediately warns Lucilius to read them critically rather than reverently.

21. This ground is covered in more detail in Schafer 2009, 71–74. See Russell 1974, 75–79, for an older discussion of the Lucilius story line, which, I propose, does not go far enough. In particular, I hope to undermine his warning (75) "it is important, however, not to exaggerate the 'plot.'"

22. It is important to point out that treating the *Letters* as the self-contained story of Lucilius is potentially dangerous, since he also appears, with some biographical detail, as the addressee of Seneca's *Quaestiones naturales* and *De providentia*. Moreover, it is clear that Seneca's other (philosophical) works are relevant for understanding the *Letters*, as we shall see below. Nonetheless, I think it both necessary and safe to restrict our study to the *Letters* alone. Necessary, because we have no way to fix the dramatic chronology of the *QNat.* and *De providentia* relative to the *Letters*. (The dates of composition are also controversial, and in the case of the *De providentia* firm evidence is entirely wanting; see Grimal 1979, 219–33 and 299–303, and Griffin 1976, 395–411). And safe, because little would be added to the picture presented in the *Letters* even if we could integrate the other two works. Lucilius' role in the *De providentia* is limited: essentially, he asks the question that the treatise answers. There is more in the *QNat.*; for instance, Lucilius is depicted as already having made significant moral progress (1.6, 4A.1–3). Yet even there the detail is scant enough, I think, to leave aside safely.

23. This suggests that Lucilius has at this point reached the lowest step of moral progress discussed in *Letter* 75. Someone who has reached this level (an achievement that Seneca regards as significant) *iam non concupiscit, sed adhuc timet, et in ipso metu ad quaedam satis firmus est, quibusdam cedit: mortem contemnit, dolorem reformidat.*

24. The chastisement is almost always less prominently placed than the praise; this is how Seneca teaches, and how Seneca the author teaches us to teach.

25. For this *Letter* and its importance for establishing the shifting nature of the Seneca-Lucilius relationship, see Wilson 2001, 179–86.

Lucilius' philosophical questions increase in frequency and technicality, as his requests for advice on practial matters, which are much more prominent in the first fifty or so letters, recede. These questions are often challenging: in *Letter* 72, for instance, Seneca writes that he needs more time to reflect on an issue that he had not considered carefully for a long time, and in *Letter* 117 Lucilius' question forces Seneca to admit, with perhaps exaggerated discomfort, that his opinion deviates from the official Stoic one.

The scattered references to Lucilius' reading works of technical philosophy are crucially important on this reading. On Seneca's own theory, expounded at great length in two programmatic letters (94 and 95, the longest in the collection) on method in philosophical instruction, inculcating virtue requires the teaching both of philosophical doctrines (*decreta*) and individual commands or instructions (*praecepta*), under which are subsumed exhortation, consolation, and related techniques of spiritual guidance.[26] The *Letters* themselves reflect the latter to a far greater extent than the former; but they also show that Seneca's curriculum includes the former, knotty (*nodosum*) stuff. In cinematic terms, the references to Lucilius' reading these books act like a montage in a kung fu movie: the hero in training may spend many years throwing knives and punching wooden boards under his master's tuition; the filmmaker need only show us one or two such exercises to allow us to infer the centrality of the training without lingering unduly on its unavoidable repetitiveness. After *Letter* 68, again, Lucilius appears to have retired in order to devote himself fully to philosophy. He reads full-time, asking Seneca for clarifications on particular issues that trouble him. This, I take it, explains why the last thirty or so letters are both idiosyncratic in their interests and technical in their exposition: Lucilius has reached the stage where he is competently absorbing a wide range of philosophical texts on his own, and need only trouble Seneca on certain difficulties. Thus in *Letter* 113, for instance, his question is about the ontological status of the virtues, and in *Letter* 120 about the epistemology of ethics.

The opening of *Letter* 108 contains important evidence both for this late stage in Lucilius' progress and for the didactic methods Seneca considers appropriate to it:

> Id de quo quaeris ex iis est quae scire tantum eo, ut scias, pertinet. Sed nihilominus, quia pertinet, properas nec vis expectare libros quos cum maxime ordino continentis totam moralem philosophiae partem. Statim expediam; illud tamen prius scribam, quemadmodum tibi ista cupiditas discendi, qua flagrare te video, digerenda sit, ne ipsa se inpediat. Nec passim carpenda sunt nec avide invadenda universa: per partes pervenietur ad totum.
>
> What you ask about is one of those things which has no further relevance beyond the bare fact of knowing it. But nonetheless, because it does have that limited relevance, you are in a hurry, and unwilling to wait for the books I am just now putting together encompassing the entirety of moral philosophy. I will untangle that right away, but first I will write about how to manage your eagerness to learn, which I see that you are burning with, so it doesn't get in its own way. You should neither pick at questions from all fields nor greedily attack them all at once: one arrives at the whole by covering each part in turn.

26. On these *Letters*, see Schafer 2009 and Bellincioni's translation with commentary (1979).

Lucilius asks an unspecified technical question. Seneca judges the issue mildly otiose, but agrees to answer it. But first he warns Lucilius not to let his eagerness trip him up: one thing at a time.[27]

Several points emerge. Lucilius is "burning" (*flagrare*) with philosophical enthusiasm. After long and persistent exhortation, Seneca prevailed upon Lucilius to retire, to spend all his time in study. Lucilius had sparks of interest, which Seneca fanned: the treatment took. He has by *Letter* 108 succeeded in reorienting Lucilius' life around philosophy. The advice he gives here is one that only a highly advanced student would need: the ordinary run of people scarcely needs to be warned against philosophical overenthusiasm. Moreover, Seneca is composing a master work, his *Summa*, of which Lucilius is sure to receive an advance copy.[28]

The remainder of *Letter* 108 fulfills the promise *illud tamen prius scribam*. The letter is a beautiful, polythematic piece, moving from a meditation on the motivational power of noble words, through a reminiscence of Seneca's own enthusiastic embrace of philosophy as a youth (including his temporary adoption of a vegetarian diet), finally focusing on the dangers of studying as mere dilettante, as *philologus*, instead of studying for the sake of the Supreme Good, virtue.

The next letter fulfills Seneca's promise to answer Lucilius' question, ending with the inevitable warning about gratuitous displays of intellectual *acumen*. Seneca also repeats that this issue is to be treated in his upcoming *Summa*. Taken together, the two letters can be seen to apply Seneca's doctrine on method (*Letters* 94 and 95 again, *et passim*): first you warn, admonish, motivate, and *then* you give the technical explanations. Seen globally, the instruction of Lucilius instantiates this doctrine, culminating (though offstage), in the promised *Summa*, the summit of Seneca's didaxis. The work is just now coming together in 108 (*cum maxime ordino*). So is Lucilius.

3. The Dramatic Reading Applied

Now that we have seen an overview of the Lucilius drama, it should be clear that it contains enough action to justify our attention.[29] But it is at least as important to vindicate the dramatic reading for individual letters, passages, and themes as it is for the collection as a whole. In this section, I will focus on three

27. *Letter* 109 reveals that the question is whether a *sapiens* would benefit another *sapiens*.

28. *Letter* 106.2 also mentions this work, known to us as the *Moralis philosophiae libri*. There, as in *Letter* 108, Seneca writes that he intended to discuss Lucilius' question (*bonum an corpus sit*) in a work covering all ethical questions (*scis enim me moralem philosophiam conplecti velle et omnes ad eam pertinentis quaestiones explicare*). Leeman (1953, 307–13) attributes the more technical nature of the later *Letters* to Seneca's contemporaneous work on such issues in the *Libri*. On my reading, of course, the content of the later *Letters* is rather to be explained by Seneca's assessment of Lucilius' philosophical progress. I take no position on the historical questions concerning the *Libri*; see Vottero 1998, 64–75, for a judicious consideration of the scant evidence available.

29. There is, of course, also a Seneca-drama, also important for my purposes, though somewhat less so. Space prevents me from tracing it here, except to point out that the act of teaching Lucilius is itself part of Seneca's journey toward goodness. Nonetheless, I think comments like *Letter* 6.1: *intellego, Lucili, non emendari me tantum sed transfigurari* are best understood not as evidence for Seneca's ongoing progress but as a calculated part of his didaxis: as discussed in connection with *Letter* 1, Seneca is keen not to present himself as radically superior to Lucilius.

different texts, showing how this approach can enhance our understanding of them. First, I will consider *Letter* 7, whose thematic resonances, especially within the first book (*Letters* 1–12) of the collection, are of fundamental importance for establishing the dynamics of Senecan philosophical friendship. Then I will consider *Letter* 56, with a glance at the other "travel letters" from Seneca's trip to Campania (49–57), showing how they contribute to Seneca-the-author's ideas about teaching method. Finally, I will consider *Letters* 60–62 as a connected series, arguing that they can be seen as a case study of a pedagogical mistake conscientiously corrected.[30]

Friends, Alone Together: *Letter* 7

Letter 7 is, deservedly, among the best known of the *Letters*. Dramatically, the training is just beginning. Lucilius has asked a quite general, but also sensible, question: what should I avoid? The answer comes immediately: *turbam*. The danger of moral contagion correlates directly with the number of one's acquaintances. Seneca's denunciation of gladiatorial games, for which the *Letter* is best remembered, comes in first as *exemplum* and then as autobiographical ekphrasis. After the mirror to our collective cruelty is held up, after we are moved to pity and disgust, morals are to be drawn. Avoid the general run of men. Be careful whom you are around (*Letter* 7.8–9):

> Recede in te quantum potes; cum his versare qui te meliorem facturi sunt, illos admitte quos tu potes facere meliores. Mutuo ista fiunt, et homines dum docent discunt. Non est quod te gloria publicandi ingenii producat in medium, ut recitare istis velis aut disputare; quod facere te vellem, si haberes isti populo idoneam mercem: nemo est qui intellegere te possit. Aliquis fortasse, unus aut alter incidet, et hic ipse formandus tibi erit instituendusque ad intellectum tui.
>
> Withdraw into yourself as much as you can; associate with those who will improve you, accept the company of those whom you can improve. These things happen mutually, and people learn while teaching. Don't let the desire to show off your talent bring you out in public to recite to people or argue with them, though I would have you do that if you had the right wares for that crowd: but in fact none of them can understand you. Yet perhaps someone or other will happen along who will be fit for you to shape and train to an understanding of you.

It would be quite natural to read this passage merely as Seneca's recommendations for spiritual reform in general. Within the drama, however, the imperatives in this passage are also specific instructions from Seneca to Lucilius, issued at this particular, early point in the course of training, which Lucilius will be expected to obey. *Recede in te*, then, is both a slogan for Senecan self-help and a prefiguration of Lucilius' retirement, which first comes up in its own right in *Letter* 17; in the former sense, the command is operative throughout the work, in the latter it is implemented by around *Letter* 68. *Cum his versare* is also heeded; who but Seneca, after all, could Lucilius be meant to think about here? There is a lesson in the subtlety, in the artistry, of this recommendation.

30. Maurach (1970, 11–17) also sees *Letters* 60–62 as forming a series, arguing that the point of Seneca's critique in 60 only emerges fully when read together with the two following *Letters*.

Seneca judges that he can help Lucilius; of course, it will not work unless Lucilius comes to feel the same way. But self-promotion is a delicate enterprise. If it must be done, best to do it implicitly, as here. If possible, embed the point in a larger one. Make the point on the general level: the plural *his* is well considered.

Letter 2 achieves something similar. The theme of that letter is stability; stay in one place, both in terms of where you go and what you read.[31] Seneca's lesson plan involves constant reading, oriented entirely toward the goal of moral edification, stressing quality over quantity: *Probatos itaque semper lege, et si quando ad alios deverti libuerit, ad priores redi*. Read "tried and true" authors. Lucilius will read this command. *Semper lege*: i.e., "read trusted authors all the time," but also "only read trusted authors." Seneca wants to be(come) *probatus* by Lucilius. He thinks he should be; otherwise, his instruction is the logical equivalent of "disobey this instruction." He also knows not to be heavy-handed with the point.[32] It is also interesting to see what happens when one applies the coda of this instruction to the text that contains it: *ad priores redi*. In other words, after we have read Seneca already. That Seneca should all but explicitly suggest *re*reading him is no small support to a reading of him that requires us constantly to revise our understanding of individual letters in the light of what follows them.

Self-applying Seneca's teachings has similar implications in the passage from *Letter* 7. If people learn while they teach, Seneca can be expected to learn from teaching Lucilius. If a philosophical friendship is a process of training the student to understand the teacher, then that characterization should also govern the friendship dramatized in the *Letters*, and indeed the *Letters* themselves. Lucilius' reading (and rereading) of the *Letters*, then, is a process by which he is shaped to do what others cannot do, namely to understand Seneca, and by understanding to be aided by him. Once again, it is no great leap to suppose that these remarks apply also to us. Most people, then, cannot understand Seneca or his *Letters*, but *unus aut alter* can submit to their tuition, study them assiduously, and thereby undergo the necessary transformation (*formari*). If this move is allowed, we have in this passage further authorial encouragement for the sort of closely read interpretation proposed here.

To continue, let us consider again *illos admitte* . . . If it is read as a specific instruction, Seneca is telling his student and patient to find his own student/patients as well. And, in fact, Lucilius carries out this instruction.[33] In *Letter* 36, Seneca seems to respond to a request for advice on how Lucilius should advise a friend, reaffirming that Lucilius should strive to make his friend as good as he can. At *Letter* 42.5, Seneca recalls Lucilius saying a certain person

31. *Letter* 2 relies heavily on the pun between *loca* (physical places) and *loci* (passages in literature), as Henderson 2004, 8, observes.

32. Seneca shows similar tact with the quote-for-the-day from *Letter* 25: *'sic fac' inquit [Epicurus] 'omnia tamquam spectet Epicurus'* (Epicurus frag. 211 Usener). Imagine a spiritual authority is watching you and you will be less tempted by vice. Epicurus' self-recommendation is explicit; here, you have to make the inference yourself. This artistry is both a lesson in cautious self-promotion and a one-upping of Seneca's less cautious, less artful predecessor in philosophical epistolarity.

33. Hence, *homines dum docent discunt* can also be inverted: Lucilius is teaching while he learns. That teaching and learning are thoroughly imbricated is perhaps most clearly shown at *Letter* 76.3, where Seneca writes that he is attending philosophy lectures, remarking that his attendance as a learner itself teaches the other learners, namely that old men should learn too.

was "in his power." Seneca disagreed, and turned out to be right: Lucilius' patient fell into complete moral corruption. No surprise if Lucilius' efforts should have failed: he is less experienced in instruction than Seneca is, and the students it is appropriate for him to take even less so, and accordingly more ensnared by vice.

Seneca also remarks in several passages that Lucilius both wants to and should become a full-fledged philosopher himself (*Letter* 33.7). In *Letter* 44, Seneca suggests that Lucilius should aspire even to be Plato's equal. Moreover, on Seneca's reading of the history of philosophy, there is no distinction between research philosophers, philosophy teachers, and philosophical therapists (*Letter* 6.6): *Zenonem Cleanthes non expressisset si tantummodo audisset: vitae eius interfuit, secreta perspexit. . . . Platon et Aristoteles et omnis in diversum itura sapientium turba plus ex moribus quam ex verbis Socratis traxit.*[34] There is therefore ample justification, within the dramatic conceit, for Seneca to mention to Lucilius those programmatic points about method in spiritual guidance, which we need in order to realize how central they are to the concerns of Seneca qua author: Lucilius is studying to be a spiritual guide himself, and must therefore himself be versed in pedagogical theory.[35]

Moreover, the teacher-student relationship is, for Seneca, not a different sort of relationship from friendship. By *Letter* 7, Lucilius has been warned (in *Letter* 3) to reflect carefully before establishing a friendship with someone. This passage, then, provides a criterion for this judgment: receive someone as friend if either you can improve him or he you. Lucilius frequently asks Seneca about mutual friends; *Letter* 29, for instance, represents Lucilius as having asked about the condition of one Marcellinus.[36] It turns out he is not well, and then it turns out that the way he is not well is not physical but moral: Lucilius' question had been about his moral state.[37]

Seneca can also be seen applying his own lessons. *Letter* 2 begins *ex iis quae mihi scribis et ex iis quae audio bonam spem de te concipio*. Seneca is not yet on intimate terms with Lucilius: so he checks his references (*ex iis quae audio*), to determine whether he is a fit student/friend. When he says in 3.2 *post amicitiam credendum est, ante iudicandum*, Seneca has already practiced what he preaches.

Of course, it will turn out that Lucilius is a suitable friend. At least, Seneca so judges, if we may judge from the intense interiority, the deep sharing of himself reflected in the *Letters*, which demonstrates Seneca once again following his own advice at 3.2 (quoted above in connection with *Letter* 1), to speak to a

34. "Cleanthes would not have been stamped in Zeno's image if he had only attended his lectures: he was part of Zeno's life, he beheld his secrets. . . . Plato and Aristotle and the whole crowd of wise men with divergent views took more from Socrates' character than from his words."

35. This thought also explains *Letter* 99, in which Seneca transcribes a letter he wrote to one Marullus, who had failed to endure the death of his son courageously. Seneca judges that this particular case calls for *obiurgatio* rather than *consolatio*, and chastises his correspondent mercilessly. Dramatically, this letter must be addressed to a third party, since Lucilius has achieved sufficient progress that this sort of reaction is not appropriate for him. The justification for showing the letter to him (and thus to us) is to teach him/us, by example again, when and how to use these drastic techniques of spiritual guidance.

36. Schönegg 1999, 61–64.

37. Cf. *Letter* 25.

friend as if to himself.[38] What is it about Lucilius that makes him an *unus aut alter . . . formandus instituendusque* for Seneca?

The answer can be inferred by reading the *Letters* dramatically. In *Letter* 19, Seneca begs Lucilius to retire.[39] Neither make a show of your retirement nor try to hide it. In any case, it is too late for Lucilius to deliberate whether a life of anonymity is better for him: *in medium te protulit ingenii vigor, scriptorum elegantia, clarae ac nobiles amicitiae; iam notitia te invasit . . . tulit te longe a conspectu vitae salubris rapida felicitas, provincia et procuratio et quidquid ab istis promittitur* (*Letter* 19.3–5).[40] Lucilius is Seneca writ small: made famous by his talent, a writer, connected to Roman power circles, enriched by political office. What Seneca is (or was) at Rome, Lucilius is in Sicily. From other letters we can add: old, but not as old as Seneca, versed in philosophy, but obviously not as well as Seneca, and so on.[41] A friend is, as the cliché goes, an *alter ego*; so he is in an asymmetrical Senecan philosophical friendship, but to a slightly lesser extent. These similarities allow Lucilius to become Seneca's friend and to understand him as such. At *Letter* 7.9, the *unus aut alter* who will understand are contrasted with the *turba* whose souls are too disordered to do so. That element is present here, but Lucilius is also in a position to understand Seneca's particular *vitia* as well: *rapida felicitas* befell them both.[42] Seneca regularly insists he is not a *sapiens*; reading *Letter* 7 together with 19 and applying the former to the latter suggests a stronger point: perhaps he *could not* be a *sapiens* and still help Lucilius. He would be too distant. There are good uses even of vice.[43]

It must be said that this passage can easily be made to support the thesis that Lucilius is not a "real" character but only a mirror for Seneca's interiority, a device allowing him to talk to himself. The cost paid by this claim is that it reduces the themes of friendship and of didactic method to a mere plot device for establishing the central conceit. I hope to have shown how high this cost is; these themes are simply too important and too ubiquitous to be merely instrumental to Seneca's soliloquizing.[44]

It is a separate question, I think, whether the details about Lucilius, even his existence, are historically true or merely invented by the author. For instance, one might see Seneca's comment at *Letter* 34.2, *adsero te mihi; meum opus es*, as a hint that Lucilius is essentially fictional (*meum opus es*, i.e., you, Lucilius, are my literary creation). For current purposes one may suspend judgment on

38. This intimacy also extends to the grossly physical. *Letter* 83, for instance, relays the details of Seneca's day-to-day life, including exercise and bathing.

39. *ita fac oro atque obsecro . . . si potes, subduc te istis occupationibus; si minus, eripe.* This *ita fac* recalls the *ita fac* that begins *Letter* 1, particularly as the next sentence, *satis multum temporibus sparsimus,* clearly recalls the first letter's theme of conserving time. This recollection of the opening, I suggest, marks what follows as bearing special thematic importance, just as a second invocation of the Muse in an epic poem does.

40. "Your lively talent, refined writings, and your friendships with distinguished and famous men have brought you into public view; fame has seized you . . . You have been taken far from the sight of healthy living by rapid prosperity, by your position as provincial procurator and all that one typically expects from that."

41. Cf. *Letter* 35.2.

42. The last words of the *Epistulae* as we have them (124.24) are *tunc habebis tuum cum intelleges infelicissimos esse felices*; cf. also 1.4: *causas paupertatis meae reddam*—a subtle but important theme.

43. This point can also be seen in Seneca's use of negative *exempla* (12.8–9, 94.62–67), and especially those in which the *exemplum* is Seneca himself (12.2–3, 87.1–5).

44. *Pace* Schönegg 1999, 91–95.

this issue, just as one need not say whether Seneca actually sent these letters, whether he actually took this trip to Campania, actually happened upon a gladiatorial spectacle, and so on. The crucial points, as I see them, are that within the *Letters* Lucilius is a literary *character*, and that his function as such is not incidental or instrumental. In fact, *Letter* 34.2 may be pressed into service for this point: *meum opus es*, i.e., your spiritual development, Lucilius, is the reason I, the Seneca-character, am writing these words.

Seneca's interest in practical and theoretical consistency, though clear in any case, is revealed to be pervasive and fundamental under a dramatic reading. For instance, Seneca thinks that only *unus aut alter* can become suitable student/friends. Lucilius is such a person, and several letters (25, 29) discuss mutual friends whose suitability for treatment is questionable. In *Letter* 112, however, Seneca flatly refuses a request from Lucilius to help an unnamed acquaintance: he is too far gone and not sincere enough to be helped. The letter is harsh, but for a good (dramatic) reason: it shows Seneca practicing what he preaches.

Another example comes at *Letter* 18.5, where Seneca assigns spiritual homework to Lucilius. The teacher wants his student on occasion to practice self-imposed poverty. The letter goes on to specify that the exercise ought to be restrictive enough to be a genuine test of Lucilius' fortitude and not a mere game (*ut non lusus sit sed experimentum*), and that he is to sustain the exercise for at least three or four days at a time.

Edification Everywhere: *Letter* 56 and Environs

But lest we reproach Seneca for exempting himself from the hardships he imposes on others, *Letter* 56 reminds us that he gives himself homework too. *Letter* 56, like 7, is deservedly one of the best known *Letters*; Seneca is staying above a bathhouse (*supra ipsum balneum habito*). The din of the *turba* is vividly described, highly specific details of urban noise-making conveyed. We infer that the letter is being written in Seneca's apartment, that he is describing noises at the very moment he hears them. Then the inevitable shift to moralizing: without reason our souls are disordered, and internal chaos is worse than the external kind (*Letter* 56.5). Seneca's reflections provide Lucilius with a criterion to measure his own tranquility (56.14): *tunc ergo te scito esse compositum cum ad te nullus clamor pertinebit*. Finally, the letter ends with Seneca remarking that he is planning to leave: *itaque ex hoc loco migrabo. Experiri et exercere me volui . . .*

A clever set-piece of homiletics. And a charming text, or an infuriating one, if one finds Seneca's condescension to the lower classes distasteful. Read in isolation, though, the conceit of this *Letter* seems threadbare and unconvincing: we wonder why the richest man in the Empire would stay in such a flat at the beginning, and our dubiousness is scarcely allayed by Seneca's eventual explanation that he wanted to test himself.

But when we read this *Letter* in the context of the series, with its dramatic indications in mind, we find that its elements are better motivated and integrated into the whole than they would otherwise appear. Seneca makes himself less aloof—but also more conscientious—by showing that he assigns spiritual exercises to himself as well. He also, by telling Lucilius that he has done this, gently plants in his friend's mind the notion that he can devise his own

exercises as well. Seneca's taste in lodgings is less strange than it seems: in *Letter* 49 he tells of going to Naples and Pompeii, and from then until *Letter* 57 at least, Seneca has been traveling in Campania. At *Letter* 51, he has come and gone from Baiae, at *Letter* 52 he takes a (disagreeable) sea-voyage, travels by sedan-chair near Cumae at *Letter* 55, and in *Letter* 57 he has gone back to Naples, going by land this time. Wherever precisely he is in *Letter* 56 (Baiae?), he needs lodging. He has already given Lucilius the instruction to simulate poverty: why may he not assign it to himself as well?

On the homiletic tone, *Letter* 56 is of a piece with most of these travel letters. In *Letter* 50, Seneca tells us that he received Lucilius' letter "many months" after it had been sent; for that reason, he did not bother to ask the courier how Lucilius was doing. From then until *Letter* 59 Seneca seems not to hear from his friend at all. Adding these months to the time that it must have taken Seneca to do all the traveling mentioned in these letters reveals that a significant amount of time passes by, enough time that the characters' friendship might reasonably be thought to be in danger of growing cool. Seneca, however, takes his responsibility as spiritual guide seriously, reaching into the details of his travels for edifying material. In *Letter* 51, he tells how he left Baiae, the notorious den of iniquity, the day after arriving: be careful. *Letter* 53 is the infamous sea-voyage: physical illness provides the entrée to a discussion of spiritual illness. *Letter* 54 features physical illness again. Seneca's asthma is acting up. Then, a *meditatio mortis*. *Letter* 55 takes Seneca past the former villa of the dissolute playboy Vatia: do not be a dissolute playboy. *Letter* 57 memorably derives moral uplift from Seneca's passing through the Naples tunnel. Much of these letters consists in first-person narratives culminating in advice. Privileging the dramatic context suggests that these letters are like this because they have to be so: Seneca has not heard from Lucilius. Again, someone who reads the *Letters* out of sequence or without considering the dramatic context will notice that these letters are homiletic, that in some cases the personal details seem to be present merely to provide an introduction to the moral lesson. The dramatic context explains these features. More importantly, reflecting on why Seneca qua author plots the drama in this way suggests the following pedagogical lesson: responding to a student/friend's personal situation and needs is preferable, but when that is impossible it is still helpful to preach on a general level. These letters also teach by example how to do that: when the details of your friend's life and soul are unavailable, ransack your own for material.

Seneca's reason for making this journey is never stated. It seems important, though, that Lucilius is himself a Pompeian. The opening of *Letter* 49, the first of the travel letters, has Seneca remarking on how the places he is seeing (*Campania et Pompeiorum tuorum conspectus*) are evoking his friend (*totus mihi in oculis es*). Seneca's intimate exploration of Lucilius' soul is not only aided by his physical presence in his friend's place of origin; the journey is itself a symbol of this exploration.[45]

45. Tracing how this works is beyond the scope of this paper; see, of course, Henderson 2004 (especially 67–92 on *Letter* 55) for Seneca's complex exploitation of place in the *Letters*. Mazzoli (1991, 81–85) fruitfully explores the symbolism of the travel letters.

Only Human: *Letters* 60–62

As we have seen, Seneca lays considerable stress on the limitations of his own moral progress. He insists he is not a sage: he must plead for extra time to consider technical matters, he relates instances where he displays vicious emotional reactions, and so on. To the extent that it is true of Seneca that he is flawed, his exploration of his flaws is commanded by his own didaxis on friendship, as discussed above. The fact, then, that the *Letters* include references to Seneca's vices is not only appropriate but required by his own teaching. But it is scarcely less mandatory that the course of education as a whole, as crafted by the flawed character Seneca, should exhibit imperfections. This thought allows us to see in a different light the *Letters'* apparent inconsistencies.[46] On the assumption that has governed this reading, namely that the *Letters* are a self-conscious literary whole, it would surely have been easy enough for Seneca qua author to impose more internal consistency on his work. Or, seen in another light, the imputation of self-contradiction involves a rather implausible degree of uncharitability: even if we accept a historical Seneca as viciously hypocritical as you like, as the author of the *Letters* he displays a keen interest in self-consistency. For him not to have seen the passages where his teachings are in tension or in downright contradiction with themselves requires us to suppose our author not only hypocritical but rather careless as well.[47]

Looking at particular instances of flawed or inconsistent instruction in this way is revealing. We have already seen how Seneca's progress report to Lucilius in *Letter* 34 is, if not taken back, significantly corrected in *Letter* 35; Seneca has fallen prey to the very human temptation to tell a friend what he wants to hear. Taking his fulsome praise back in *Letter* 35 is going to hurt both parties: *amas me amicus non es* can have been a joy neither to write nor read. Taken together, this point/counterpoint renders a meta-didactic moral, "be careful with praise," which reflects and confirms Seneca's explicit warnings about evaluating oneself too leniently.

Seneca frequently revisits and revises his teachings on various themes. In part this practice accords with the conversational tone he consciously adopts in the *Letters*: self-revision and qualification are of course ubiquitous in real

46. *Letters* 6.4 and 7.11 are a particularly bald example of Senecan teachings in (creative) tension. In the first passage, Seneca says he would reject wisdom if he had no one to share it with, because *nullius boni sine socio iucunda possessio est*. In the second, he approvingly quotes an artist saying of his audience: *satis sunt mihi pauci, satis est unus, satis est nullus.*

47. Again, this is true if and only if the *Letters* are a literary creation. If they were merely genuine letters, unintended for publication, with genuine letters from Lucilius being sent and received between the composition of each, inconsistency becomes not only tolerable but, at some point, expected: anyone who regularly deals in pontificating will at some point self-contradict (or else be a terrible bore). As one's corpus of writings increases, at some point the risk of this becomes a near certainty. Now it is my contention that the *Letters* are not a genuine multi-year correspondence, but that they are an attempt realistically to portray one. For them to succeed in this all but requires some internal inconsistency. An interesting result: self-consistency within the dramatic conceit would be self-contradictory.

There is much more to the issue of self-consistency and self-contradiction in the *Letters* than can be considered here; the dialectic is a central problem for the work. What is clear is that this dialectic is important and self-conscious. This point is clearly seen in Too 1994, 214–22, which argues that Seneca's failure in the *Letters* to enact his own teaching is part of a strategy of disempowering the Neronian state. While I cannot agree with her solution, Too is quite right to stress the centrality of the problem; for related worries about authorial consistency, see Edwards 1997, 34–36. Much work, I think, remains to be done here.

conversation.[48] But they also bear meta-didactic fruit. *Letters* 60–62 may be read together in this regard. Recall from *Letters* 50–58 that Seneca has been traveling; we infer *ex silentio* that he has not heard from Lucilius. In *Letter* 59, Seneca responds to a letter from his friend, remarking that he seems to be in a good mood (*animi hilarem adfectum*). *Letter* 60, however, begins thus: *queror, litigo, irascor. Etiamnunc optas quod tibi optavit nutrix tua aut paedagogus aut mater?* Lucilius must have revealed his lingering preoccupation with material goods. Seneca is disappointed and lets his friend know. The letter is short, as Senecan upbraiding generally is. The opening implicitly likens Lucilius to a child, and as Seneca works himself into a lather the images get worse: those who let *ambitio* get the better of them are not even human beings but animals (*animalium loco numeremus, non hominum*), and in particularly bad cases not even animals but dead people (*ne animalium quidem sed mortuorum*). They are above ground, but not really alive: *mortem suam antecesserunt*.

Is this perhaps a little harsh? Lucilius mentions that he hopes for a good return on an investment, and in response he is called a child, a cow, a corpse. Indeed, the third word of the letter, *irascor*, all but proves (in Stoic terms) that Seneca's reaction is mistaken: it is never right to be angered. The author of three books *De ira* knows something about this, in particular that it is characteristic of an angry person to go too far, even when a forceful reaction is appropriate. The man who wrote *maximum remedium irae est mora* knows better. After a short *mora*, then, Seneca serves up a calmer and more soothing discussion (*Letter* 61.1): *desinamus quod voluimus velle. Ego certe id ago ne senex eadem velim quae puer volui*. Better judged, that: the hortatory subjunctive is much less off-putting than the sarcastic second-personal question *etiamnunc optas . . . ?* The rest of the letter is almost entirely first-personal, relaying how Seneca is trying, with all the effort he can muster, to put an end to his vices. *Letter* 60 had been all stick; 61 reaches for the carrot. The letter offers an enticement to be good instead of a rant for being bad: resigning oneself to fate provides serenity, allows one to contemplate death without fear. The letter closes thus: *vixi, Lucili carissime, quantum satis erat; mortem plenus expecto. Vale.* Lucilius is usually *mi Lucili*; the *carissime* suggests that Seneca is worried he has alienated his friend.

Letter 60 was short, 61 shorter: 62 is the shortest letter in the collection. There is, again, no dramatic indication that Lucilius has written. It is not true, this letter says, that *negotia* make us too busy for proper studies. *Vaco, Lucili, vaco, et ubicumque sum, ibi meus sum*. Even when I am forced to work I am free to mull over the Great Men of history (here Seneca adverts, as he very rarely does, to his career in politics: *causa ex officio nata civili*): *Demetrium, virorum optimum, mecum circumfero et relictis conchyliatis cum illo seminudo loquor, illum admiror* (*Letter* 62.3). My deliverance, while caught up in the pomp, in the mendacities of the imperial court, is to think about my friend Demetrius,

48. 75.1: *Qualis sermo meus esset si una desideremus aut ambularemus, inlaboratus et facilis, tales esse epistulas meas volo . . . si fieri posset, quid sentiam ostendere quam loqui mallem*, "I want my letters to be like my speech would be, if we were sitting or walking together, that is, spontaneous and natural. If it were possible, I would rather show what I mean than say it."

That last we may take, I think, as explicit warrant for meta-dramatic readings of the *Letters* in general.

the Cynic philosopher. Stoics not infrequently saw the Cynics as fellow travelers, particularly as regards their recommended form of life. Both schools denied any intrinsic value to material goods; the difference being that the Stoa endorsed pursuing them anyway, albeit with complete emotional detachment from them. Of course, this middle-ground position implies, in practical terms, endlessly subjecting oneself to the temptation to conflate means and ends, to identify the object of your pursuit with the reason for your pursuing it. This problem, at least, the Cynics avoid. *Seminudo* is, for Seneca, the road not taken: he is wistful. Demetrius is poor, but he never had to compromise his principles, and is not sitting at home waiting for one of Nero's goons to order his suicide.[49]

How should we imagine all this within the dramatic conceit? *Letter* 60 was a nasty production, a self-righteous little screed. Seneca quickly realizes his mistake. Perhaps the day after dispatching his courier to Sicily he dashes off *Letter* 61, entrusts it to another courier, tells him to explain to Lucilius that he had one more thing to say. *Letter* 61 softens the blow, mitigates the damage, accentuates the positive. It moves to the first person from the second. The day after that, however, in the course of examining his conscience Seneca comes to see the connection between his imperiousness towards Lucilius and his Imperial Connections.[50] He discovers something about himself, feels guilty, and in keeping with his own teachings he rips his soul out, reveals it to his friend. *Homines dum docent discunt*, once again. *Letter* 62 is quickly sent, and the author hopes all three will arrive simultaneously or nearly so. *Letter* 60 was brash, second personal; Epictetus could have written it. *Letter* 61 switches to the first person, 62 from the first to the third. This is the movement: first, "stop caring about things that don't matter," then, "I've profited by doing so"; finally, "and if only I'd been like Demetrius, who didn't have to learn the hard way." Seneca, dismayed by Lucilius' susceptibility to these things, overreacts. Then he corrects himself. Finally, he reveals why he overreacted: Lucilius' vices are the precise ones that wreaked so much havoc on Seneca's life, and he does not want his friend to suffer what he suffered. Even though, as Seneca surely held, the truth is universal, the same salvific thing for all, its teachers neither are nor should be disembodied dispensaries of it. In a real life it is particularities all the way down.

CONCLUSION: SENECAN CONVERGENCES

While far from exhaustive, this survey has considered many of the most important texts for the dramatic reading. The precipitate of this reading, as I hope to have persuasively shown, is a coherent and powerful vision of Stoic moral education and of the Stoic life. What are the principal components of this vision?

Virtue, the only good, is inevitably the sovereign criterion for every aspect of education. In that respect, the vision is monistic. To the extent that the *Letters* are a brief for Stoicism, they constitute an argument for that monism

49. Motto and Clark (1993, 109–11) persuasively argue that *Letter* 62 would have struck a contemporary audience as a calculated affront to Nero.

50. On the examination of conscience, see *Letter* 62.1: *quocumque constiti loco, ibi cogitationes meas tracto*.

and against conventional education, which for Seneca fails to be for anything outside itself.[51] Seneca often states this point explicitly (*Letter* 88 is the most important such text). But it is only by considering the Seneca/Lucilius relationship as a whole that the full strength of this case emerges: the characters' shared commitment to virtue integrates their studies, or education narrowly conceived, with every other aspect of their lives, with what they take to be the purpose of life. Seneca's insistence that liberal pursuits, themselves by themselves, are vain can only persuade when his positive alternative, his exploration of how education can be and do more, has been seen and appreciated.

Within the overarching commitment to virtue, however, Seneca's portrait of education is remarkably varied and pluralistic. Material for edification can be found everywhere: in philosophical study, for sure, but also in history, in poetry, in the banalities of daily life. It is not limited to the Stoic school alone (witness especially the approving quotations of Epicurus). Although rationality is the summit of human perfection, the means by which it is reached are not exclusively rationalist. In claiming this, the *Letters* can be shown to be not only an argument for Stoicism but also an argument within Stoicism, against partisans of purely doctrinal, technical, rational instruction. For instance, the Stoics often employed sweeping (and unconvincing) syllogisms to argue for key points of doctrine.[52] Seneca's disdain for these arguments, a frequent theme in the *Letters*, is best understood not as impatience with logic itself but as part of his endeavor to establish a more effective, and more psychologically insightful, method of inculcating Stoicism.[53] Once again, Seneca's case is stated explicitly here and there, but is most persuasive as it is shown by the persuasion of Lucilius, and of us, in its entirety.

As mentioned earlier, the best support for my contention that to read the *Letters* dramatically is to read them aright lies in the convergence of the lessons one can glean thereby with the lessons that Seneca dispenses to Lucilius. That Seneca qua author plots the drama in such a way as to make his characters' lives line up with their ideals is no mere ornamental detail. Rather, that they converge—that they can converge—is meant, just by itself, to provide strong indication that the doctrines are sound. The Stoics were always proud of their theory's systematicity, of the way all its parts support and are supported by each other. Seneca says of the passions that their mutual inconsistency is proof that they are mistaken. The virtues, by contrast, are mutually entailing. Moreover, rational consistency and harmony are the distinctive and inerrant marks of the Good. We recognize the goodness of the Cosmic Order that governs the universe, we come to appreciate it in a way analogous with the recognition of artistic beauty, and so develop a commitment to the Good that allows us to remain faithful to it in the face of pain, of fear, of death: *Si vis eadem velle, oportet velle vera* (*Letter* 95.58). How we learn Stoicism is a part of Stoicism. That its parts and techniques should be mutually consistent, that the teacher

51. *Letter* 106.12: *non vitae sed scholae discimus.*

52. Opponents of Stoicism were quick to mock them on this score. For instance, Cicero quite devastatingly describes one such argument as a "leaden dagger" at *Fin.* 4.48.

53. See, especially, *Letters* 82 and 85. At 82.9, Seneca derides one of Zeno's syllogisms by sarcastically exclaiming *liberatus sum metu! post hoc non dubitabo porrigere cervicem!*

learns and the student teaches, that the techniques of teaching are both taught and instantiated in teaching them, are not only appropriate but necessary.

Seneca's Stoicism proclaims that all of us are vicious and spiritually disordered, that setting our souls aright is our one mission, the only thing that really matters. The *Letters* are a heroic attempt to vindicate, to make attractive and plausible, that vision of the meaning of our lives. Old age, for instance, is not an incidental topic in the *Letters*; if Stoicism is true, Nature must have provided for this final stage in life for a reason; and again, if Stoicism is true, the only acceptable reason is to achieve and practice virtue. Old age is for the consummation of our natures and of the charge Nature imposes on us. *Moriantur ante te vitia* (*Letter* 27.2): old age is the climax of the story.

The aesthetic effect of all this is surely to conjure an overwhelmingly poignant, if not tragic, set of images. Seneca, both as author and as the authorial I of the work, had aspired to combine philosophical learning and literary talent with political power: he failed. Cashiered from politics, he has only the care of his soul. Luckily (perhaps) for him, his doctrinal commitments include the belief that only this matters. The *Letters*, then, depict a life lived accordingly and attempt to make that belief plausible by rendering that life interesting, large, majestic. If this belief is plausible it is not implausible that details that we might think banal, like the regular changing of the seasons, a visit to a villa, and traversing a sooty tunnel, should become grist for virtue's mill: by Seneca's lights Nature is providentially arranged, with the good in mind; virtue is the only good. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that if such things could not provide edification then Nature would have been remiss, and so Seneca's theory wrong. But Nature provides for him: a student comes along (*incidit*), saves the senescent guru from loneliness, and reminds him why he fell in love with philosophy in the first place. The act of teaching reinforces his faith in his teachings. The portrait of the virtuous and therefore happy life, of the courageous and therefore good death, attracts the painter as much as the viewer; demonstrating the techniques of approaching that vision brings the demonstrator closer to it. Everything works, or at least can work, in harmony. To the extent the picture succeeds it succeeds because we, the intruding third-person readers, are moved by this harmony, by the compelling austerity of this image: the old man, the apparent failure, putting all that remains of his life and genius into vindicating his beliefs, and ultimately proving himself right to himself, not so much by his words as by the act of formulating and issuing his words.[54]

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54. Self-consistency, again: the entirety of the *Letters* depicts Seneca carrying out his very first instruction: *vindica te tibi* (on this phrase, see Maurach 1970, 26). It is clear enough that in the first instance, to Lucilius, this means "be master, take charge, of your own life." But *vindicare* also means "to rescue from danger or harm" and "to free from blame"; and it is in this sense, I think, that Seneca most interestingly follows his own instruction.

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