

The Stoic Palestra: Learning how to die in Seneca's letters II

1. The body as slave?

Slaves/bodies are demanding, manipulative; they have and express needs: see *On the Tranquillity of the Soul (De tranquillitate animi)* 8.8, cf. *Ep.*47 (we are all slaves, symbolically), or *Ep.*44 (we are all slaves literally, as who doesn't have a slave somewhere in their family tree? Cf. Plato *Theaetetus* 174E). The master is never absolutely self-sufficient, as he *depends* on the labour of his slaves. Other Senecan letters which deal with slavery and liberation include *Ep.*1, *Ep.*65, *Ep.*80, *Ep.*90.

Bibliography: see especially C.Edwards (2009) in Bartsch/Wray *Seneca and the Self*, pp139ff., and W.Fitzgerald (2000) *Slavery and the Roman Imagination*.

2. Torture

A. 'It is not surprising that our greatest terror is of such a fate' (*Ep.*14.6)

B. *Ep.*66.18-20:

I know what you may reply to me at this point: "**Are you trying to make us believe that it does not matter whether a man feels joy, or whether he lies upon the rack and tires out his torturer?**" I might say in answer: "**Epicurus also maintains that the wise man, though he is being burned in the bull of Phalaris, will cry out: 'Tis pleasant, and concerns me not at all.'**" Why need you wonder, if I maintain that he who reclines at a banquet and the victim who stoutly withstands torture possess equal goods, when Epicurus maintains a thing that is harder to believe, namely, that it is pleasant to be roasted in this way? **19. But the reply which I do make, is that there is great difference between joy and pain; if I am asked to choose, I shall seek the former and avoid the latter.** The former is according to nature, the latter contrary to it. So long as they are rated by this standard, there is a great gulf between; but when it comes to a question of the virtue involved, the virtue in each case is the same, whether it comes through joy or through sorrow. **20.** Vexation and pain and other inconveniences are of no consequence, for they are overcome by virtue. Just as the brightness of the sun dims all lesser lights, so virtue, by its own greatness, shatters and overwhelms all pains, annoyances, and wrongs; and wherever its radiance reaches, all lights which shine without the help of virtue are extinguished; and inconveniences, when they come in contact with virtue, play no more important a part than does a storm-cloud at sea.

C. *Ep.*71.21-24

"What," you say, "**do you call reclining at a banquet and submitting to torture equally good?**" Does this seem surprising to you? You may be still more surprised at the following, – that reclining at a banquet is an evil, while reclining on the rack is a good, if the former act is done in a shameful, and the latter in an

honourable manner. **It is not the material that makes these actions good or bad; it is the virtue.** All acts in which virtue has disclosed itself are of the same measure and value. **22.** At this moment the man who measures the souls of all men by his own is shaking his fist in my face because I hold that there is a parity between the goods involved in the case of one who passes sentence honourably, and of one who suffers sentence honourably; or because I hold that there is a parity between the goods of one who celebrates a triumph, and of one who, unconquered in spirit, is carried before the victor's chariot. For such critics think that whatever they themselves cannot do, is not done; they pass judgment on virtue in the light of their own weaknesses. **23.** Why do you marvel if it helps a man, and on occasion even pleases him, to be burned, wounded, slain, or bound in prison? **To a luxurious man, a simple life is a penalty; to a lazy man, work is punishment;** the dandy pities the diligent man; to the slothful, studies are torture. Similarly, we regard those things with respect to which we are all infirm of disposition, as hard and beyond endurance, forgetting what a torment it is to many men to abstain from wine or to be routed from their beds at break of day. **These actions are not essentially difficult; it is we ourselves that are soft and flabby.** **24.** We must pass judgment concerning great matters with greatness of soul; otherwise, that which is really our fault will seem to be their fault.

3. A day/life in a letter: after *Ep.12*

Ep.24.20: 'we are dying every day' (*cotidie morimur*)

Ep.58.34-37:

Few have lasted through extreme old age to death without impairment, and many have lain inert, making no use of themselves. How much more cruel, then, do you suppose it really is to have lost a portion of your life, than to have lost your right to end that life? **35.** Do not hear me with reluctance, as if my statement applied directly to you, but weigh what I have to say. It is this, that I shall not abandon old age, if old age preserves me intact for myself, and intact as regards the better part of myself; but if old age begins to shatter my mind, and to pull its various faculties to pieces, if it leaves me, not life, but only the breath of life, I shall rush out of a house that is crumbling and tottering. **36.** I shall not avoid illness by seeking death, as long as the illness is curable and does not impede my soul. I shall not lay violent hands upon myself just because I am in pain; for death under such circumstances is defeat. But if I find out that the pain must always be endured, I shall depart, not because of the pain but because it will be a hindrance to me as regards all my reasons for living. He who dies just because he is in pain is a weakling, a coward; but he who lives merely to brave out this pain, is a fool. **37.** But I am running on too long; and, besides, there is matter here to fill a day. **And how can a man end his life, if he cannot end a letter?** So farewell (nb. *vale* = 'farewell', and 'keep well'). This last word you will read with greater pleasure than all my deadly talk about death. Farewell.

Seminar discussion: writing the asthma attack in Seneca Letter 54 (also cf. Ep.55.1 and Ep.78 on Seneca's catarrh problem)

1. My ill-health had allowed me a long leave of absence, when suddenly it resumed the attack. "What kind of ill-health?" you say. And you surely have a right to ask; for it is true that no kind is unknown to me. But I have been consigned, so to speak, to one special ailment. I do not know why I should call it by its Greek name; for it is well enough described as "shortness of breath." (*suspirium*). Its attack is of very brief duration, like that of a squall at sea; it usually ends within an hour. Who indeed could breathe his last for long? 2. I have passed through all the ills and dangers of the flesh; but nothing seems to me more troublesome than this. And naturally so; for anything else may be called illness; but this is a sort of continued "last gasp." Hence physicians call it "**practising how to die.**" (*meditatio mortis*). For some day the breath will succeed in doing what it has so often essayed. 3. Do you think I am **writing this letter** in a merry spirit, just because I have escaped? It would be absurd to take delight in such supposed restoration to health, as it would be for a defendant to imagine that he had won his case when he had succeeded in postponing his trial. Yet in the midst of my difficult breathing I never ceased to rest secure in cheerful and brave thoughts. 4. "What?" I say to myself; "does death so often test me? Let it do so; I myself have for a long time tested death." "When?" you ask. Before I was born. Death is non-existence, and I know already what that means. What was before me will happen again after me. If there is any suffering in this state, there must have been such suffering also in the past, before we entered the light of day. As a matter of fact, however, we felt no discomfort then. 5. And I ask you, would you not say that one was the greatest of fools who believed that a lamp was worse off when it was extinguished than before it was lighted? We mortals also are lighted and extinguished; the period of suffering comes in between, but on either side there is a deep peace. For, unless I am very much mistaken, my dear Lucilius, we go astray in thinking that death only follows, when in reality it has both preceded us and will in turn follow us. Whatever condition existed before our birth, is death. For what does it matter whether you do not begin at all, or whether you leave off, inasmuch as the result of both these states is non-existence? 6. I have never ceased to encourage myself with cheering counsels of this kind, silently, of course, since I had not the power to speak; then little by little this shortness of breath, already reduced to a sort of panting, came on at greater intervals, and then slowed down and finally stopped. Even by this time, although the gasping has ceased, the breath does not come and go normally; I still feel a sort of hesitation and delay in breathing. Let it be as it pleases, provided there be no sigh from the soul. 7. Accept this assurance from me – I shall never be frightened when the last hour comes; I am already prepared and do not plan a whole day ahead. But do you praise and imitate the man whom it does not irk to die, though he takes pleasure in living. For what virtue is there in going away when you are thrust out? And yet there is virtue even in this: I am indeed thrust out, but it is as if I were going away willingly. For that reason the wise man can never be thrust out, because that would mean removal from a place which he was unwilling to leave; and the wise man does nothing unwillingly. He escapes necessity, because he wills to do what necessity is about to force upon him. Farewell.

[1] Longum mihi commeatum dederat mala valetudo; repente me invasit. 'Quo genere?' inquis. Prorsus merito interrogas: adeo nullum mihi ignotum est. Uni tamen morbo quasi assignatus sum, quem quare Graeco nomine appellem nescio; satis enim apte dici **suspirium** potest. Brevis autem valde et procellae similis est impetus; intra horam fere **desinit**: quis enim diu expirat? [2] Omnia corporis aut incommoda aut pericula per me transierunt: nullum mihi videtur molestius. Quidni? aliud enim quidquid est aegrotare est, hoc animam egerere. Itaque medici hanc '**meditationem mortis**' vocant; facit enim aliquando **spiritus** ille quod saepe conatus est. Hilarem me putas haec tibi **scribere** quia effugi? [3] Tam ridicule facio, si hoc fine quasi bona valetudine delector, quam ille, quisquis vicisse se putat cum vadimonium distulit. Ego vero et in ipsa suffocatione **non desii cogitationibus laetis ac fortibus acquiescere**. [4] 'Quid hoc est?' inquam 'tam saepe mors experitur me? Faciat: [at] ego illam diu expertus sum.' 'Quando?' inquis. Antequam nascerer. Mors est non esse. Id quale sit iam scio: hoc erit post me quod ante me fuit. Si quid in hac re tormenti est, necesse est et fuisse, antequam prodiremus in lucem; atqui nullam sensimus tunc vexationem. [5] Rogo, non stultissimum dicas si quis existimet lucernae peius esse cum exstincta est quam antequam accenditur? Nos quoque et exstinguimur et accendimur: medio illo tempore aliquid patimur, utrimque vero alta securitas est. In hoc enim, mi Lucili, nisi fallor, erramus, quod mortem iudicamus sequi, cum illa et praecesserit et secutura sit. Quidquid ante nos fuit mors est; quid enim refert non **incipias an desinas**, cum utriusque rei hic sit effectus, non esse? [6] His et eiusmodi exhortationibus - tacitis scilicet, **nam verbis locus non erat** - alloqui me **non desii** (cf. *Ep.55.2: in locum stili sermo successit*); deinde paulatim **suspirium illud**, quod esse iam anhelitus **coeperat**, intervalla maiora fecit et retardatum est. At remansit, nec adhuc, quamvis **desierit**, ex natura fluit **spiritus**; sentio haesitationem quandam eius et moram. Quomodo volet, dummodo **non ex animo suspirem**. [7] Hoc tibi de me recipe: non trepidabo ad extrema, iam praeparatus sum, nihil cogito de die toto. Illum tu lauda et imitare quem non piget mori, cum iuvet vivere: quae est enim virtus, cum eiciaris, **exire**? Tamen est et hic virtus: eicior quidem, sed tamquam **exeam**. Et ideo numquam eicitur sapiens quia eici est inde expelli unde invitus recedas: nihil invitus facit sapiens; necessitatem effugit, quia vult quod coactura est. Vale.

Questions to consider in groups:

- 1) How does Seneca turn his illness into a lesson in *meditatio mortis*? Make close reference to the text in your responses.
- 2) Following on from the first question, what do you think this letter is saying about the relationship between the body and soul?
- 3) Look at the poetics of the letter. How does Seneca write his ailing body into this text? Is it significant that this is an explicitly *written* text, i.e. its composition and reception do not (need to) involve the voice?

Follow-up exercise: the death of Seneca in Tacitus *Annals* 15

- 1) Read *Annals* 15.62-4. How exactly does Tacitus' Seneca transform this forced suicide into a philosophical performance which enacts many of the ideas we have been exploring in the letters, and to what effect?
- 2) Think about how the partnership between Seneca and his wife Paulina is played out here. Are Seneca's ambitions as a philosopher represented here as incompatible with dying together with his wife? How might we interpret this?

Tacitus *Annals* 15.62-64.

Seneca, quite unmoved, asked for tablets on which to inscribe his will, and, on the centurion's refusal, turned to his friends, protesting that as he was forbidden to requite them, he bequeathed to them the only, but still the noblest possession yet remaining to him, the pattern of his life, which, if they remembered, they would win a name for moral worth and steadfast friendship. At the same time he called them back from their tears to manly resolution, now with friendly talk, and now with the sterner language of rebuke. "Where," he asked again and again, "are your maxims of philosophy, or the preparation of so many years' study against evils to come? Who knew not Nero's cruelty? After a mother's and a brother's murder, nothing remains but to add the destruction of a guardian and a tutor."

Having spoken these and like words, meant, so to say, for all, he embraced his wife; then softening awhile from the stern resolution of the hour, he begged and implored her to spare herself the burden of perpetual sorrow, and, in the contemplation of a life virtuously spent, to endure a husband's loss with honourable consolations. She declared, in answer, that she too had decided to die, and claimed for herself the blow of the executioner. Thereupon Seneca, not to thwart her noble ambition, from an affection too which would not leave behind him for insult one whom he dearly loved, replied: "I have shown you ways of smoothing life; you prefer the glory of dying. I will not grudge you such a noble example. Let the fortitude of so courageous an end be alike in both of us, but let there be more in your decease to win fame."

Then by one and the same stroke they sundered with a dagger the arteries of their arms. Seneca, as his aged frame, attenuated by frugal diet, allowed the blood to escape but slowly, severed also the veins of his legs and knees. Worn out by cruel anguish, afraid too that his sufferings might break his wife's spirit, and that, as he looked on her tortures, he might himself sink into irresolution, he persuaded her to retire into another chamber. Even at the last moment his eloquence failed him not; he summoned his secretaries, and dictated much to them which, as it has been published for all readers in his own words, I refrain from modifying. Nero meanwhile, having no personal hatred against Paulina and not wishing to heighten the odium of his cruelty, forbade her death. At the soldiers' prompting, her slaves and freedmen bound up her arms, and stanching the bleeding, whether with her knowledge is doubtful. For as the vulgar are ever ready to think the worst, there were persons who believed that, as long as she dreaded Nero's relentlessness, she sought the glory of sharing her husband's death, but that after a time, when a more soothing prospect presented itself, she yielded to the charms of life. To this she added a few subsequent years, with a most praiseworthy remembrance of her husband, and with a countenance and frame white to a degree of pallor which denoted a loss of much vital energy.

Seneca meantime, as the tedious process of death still lingered on, begged Statius Annæus, whom he had long esteemed for his faithful friendship and medical skill, to produce a poison with which he had some time before provided himself, the same drug which extinguished the life of those who were condemned by a public sentence of the people of Athens. It was brought to him and he drank it in vain, chilled as he was throughout his limbs, and his frame closed against the efficacy of the poison. At last he entered a pool of heated water, from which he sprinkled the nearest of his slaves, adding the exclamation, "I offer this liquid as a libation to Jupiter the Deliverer." He was then carried into a bath, with the steam of which he was suffocated, and he was burnt without any of the usual funeral rites. So he had directed in a codicil of his will, when even in the height of his wealth and power he was thinking of his life's close.

Latin text:

Ille interritus poscit testamenti tabulas; ac denegante centurione conversus ad amicos, quando meritis eorum referre gratiam prohaberetur, quod unum iam et tamen pulcherrimum habeat, imaginem vitae suae relinquere testatur, cuius si memores essent, bonarum artium famam tam constantis amicitiae [pretium] laturos. simul lacrimas eorum modo sermone, modo intentior in modum coercentis ad firmitudinem revocat, rogicans ubi praecepta sapientiae, ubi tot per annos meditata ratio adversum imminetia? cui enim ignaram fuisse saevitiam Neronis? neque aliud superesse post matrem fratremque interfectos, quam ut educatoris praeceptorisque necem adiceret. 63. Ubi haec atque talia velut in commune disseruit, complectitur uxorem, et paululum adversus praesentem fortitudinem mollitus rogat oratque temperaret dolori [neu] aeternum susciperet, sed in contemplatione vitae per virtutem actae desiderium mariti solacii honestis toleraret. illa contra sibi quoque destinatum mortem adseverat manumque percussoris exposcit. tum Seneca gloriae eius non adversus, simul amore, ne sibi unice dilectam ad iniurias relinqueret, "vitae" inquit "delenimenta monstraveram tibi, tu mortis decus mavis: non invidebo exemplo. sit huius tam fortis exitus constantia penes utrosque par, claritudinis plus in tuo fine." post quae eodem ictu brachia ferro exsolvunt. Seneca, quoniam senile corpus et parco victu tenuatum lenta effugia sanguini praebebat, crurum quoque et poplitum venas abrumpit; saevisque cruciatibus defessus, ne dolore suo animum uxoris infringeret atque ipse visendo eius tormenta ad impatientiam delaberetur, suadet in aliud cubiculum abscedere. et novissimo quoque momento suppeditante eloquentia advocatis scriptoribus pleraque tradidit, quae in vulgus edita eius verbis invertere supersedeo. 64. At Nero nullo in Paulinam proprio odio, ac ne glisceret invidia crudelitas, [iubet] inhiberi mortem. hortantibus militibus servi libertique obligant brachia, premunt sanguinem, incertum an ignarae. nam, ut est vulgus ad deteriora promptum, non defuere qui crederent, donec implacabilem Neronem timuerit, famam sociatae cum marito mortis petivisse, deinde oblata mitiore spe blandimentis vitae evictam; cui addidit paucos postea annos, laudabili in maritum memoria et ore ac membris in eum pallorem albentibus, ut ostentui esset multum vitalis spiritus egestum. Seneca interim, durante tractu et lentitudine mortis, Statium Annaeum, diu sibi amicitiae fide et arte medicinae probatum, orat provisum pridem venenum, quo d[am]nati publico Atheniensium iudicio exstinguerentur, promeret; adlatumque hausit frustra, frigidus iam artus et cluso corpore adversum vim veneni. postremo stagnum calidae aquae introiit, respergens proximos servorum addita voce libare se liquorem illum Iovi liberatori. exim balneo inlatus et vapore eius exanimatus, sine ullo funeris sollemni crematur. ita codicillis praescripserat, cum etiam tum praedives et praepotens supremis suis consuleret.