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Seneca: the world according to nature

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Seneca: The World According to Nature

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Abstract.

The dissertation examines the treatment of nature in the tragic and philosophical works of Seneca the Younger. “Live according to nature” was the Stoic injunction, but for Seneca it was impossible to think about the natural world without also considering the limitations of the philosopher’s own mind. Through literary critical study of various complexes of imagery spanning the Senecan corpus, I argue that Seneca regarded the split between the flawed mind of the philosopher and the perfect nature which is the object of his study as a central problem within Stoicism.

Seneca: The World According to Nature.

Facilius natura intelligitur quam enarratur.

Sen. *Ep.* 121.

Produktion der Leiche ist, vom Tode her betrachtet, das Leben.

W. Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels.*

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Introduction.

Seneca was a Stoic philosopher, a playwright and a politician. Of his works there survive his tragedies (*Hercules Furens*, *Troades*, *Phoenissae*, *Medea*, *Phaedra*, *Oedipus*, *Agamemnon*, *Thyestes*, transmitted along with the possibly spurious *Hercules Oetaeus* and the certainly non-Senecan *Octavia*), twelve *Dialogi* (*De providentia ad Lucilium*, *De constantia sapientis ad Serenum*, *De ira ad Novatum*, *Consolatio ad Marciam*, *De vita beata ad Gallionem*, *De otio ad Serenum*, *De tranquillitate animi ad Serenum*, *De brevitae vitae ad Paulinum*, *Consolatio ad Polybium*, *Consolatio ad Helviam matrem*, *De Clementia* and *De beneficiis ad Aebutium Liberalem*), a collection of letters (*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*), an eight book natural scientific work (*Naturales Quaestiones*)¹ and a Menippean satire on the apotheosis of Claudius (*Apocolocyntosis*).² The 14 letters supposedly between Seneca and the Apostle Paul, though their antiquity is attested by Augustine and Jerome, have long been known to have been forged. He also seems to have written a biography of his father, some epigrams, a work from exile flattering Messalina and Claudius' freedmen (c.f. Dio 60.8.5), a set of letters addressed to a friend named Maximus, some exhortations, *Libri moralis philosophiae* and essays on the Stoic practice of *meditatio*, marriage, duties, friendship, untimely death, superstition, Egypt, India, earthquakes and the formation of the world.

¹ Like the *De Providentia* and the *Epistulae Morales*, the *Naturales Quaestiones* are addressed to Lucilius, apparently a slightly younger friend of Seneca's. See Griffin 1992 91 for biographical details and references.

² On Seneca's writings, see Griffin 1992 395-401 (Appendix A) and Ker 2006 73-74 (with notes on further bibliographic references).

Possibly because of this variety in his works, Seneca has been split into parts like no other Latin writer.³ The history of Senecan studies has been a long opening up of divides within the man or his writings, accounting for or denouncing discrepancies.

For years it was assumed that our Seneca was two Senecas, *Philosophus* and *Tragicus*, so irreconcilable in tone and outlook did the two sets of writings, prosodic and dramatic, seem.⁴ Even those readers who judged Seneca *Philosophus* too severe to have dabbled in (grossly inferior) tragedy⁵ did not overlook his hypocritical disregard for his own avowed Stoic convictions in his life.⁶ With their faith in the man shaken, readers have found themselves suspicious of his writings too. No Stoic statesman, he was also

³ See Volk and Williams 2006, discussed further below.

⁴ Fantham 1982 1. Now the unity of the author is almost uncontested (though Ahl 1986 12 reminds us that the only ancient attribution of the tragedies to Seneca is in Quintilian, and conjectures that the context suggests that it is in fact Seneca the Elder who is meant). For Seneca's life: Griffin 1992 is still the most comprehensive. See also Grimal 1948, Sorensen 1984, Maurach 1991 and Veyne 2003.

⁵ Segal 1986 3 n.1 notes that disdain for Seneca's tragic efforts, plays so popular in the Early Modern period, dates from August Wilhelm von Schlegel.

⁶ E.g. Cary, Rose, Harvey, and Souter 1949, s.v.: "Seneca's character, with its lamentable rift between principle and practice in crises, is sometimes pronounced detestable. He preached detachment and was conspicuously a money-maker; defiance of circumstance, yet whined in Corsica and crawled before Polybius; contempt for death and pain, yet, till finally trapped evaded them by flagrant complaisance. He could vent spite, or curry favour, or both by clever sniggering at a dead and by no means contemptible emperor, yet five years later connives supinely at more than common murder by a vicious live one. With all this he affects the moral guide. Such is briefly the indictment"

Rose 1936, 359–361: "That a man in exile should flatter basely those who have power to recall him is understandable; Ovid did as much. That a prime minister in difficult times should show himself neither heroic nor self-consistent is no more than is to be expected of the vast majority of statesmen. That the influential adviser of an impressionable and unbalanced young prince should allow his master's favours to take the form of making him prodigiously wealthy is not remarkable; we may discount the tales of Seneca using extortion to add to his riches. That, having flattered, he should bespatter with abuse the object of his sometime adoration is certainly not commendable, but shows no deep depravity, merely a desire to swim with the current. That, being the most popular author of the day and master of an eloquence calculated to make the worst case appear passable, he should frame an elaborate justification of a matricide, may be passed over as one of the hard necessities of his position; but when the man who has done and is doing all this takes the tone of a rigid moralist and a seeker after uncompromising virtue, preaching, from his palace, simplicity and the plainest living with almost the unction of a St Francis praising Holy Poverty, refusing all knowledge that does not tend to edification, and proclaiming, in verse worthy of a better man than Nero's hack, that the true king is he who fears nothing and desires nothing, the gorge of the reader rises and he turns for relief to someone who either made his life fit his doctrine or, if he behaved unworthily of the best that was in him, at least laid no claim to be a spiritual guide." Rose does at least begin with a warning to the reader that he finds it difficult to judge Seneca's works fairly, "owing to the loathing which his personality excites."

not much of a philosopher.⁷ Or at least, instead of a Stoic, he was an eclectic.⁸ As a writer he was second-rate: reckless and disjointed.⁹ His prose ambled.¹⁰ His works hardly form an *oeuvre*: he wrote to pass the time during enforced exiles from the court.¹¹

⁷ E.g. Arnold 1911 114: "His writings may well be compared with articles in our periodical literature and the hebdomadal productions of our pulpits; they aim at immediate effect rather than at the slow building up of ordered knowledge." Barker 1949, s. v. Seneca the Younger: Seneca's Stoicism was the "readymade escape system of a man whose deep-seated neurotic maladjustment is evidenced by his early ill-health." Shaw 1985, 30: "his Stoicism has a peculiar slant to it that is dictated by his central political position and his role as an adherent rather than a propagator." Sandbach 1994 149: Seneca was a "spare-time amateur philosopher."

⁸ My readings of Seneca do not rely on his Stoicism being orthodox or otherwise. I concur with Inwood's comments, 1993 150: "Seneca is sometimes described why the (traditionally pejorative) term 'eclectic'. But as Pierluigi Donini and others have shown, we can no longer take for granted the usefulness of that simple description in the study of later ancient philosophy; indeed, it is not clear that we can readily agree about its meaning. I want at least to set aside the negative associations of the word: even if Seneca is in some sense an 'eclectic' it should not be assumed for that reason a derivative, less powerful or less interesting thinker."

⁹ E.g. Van der Vliet 1882 129: "Quod iudicium Qunctilianus de dicendi genere tulit, quod, quum rhetoricen profiteri coepisset, inter aequales suos plurimum obtinebat, idem fere ego, paululum verborum sententia inflexa, de Senecae libris affirmare ausim. *Corrupta* fuit et *omnibus vitiis fracta* elocutio, quam Quinctilianus ad pristinam severitatem revocare studebat. *Corruptae et multis vitiis turbatae* Senecae Epistolae et qui feruntur Dialogi ad hunc usque diem leguntur." Albertini 1923 132, on the letters: "Il est impossible de distinguer dans le recueil un plan d'ensemble." Herington 1982 516: "The effect is again that of an impromptu speaker, developing various aspects of his topic as they occur to him, often at inordinate length and with much repetition. Here may be formulated the most important criticism to which Seneca is liable, in his prose and — to a lesser extent — in his verse: his deficiency in a sense of proportion, his inability to stop. Like so much of the best and worst in Seneca, this is essentially the attribute of a *speaker* rather than a writer — of a supreme virtuoso among conversationalists, whose *metier* is to captivate his hearer from moment to moment."

¹⁰ Williamson 1951.

¹¹ Because of the paucity of references to dateable events in Seneca's writings, their dating is mostly insecure. However, there are some certainties: a reference in the *Consolatio ad Polybium* (13.2) to Claudius' imminent triumph places it in 43, mention of Nero's age in *De Clementia* 1.9.1 puts it in late 55 or 56, a report of the Campanian earthquake in the *Naturales Quaestiones* (6.1) puts it after 62 or 63, and a description of the fire at Lugdunum in *Epistulae Morales* 91 dates that part of the work to after 64. Moreover in the *Consolatio ad Helviam Matrem* Seneca consoles his mother over his own exile, placing it in that period. The *Apocolocyntosis* is a satire on Claudius' death and thus must have appeared after 54. Griffin 1976 Appendix A (395-411) is a chronology of the prose works with discussion and bibliographic references. Broadly speaking, the *Dialogues* appeared over Seneca's career until his retirement, and the longer *Naturales Quaestiones* and *Epistulae Morales* were written in retirement from 62. Griffin's Appendix C (1992 420-444) is an in-depth discussion of the sources for Seneca's life. For the dating of the dialogues see also Giancotti 1957 and Abel 1967 155-70.

The tragedies are even hard to date than the prose, though see Fantham 1982 15: "Many have inferred that S wrote his tragedies while still relatively young, perhaps specifically during the period of exile." She cites Herzog 1928. Also, references in the *N.Q.* suggest that Seneca worked on these before that time. See further Fitch 1981 who divides them into three periods according to metrical analysis and Tarrant 1985 10-13.

Octavia, a *fabula praetexta* set in Nero's court in the year 62 C.E. and featuring Seneca as a character is not by Seneca. See Herington 1961 and Carbone 1977 for an overview of the evidence about

Most of his writings were “really” essays sent to persuade on one issue or another, or “really” letters.¹²

Latterday rehabilitations of Seneca attempt to patch him up: to demonstrate the coherence of individual works,¹³ to point out the philosophical undertones of the tragedies, to find an overarching philosophical project behind all the anecdotes and *exempla* and apparent philosophical eclecticism. Volk and Williams’ 2006 collection *Seeing Seneca Whole* called for scholars to look at Seneca’s corpus as an unified entity, rather than dismembered parts.¹⁴ This dissertation is a response to that critical imperative. But it approaches the task from aslant. Rather than attempting to transcend

Senecan authorship, and Ferri 2003 31-54 for a comparison with the Senecan corpus and further bibliography.

¹² This debate has been particularly lively in the case of the letters. For the facticity of the epistolary correspondence are Albertini 1923 136, Grimal 1978 155-64 and 315-27, W.G. Müller 1980 139-42, and Armisen-Marchetti 1989. Against: Cancik 1967 4, Maurach 1970 21, Griffin 1992 416-9, Stückelberger 1980 135-6, Hijmans 1976 134, Albrecht 2004 11. For an overview of scholarship see Abel 1981. Wilson 2008 61 n. 3: “It is unprofitable to think in terms of a sharp distinction between a) ‘genuine’ and b) ‘fictional’ correspondence. There are, in this context, degrees of ‘genuineness’. Letters intended from the outset for publication may nevertheless have been sent to the addressee; letters sent in the course of regular correspondence may later be revised, expanded, supplemented with other material prior to publication. Whether the *Epistles to Lucilius* were actually sent to him or not is a question more important for the biographer than the critic; for in either case it is apparent that Seneca had eventual publication in mind; in either case the letters present a programmed introduction to Stoic ethical thought – whether designed initially for Lucilius or for the wider public”.

In any case, Seneca’s work falls into a tradition of philosophical letter-writing which also includes, Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoreans and Cynics: see Inwood 2007b.

¹³ Abel 1967 is a detailed study of the structure of the three consolations, *De Providentia*, and *De Constantia Sapientis*. He demonstrates that Seneca manipulates a set of generic tropes, but that his arrangement, design, and expression are original. He emphasises that the effect of the carefully worked out pieces is to heighten the dialogues’ educational value, their *Seelenformung*. His structural analysis has proven a fruitful methodology in Senecan studies, particularly in work on the *Letters*. Cancik 1967 offers a similarly literarily sympathetic and structural analysis of the *Epistulae Morales*. Her diagrammatic vision of the structure of the *EM* may appear overly schematic to contemporary reader, but her exposition of the thematic coherence of books is invaluable, and her approach to individual letters is sensitive: she emphasises the possibility for mutually contradictory arguments to exist alongside one another, and understands that Seneca’s *exempla*, anecdotes and even lacunae are as important for creating meaning as formal dialectic. Maurach 1970 rejects the traditional book divisions of the *EM* (124 letters divided into 20 books; Seneca wrote at least 22 books according to Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 12.2) for his own schematisation. However, there is no need for this radical move for the series which he uncovers to hold.

Rosenmeyer 1989 is the fullest and most sensitive exposition of Stoic influence on the tragedies; see also Wiener 2006.

¹⁴ See Volk and Williams 2006 introduction xiii-xvii. See Dionigi 2001 for a consideration of Seneca’s discussions of his inability to adhere to Stoic doctrine in life alongside a discussion of the duality of Seneca’s philosophical and tragic works, which he affirms.

the splits and schisms across Seneca's work and criticism of it, I focus upon them as the very feature which unifies Seneca's work and thought.

Seneca's philosophical project is now receiving more serious critical attention. New trends in philosophy have led to a reconsideration of the philosophical import of spiritual development. Seneca was first claimed for this tradition by I. Hadot, and her work helped inspire Foucault's reading of Seneca's work as part of a first century turn toward the care of the self.¹⁵

As Long observes, the current vogue for Seneca studies has largely been influenced by Foucault's readings of the philosopher.¹⁶ Continental Classicists have fleshed out the Foucauldian line of thinking, notably Veyne and P. Hadot.¹⁷ In English, Nussbaum and Cooper are less under the spell of Foucault, but also treat Seneca as a spiritual guide.¹⁸ However, the leading scholar in Seneca's scholarly philosophical rehabilitation for the most part rejects the characterisation of Seneca as a spiritual guide. Inwood, whose important articles and whose edition and philosophical commentary on a selection of the letters chart Seneca's philosophical influences and innovations, takes Seneca seriously as a philosopher.¹⁹ Inwood's contribution has been invaluable, though his approach has come under some criticism for attempting to distil the philosophical kernel of Seneca's thought from the verbiage of his writings, despite his avowed acknowledgement of Seneca's status as a literary philosopher.²⁰ Armisen-Marchetti proposes a different

¹⁵ I. Hadot.1969.

¹⁶ Long 2009.

¹⁷ Veyne 1993 and P. Hadot 2001. P. Hadot 1981 popularised the idea of ancient philosophy as a kind of therapy or "series of spiritual exercises," and was a major influence on Foucault. See also Voelke 1993 for an overview of ancient philosophy as therapy, though with only occasional references to Seneca.

¹⁸ Nussbaum 1994 and Cooper 2004.

¹⁹ Inwood 2005 (collected articles) and 2007.

²⁰ See also I. Hadot 1969, Armisen-Marchetti 1992, Armisen-Marchetti 1996, Armisen-Marchetti 2001, Cooper 2004 309-334, Gauly 2004 38-51, Wildberger 2006 and Armisen-Marchetti 2009. For Seneca's engagement with poetry in his philosophical works see Mazzoli 1970 and Hine 2005.

Criticism of Inwood: in reviews of Inwood 2005, Graver 2007, Reydams-Schills 2007 188, and

approach to Seneca *Philosophus* in her in-depth study of Seneca's language and images, with sensitive commentary about the philosophical potential of metaphor, as well as his translation of Greek philosophical concepts into Latin.²¹ Bartsch explicitly argues in favour of Armisen-Marchetti's treatment of Senecan metaphor as fundamental to his work, *contra* Inwood's attempt to find a kernel of pure philosophical argument by stripping away figurative language.²² Similarly Ker, in the same volume as Bartsch, avows his intention to "counteract the impulse to strip the figurative language from Seneca's prose-writing in order to search for a putative philosophical doctrine that can exist intact without it".²³

The best recent literary treatments of Seneca have engaged at least implicitly with his philosophical project. The tragedies have been illuminated by attention to their philosophical influences. In parallel with the philosophical emphasis on Seneca's persona as spiritual guide, studies have tended to focus more on his introversion than his turn outwards. Bartsch is one critic who looks to Seneca's works to find his take on the subject and emphasises the schism of the self that comes about with introspection; she implicitly agrees with Veyne that Seneca pioneered the conception of self as something to be viewed objectively.²⁴ Edwards notes that Seneca deliberately parades a series of *personae* to provoke the reader into wondering about the inaccessible "real" author.²⁵ Star explores Senecan self-fashioning in the context of the complex contemporary political environment.²⁶ The preoccupation with self-scrutiny and the split

Setaioli 2007 (the two former reviewers being broadly favourable to the book, the latter finding the lack of attention to Seneca's literary qualities and to the literary bibliography on Seneca a much greater flaw).

²¹ Armisen-Marchetti 1989.

²² Bartsch 2009.

²³ 2009 18.

²⁴ Bartsch 2006.

²⁵ Edwards 1997, especially 23-8.

²⁶ Star 2012. I. Hadot 1969 treats self-representation in Seneca as a philosophical topic, Long 1991 deals with the subject in Stoicism. For literary treatments of Senecan interiority see especially Traina 1974 and

self stemming from Foucauldian readings is ante-dated by the observation that Senecan drama is notably self-conscious: characters refer to themselves in the third person and seem to be aware of their paradigmatic status.²⁷ As Braund points out, the critical preoccupation with this aspect of Seneca's tragedies stems largely from Eliot's 1950 essay "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca", which identifies the self-consciousness of Senecan tragic heroes as an influential innovation.²⁸

Whereas recent studies have tended to look at Senecan self-consciousness and introspection, this dissertation is an attempt to investigate an opposite outward movement: Seneca's attitude to the cosmos that surrounds him. In practice, as will be seen, the outward movement can no more be studied in isolation than the inward turn: the same nature governs both the world and the self, and in fact it is the tension between inner and outer reality that is productive for Seneca. This will be the conclusion of the thesis, but we see it throughout: Seneca looks under the surface of the earth and the human body (which stands in a close metaphorical and genetic relation with the earth) for knowledge of the inner workings of the cosmos, and finds unknown and unknowable spaces, he looks into the distant sky and finds a mirror reflecting humanity. Even the letters to Lucilius (a little Lucius, Seneca's younger, equestrian friend), have their

also Thévenaz 1944, Albrecht 1986, Edwards 1997, Lotito 2001 and Fitch and McElduff 2008. See also Long 2009 *passim* and 36: "much of our modern responsiveness to [Seneca, Augustine and Marcus Aurelius] – and hence why we read Seneca now – is due to the fact that we intuitively recognise ourselves in the gap that they share and set before us between our occurrent and our normative selves meaning the gap between what we are and what we would like to be." There are exceptions to this critical tendency, e.g. Roller 2001 124: "I have difficulty ... accepting Foucault's suggestion that the prominence of Stoicism in early imperial society adverts to an efflorescence off "individualism". For while Stoicism may well involve an intensification of one's relations with oneself... this intensification occurs in the service of sustaining or altering relations among persons. For Seneca, Stoicism's utility is in its social effects."

²⁷ To give one oft-cited example, Medea frequently appears aware of growing into her mythological and Euripidean role, declaring, for example, at *Med.* 171, *Medea fiam*, "I am becoming Medea;" c.f. *Med.* 166, 566-7, 867-9, 933, *Ag.* 25, *Thy* 476; the trope bears a marked similarity to Seneca's depiction of Lucilius' philosophical development as a process of becoming more himself: *Ep.* 31.1: *Agnosco Lucilium meum: incipit quem promiserat exhibere*, "I recognize my Lucilius: he begins to show what he had promised."

²⁸ Fitch and McElduff 2002 and Littlewood 2004 are two recent and comprehensive treatments of the subject.

counterpart in the lost letters to Maximus: Seneca's focus zooms in and out between the small and great.

As a Stoic, Seneca was a firm believer in the fundamental harmony and divine reason of the entire universe. So the fact that critics find his corpus problematically contradictory and bitty seems to pose questions about Seneca's philosophical commitment as well as his literary ability. Thus I attempt to absorb questions about the relentless reflexivity of Seneca's writings, too easily dismissed as the arch and over-clever malaise of a self-consciously late-coming writer into an earnest enquiry into his philosophical outlook. My attention to Seneca's deconstructions of oppositions without and within Stoic philosophy is thus not an attempt to undermine or negate straightforward readings of Seneca's Stoicism, to find an "anti-Sénèque chez Sénèque," but asks why critics are constantly confronted with splits and schisms in his writings.

In fact, Seneca held, philosophy is a unified whole which *must* be chopped up for the comprehension of ordinary people:

Rem utilem desideras et ad sapientiam properanti necessariam, dividi philosophiam et ingens corpus eius in membra disponi; facilius enim per partes in cognitionem totius adducimur. Utinam quidem quemadmodum universa mundi facies in conspectum venit, ita philosophia tota nobis posset occurrere, similimum mundo spectaculum! Profecto enim omnes mortales in admirationem sui raperet, relictis iis quae nunc magna magnorum ignorantia credimus. Sed quia contingere hoc non potest, est sic nobis aspicienda quemadmodum mundi secreta cernuntur.

Sapientis quidem animus totam molem eius amplectitur nec minus illam velociter obit quam caelum acies nostra; nobis autem, quibus perrumpenda caligo est et quorum visus in proximo deficit, singula quaeque ostendi facilius possunt, universi nondum capacibus.

Ep. 89.1-2

It is a useful fact that you wish to know, one which is essential to him who hastens after wisdom – namely, the parts of philosophy and the division of its huge bulk into separate members. For by studying the parts we can be brought more easily to understand the whole. I only wish that philosophy would come before our eyes in all her unity, just as the whole expanse of the firmament is spread out for us to gaze upon! It would be a sight closely resembling that of the firmament. For then surely philosophy would ravish all mortals with love for her; we should abandon all those things which, in our ignorance of what is great, we believe to be great. Inasmuch, however, as this cannot fall to our lot, we must view philosophy just as men gaze upon the secrets of the firmament.

The wise man's mind, to be sure, embraces the whole mass of philosophy, surveying it with no less rapid glance than our mortal eyes survey the heavens; we, however, who must break through the gloom, we whose vision fails even for that which is near at hand, can be shown with greater ease each separate object since we cannot yet comprehend the universe.

Seneca's argument seems reasonable but it is fraught with difficulties. The trick for *proficientes* – learner Stoics – is to avoid cutting up philosophy too finely: *Dividi enim illam, non concidi* (Ep. 89.2, "For it is useful that philosophy should be divided, but not

chopped into bits”). If you reduce something to too many parts, the effect is the same as if one had never divided it: a chaos which human thought cannot encompass. (*Idem enim vitii habet nimia quod nulla divisio: simile confuso est quidquid usque in pulverem sectum est. Ep. 89.3*, “For over-division has precisely the same problem as no division; whatever you cut so fine that it becomes dust is as good as blended into a mass again.”) In attempting to tackle the huge subject of the natural world by breaking it down into categories, Seneca finds that divisions multiply bewilderingly: in discussing the elements in Book 3 of the *N.Q.*, for example, he begins by insisting that first of all the elements were one – fire. But this easily changed into water; then, “this moisture in the division of things was reduced to quarters” (*N.Q. 3.13.2: hic umor in diductione rerum ad quartas redactus est*). The Egyptians too had four elements, but they formed a pair from each one (male and female, *N.Q. 3.14.1*), giving eight. One has the sense that the elements are mutable and multipliable (what if the eight sexed Egyptian elements could reproduce?), but that they are ultimately reducible again to one.

In fact, Letter 89 articulates a central challenge for Stoic philosophy: how can the flawed and limited mind of man be brought to comprehend the perfect and unified whole of the cosmos? Division is proposed as a remedy: cut the cosmos down to size, so men can fit it in their brains. Just as the body absorbs bits of food, so the mind absorbs wisdom, which it reforms in its own unified image: *hoc faciat animus noster: omnia quibus est adiutus abscondat, ipsum tantum ostendat quod effecit* (*Ep. 84.7*: “This is what our mind should do: it should hide away all the materials by which it has been aided, and bring to light only what it has made of them”).

But this remedy is not without its problems. Dividing philosophy undermines its most important feature: its oneness. The question is whether it will be as easy for a man to

slot bits of wisdom into a unified image as it is to digest food, when it is precisely the unity of all which is crucial, and which has been deemed too great for him to take in. And dividing too far will produce such a multiplicity of categories as to be unintelligible to man anyway – and is precisely the same as oneness, and so just as indigestible. This underscores the nature of the oneness of the universe. The cosmos' many parts are not illusory, but every part has its place in a divine plan and is connected to every other part. It is just too huge and too complex for us to understand. The ability of a shift in perspective to transform a numberless chaos into a single principle, without anything having been materially changed, is an important conception in Seneca's Stoicism.

This fact has recently been identified in an important recent study. Williams points out that the main problem for *proficientes* is not so much a lack of factual knowledge, but an inability to synthesise their knowledge in order to gain an appreciation of the cosmos in its entirety.²⁹ Though the universe in its parts might look incomprehensible, incomplete, or flawed, by taking the God's eye perspective, the Cosmic Viewpoint, which sees the entire universe all at once, the Stoic will understand that in fact the whole is absolutely perfect and rational. Williams focuses on the *Naturales Quaestiones*, in acknowledgement of the fact that the Cosmic Viewpoint must be sought outside the corrupt human perspective: in order to live according to nature, we must understand the world from the point of view of nature, which in Stoic philosophy might be understood as a shorthand for the unity of the universe, pervaded in all its parts by god, who gives form to matter and controls all actions, as fate, and provides the rationale by which everything is to be understood, as *logos*. This *logos* is the same reason which characterizes the human mind. Thus, a single entity, God, allows us to think and controls the universe in space and time. When the Stoics exhort people to “live according to nature,” they are

²⁹ Williams 2012.

making an appeal to this cosmic unity. Thus the defining attribute of the sage is *constantia*: he is always equal to himself (*quid est sapientia? semper idem velle atque idem nolle*, Ep. 20.5, “What is wisdom? Always desiring the same things, and always refusing the same things”). I have taken this sense that wisdom is fundamentally a matter of (correct) perspective in Seneca’s thought as a central tenet of my own study.

The perspective of Nature then is the healer of the schisms which the Senecan text enacts, and the absolute to which Stoic philosophy has recourse.³⁰ But often Nature is also at the centre of the splitting. The Stoic injunction “live according to nature” has a doubleness encoded in it. On the one hand it is an exhortation for man to transcend the limitations of his own body and particular mind and become one with the divine rationality of the universe. On the other, it is a call to turn inwards, and become true to the divinely rational nature within.³¹ These two exhortations are not contradictory, since

³⁰ On *natura* in Seneca’s usage see Boyle 1987 213-214, Appendix 1.

³¹ So Grimal 1978 357: “en réalité, la *sapientia* aura deux sources: la conformité à l’ordre du monde (ce sera la source cosmique de la sagesse), et la conformité à notre propre nature, la *constantia* qui nous maintiendra semblables à nous-mêmes. L’adhésion à l’ordre universel n’entraîne l’accomplissement permanent de sa nature propre.” See Mazzoli 1996 for discussion of this view of Stoic nature in the context of the tragedies.

Long 1986 108: “The Stoics... prided themselves on the coherence of their philosophy. They were convinced that the universe is amenable to rational explanation, and is itself a rationally organised structure. The faculty in man which enables him to think, to plan, and to speak – which the Stoics called *logos* – is literally embodied in the universe at large. The individual human being at the essence of his nature shares a property which belongs to Nature in the cosmic sense. And because cosmic Nature embraces all that there is, the human individual is a part of the world in a precise and integral sense. Cosmic events and human actions are therefore not happenings of two quite different orders: in the last analysis they are both alike consequences of one thing – *logos*. To put it another way, cosmic Nature or God (the terms refer to the same thing in Stoicism) and man are related to each other at the heart of their being as rational agents. If a man fully recognises the implications of this relationship, he will act in a manner which wholly accords with human rationality at its best, the excellence of which is guaranteed by its willing agreement with Nature. This is what it is to be wise, a step beyond mere rationality, and the goal of human existence is complete harmony between a man’s own attitudes and actions and the actual course of events. Natural philosophy and logic are fundamental and intimately related to this goal. In order to live in accordance with nature a man must know what facts are true, what their truth consists in, and how one true proposition is related to another. The coherence of Stoicism is based upon the belief that natural events are so causally related to one another that on them a set of propositions can be supported which will enable a man to plan a life wholly at one with Nature or God.”

man's own nature is precisely the same as god, *logos*, which permeates the universe.

Yet in practice, they seem to pull man in two different directions.

From the Cosmic Viewpoint one surely can see all things and understand their place in the unified and divinely reasoned whole, and it is indeed the Stoic adherent's goal to assume this viewpoint. But though Seneca's prose works all aim at bringing their reader to that cosmic viewpoint, none of them are written from it, since Seneca, like everyone else alive, is not in fact a sage, but a mere *proficiens*, travelling towards wisdom. The fact is brought out most clearly when Seneca's voice is at its most personal: Henderson points out the continual tension in Seneca between his philosophical inclination towards abstraction and transcendence and his autobiographical format, and notes that he associates textuality with the material conditions of life and with mortality.³²

A split in perspective is built into the works: a split between the cosmic viewpoint that it is always assumed that one ought to take, and the actual perspective of the human, aspirational but flawed, and annoyingly hard to escape. Seneca's writings attempt to solve the fundamental Stoic problem of division: division from one's true nature, and from god. But they also inevitably perpetuate that division: one cannot attempt to write about the single perfection of the universe without dividing it into parts to facilitate human

³² Henderson 2006 124 (on Letter 57). "Seneca channels writing to get us out of this world, reaching for eternity to realise the essence of Being. Then the campaign to habituate strenuous reasoning presses ahead. Bursts of auto-portraiture will recur, but ere Book VI the collection has completed its transformation of writer and addressee into a pact to renounce unreasoning existence. Embodied contingency will persist as intermittent jolt and spur to philosophise, as "we" stumble and falter along the road through its denigration towards its elimination from our preoccupation. The autography of this therapeutic writing enshrines philosophy as a continuous drive to battle on through the distraction of life to reach past mortality to discountenance, more than consciousness, the entire baggage of happenstance, including the paraphernalia of language, social-individual persona, and cultural situatedness.

"Nonetheless, the "postcard" qualities of Seneca's solitary record of tripping to (and fro) the coast function, too, to emphasise the dependence of philosophy on contingency – weather and traffic conditions, but or boat, hover or chunnel, the way round or cut through! – as its *raison d'être*. Till death stops the chain of mail, reason must never succeed *absolutely* in repressing its *Sitz im Leben*."

comprehension. Further, the very act of writing inevitably assumes a particularising perspective which is inimical to the cosmic viewpoint. One might add that there is a strong argument to be made that *all* language entails a splitting: for Derrida, for example, writing is the origin of the problem of soul and body, the presence of signification necessarily entailing the absence of the author.³³

As we will see, Seneca conceives the cosmic viewpoint as a problem for language – because to say anything is to not say all the other meanings in the universe, whereas the cosmic viewpoint is all meaning all at once all the time. Seneca’s preoccupation with nature sometimes comes across as an attempt to escape the Roman “critical turn” – an attempt to transcend the limitations of the human mind, which seem to turn back the study of any object into the study of the thinking subject himself. If Seneca does not find a way to have his discourse subvert this feedback loop it is precisely because he associates language itself with critical self-consciousness and the human perspective. In fact he meditates upon this failure and absorbs it into his philosophical project.

Thus I contend that Seneca’s acute critical sense means that seemingly extra or meta-textual issues – the contrast between Seneca’s life and his philosophy, the apparently insurmountable generic discrepancies between the prose and dramatic works, the awkward juxtaposition of moralising and scientific passages in the *N.Q.* – are reifications of the live philosophical problems of division in Stoic philosophy: how the non-sage can recognize reason before he has attained it, how one can reconcile divine nature of the universe with the divine nature buried deep within the man. This dissertation takes on these generic issues, and addresses the splits and schisms in Seneca’s writings, asking what is it that causes Seneca to cleave open divisions and then patch them up.

³³ *E.g.* Derrida 1976 35.

Seneca and dialectic.

Seneca's writing, in both prose and verse, makes use of the rich set of techniques developed within the Roman literary tradition, and most in evidence in the work of Ovid, which serve to highlight the presence, contingency and ambiguity of the text. Seneca's innovation is not formal, but lies in his investing these formal tropes with philosophical significance, and deploying them to make an argument self-consciously opposed to the kind of argument made by traditional philosophical dialectic, which Seneca consistently ridicules and rejects.³⁴

This scorn for dialectic is somewhat surprising for one so preoccupied with this procedure of splitting and resolving splits. Seneca's disdain for dialectic has been taken to be evidence of his weakness as a philosopher.³⁵ Stoic logic is mostly lost, but is thought to have rivaled Aristotle's system: philosophers understandably find it galling that the writer who might have transmitted it apparently failed to recognize its importance.³⁶ In fact, in scorning dialectic, Seneca was not breaking with Stoicism, but continuing a venerable tradition. Plutarch reports this story about Zeno:

"In response to him who said, 'Do not pass judgement until you have heard both sides,' Zeno stated the contrary thesis, with this sort of argument. 'The second speaker must not be heard, whether the first proved his case (for the inquiry is then finished) or did not prove it (for that is just like his having not complied when summoned, or his having complied by talking nonsense). But either he proved

³⁴ See Limburg 2007 211-212 and Armisen-Marchetti 2009 on this tendency in Seneca.

³⁵ Cooper 2004 sees Seneca's disinterest in dialectic as a philosophical shortcoming; Inwood 2008 remarks that, 'the dismissal of technical philosophy ... must be weighed alongside the fact that he *chooses* to introduce the technical material and to engage with it in a manner which more or less forces his readers to do the same.'

³⁶ See M. Frede 1987 99-124 for a comparison of Stoic and Aristotelian logic.

his case or he did not prove it. Therefore the second speaker must not be heard.”

Plutarch, On Stoic self-contradictions 1034E (LS 31 L).

Stoicism has a tendency to demand absolutes. For a Stoic, there is only one side to every story: the reasoned truth. But human beings' faulty perception of this truth calls for exceptions. Plutarch continues with his anecdote about Zeno: "After posing this argument, however, he continued to write against Plato's *Republic*, to solve sophisms, and to encourage his pupils to take up dialectic because of its power to do so." And of course, Zeno presented his case against second arguments in response to an argument in favour of them. For Plutarch this is the point of the story: it appears in an essay dedicated to stories about Stoics contradicting themselves, after all. The accusation is indeed revealing about Stoicism which, though it insisted upon the univocity of wisdom, acknowledged that in practise it could only be reached by argument and division, because the weakness of ordinary human judgement requires these crutches, though a wise man would not.³⁷ Stoicism thus appears as a philosophy which sets out from a position of compromise.

Seneca himself prefers to expound his philosophy in a single voice, his own, as opposed to in dialogues. But his works seem always to hint at other voices: implied interlocutors posit counter-arguments and of course Lucilius' replies to the letters are understood. The question is always how far these voices are allowed through, and how far they are suppressed by the authorial voice. We never get to read Lucilius' replies after all, and as Williams points out, the implied interlocutors of the *Naturales Quaestiones* appear mostly to voice straw man arguments for Seneca, in his own authorial voice, to knock down.

³⁷ The section in Long and Sedley dedicated to Stoic attitudes towards dialectic illustrates the ambivalence felt towards it: 31. See also Long 1978.

Seneca's dislike for dialectic manifests itself rather as an impatience with trivial linguistic pedantry than a stifling of argument (and it would not be fair to represent him otherwise: he is happy seriously to discuss the ideas of philosophers and scientists with whom he disagrees). In an often quoted passage, Seneca offers a parody of the dry dialectical style: *Mus syllaba est: mus autem caesum rodit: syllaba ergo caseum rodit* (Ep. 48.6, "'Mouse' is a syllable. Now a mouse eats its cheese; therefore, a syllable eats cheese"). Seneca refutes the syllogism by asking if we will catch syllables in traps: he is joking, but he also reveals an anxiety about the way in which language can be manipulated in order to seem to prove what experience shows us is manifestly false. There would be no problem with false logic if *logos* were not the divine principle of the universe, but because it is, an unsolved logical sophism or paradox is profoundly disturbing.

In Letter 45, Seneca despairs of philosophers who cavil about words, which are only mistaken in discussion, claiming that it is things which lead us astray. But his discussion makes clear that it is *in words* that things are confused:

Quid mihi vocum similitudines distinguis, quibus nemo umquam nisi dum disputat captus est? Res fallunt; illas discerne. Pro bonis mala amplectimur; optamus contra id, quod optavimus. Pugnant vota nostra cum votis, consilia cum consiliis. Adulatio quam similis est amicitiae! Non imitatur tantum illam, sed vincit et praeterit; apertis ac propitiis auribus recipitur et in praecordia ima descendit, eo ipso gratiosa, quo laedit. Doce quemadmodum hanc similitudinem possim dinoscere. Venit ad me pro amico blandus inimicus. Vitia nobis sub virtutum nomine obrepunt, temeritas sub titulo fortitudinis latet, moderatio vocatur ignavia, pro cauto timidus accipitur; in his magno periculo erramus. His certas notas inprime.

Ep. 45.6-7

Why, pray, do you discriminate between similar words, when nobody is ever deceived by them except during the discussion? It is things that lead us astray: it is between things that you must discriminate. We embrace evil instead of good; we pray for something opposite to that which we have prayed for in the past. Our prayers clash with our prayers, our plans with our plans. How closely flattery resembles friendship! It not only apes friendship, but outdoes it, passing it in the race; with wide-open and indulgent ears it is welcomed and sinks to the depths of the heart, and it is pleasing precisely wherein it does harm. Show me how I may be able to see through this resemblance! An enemy comes to me full of compliments, in the guise of a friend. Vices creep into our hearts under the name of virtues, rashness lurks beneath the appellation of bravery, moderation is called sluggishness, and the coward is regarded as prudent; there is great danger if we go astray in these matters. So stamp them with special labels.

It is in our prayers that we contradict ourselves, and vices creep in by being misnamed. Despite occasional claims that passages like this evince an inability on Seneca's part to deal with real philosophy, and that he prefers to deal with flowery language, Seneca himself stages his dismissal of syllogistic argument as an attempt to free philosophy from the strictures of language, which introduces vicious and ignorant flaws into what should be perfect.

But of course not only is it impossible to philosophise except in language (though the Stoics' admiration for the Cynics stems from the latter group's heroic attempts at practical philosophy), but language and flawed human logic are also related to cosmic *logos*. The vision of the syllable *mus* behaving like an actual mouse should remind us

that that there was a latent sense for the Stoics that words really ought to be as powerful a descriptor of reality as if they were part of reality itself: for Chrysippus, “if you say ‘chariot,’ a chariot passes through your lips.”³⁸

The schizophrenic idea that syllables and language might be freed from a system and operate independently is the ultimate end of an abandonment of philosophical language. With no logical inferences by which general principles can be established, everything in the world is treated as a unique individual, which cannot be systematised, except by the single system which is the entire world. And as Seneca points out at *Ep.* 89.2 this is the case: the one true system is total chaos viewed from a different perspective. The inexpressibility in language of this system which encompasses everything is a logical consequence of his philosophy, but also a major problem for Seneca. For Seneca, language inevitably means partiality, but fate is univocal. Any particular part of the universe viewed from the cosmic perspective is seen to be connected to everything else, past, present and future, through the chain of causality which binds the cosmos. Nothing in particular is to be said about it. God is the *spermatikos logos* of the world: the cosmos is governed by one single *logos* rather than many *logoi*.³⁹

Thus, one problem for Seneca is that we do not speak the *logos* of the cosmos. But another is the worry about what we could say if we did. Seneca objects to dialectic also because to achieve wisdom one must have fully internalised Stoic wisdom: one must not be forced to a conclusion, but reach it naturally and intuitively: *ego non redigo ista ad legem dialecticam et ad illos artificii veterosissimi nodos: totum genus istuc exturbandum iudico quo circumscribi se qui interrogatur existimat et ad confessionem perductus aliud respondet, aliud putat. Pro veritate simplicius agendum est, contra*

³⁸ Diogenes Laertius 7.11.

³⁹ Long 2005 373.

metum fortius (Ep. 82.19: “But I for my part decline to reduce such questions to a matter of dialectical rules or to the subtleties of an utterly worn-out system. Away, I say, with all that sort of thing, which makes a man feel, when a question is propounded to him, that he is hemmed in, and forces him to admit a premise, and then makes him say one thing in his answer when his real opinion is another. When truth is at stake, we must act more frankly; and when fear is to be combated, we must act more bravely”).

In this passage one must assume that when one has achieved wisdom one will come to the correct conclusion freely. But the anxiety about being forced to come to a conclusion throws into question whether even freely coming to the single inevitable (because true) conclusion is an encroachment upon individual choice. This is an anxiety which will recur throughout the passages I discuss: the idea that giving up one’s folly and imperfect understanding will mean an abdication of personality. In fact, this abandonment of self is connected with the Stoic acceptance of death: not only must one be prepared to die happily but one must be ready to give up one’s life *in life*. Hence the insistence in this passage on bravery, a virtue which seems more suited to facing up to mortality than to accepting the outcome of a syllogism.

Philosophy has a somewhat troubled status in Seneca’s mind. On the one hand it is straightforwardly the means or vehicle by which one is to approach wisdom:

Primum itaque, si [ut] videtur tibi, dicam inter sapientiam et philosophiam quid intersit. Sapientia perfectum bonum est mentis humanae; philosophia sapientiae amor est et adfectatio: haec eo tendit quo illa pervenit. Philosophia unde dicta sit apparet; ipso enim nomine fatetur quid amet.

...

Illud quasi constitit, aliquid inter philosophiam et sapientiam interesse; neque enim fieri potest ut idem sit quod adfectatur et quod adfectat. Quomodo multum inter avaritiam et pecuniam interest, cum illa cupiat, haec concupiscatur, sic inter philosophiam et sapientiam. Haec enim illius effectus ac praemium est; illa venit, ad hanc itur.

Ep. 89.4, 89.6

In the first place, therefore, if you approve, I shall draw the distinction between wisdom and philosophy. Wisdom is the perfect good of the human mind; philosophy is the love of wisdom, and the endeavor to attain it. The latter strives toward the goal which the former has already reached. And it is clear why philosophy was so called. For it acknowledges by its very name the object of its love.

...

One thing is practically settled, that there is some difference between philosophy and wisdom. Nor indeed is it possible that that which is sought and that which seeks are identical. As there is a great difference between avarice and wealth, the one being the subject of the craving and the other its object, so between philosophy and wisdom. For the one is a result and a reward of the other. Philosophy does the going, and wisdom is the goal.

But on the other hand, philosophy is not merely a means. *Logos* is the universe's divine ruling principle, another word for which is Nature. The problem for the philosopher is that he must make sense of the world using reason, philosophy itself must be logical, even though reason is also the goal he is trying to reach and the object of his cogitations. In the same letter, Seneca continues,

Quidam ex nostris, quamvis philosophia studium virtutis esset et haec peteretur, illa peteret, tamen non putaverunt illas distrahi posse; nam nec philosophia sine virtute est nec sine philosophia virtus. Philosophia studium virtutis est, sed per ipsam virtutem; nec virtus autem esse sine studio sui potest nec virtutis studium sine ipsa. Non enim quemadmodum in iis qui aliquid ex distante loco ferire conantur alibi est qui petit, alibi quod petitur; nec quemadmodum itinera quae ad urbes perducunt <extra urbes sunt, sic viae ad virtutem> extra ipsam: ad virtutem venit per ipsam, cohaerent inter se philosophia virtusque.

Ep. 89.8

Certain of our school, however, although philosophy meant to them "the study of virtue," and though virtue was the object sought and philosophy the seeker, have maintained nevertheless that the two cannot be sundered. For philosophy cannot exist without virtue, nor virtue without philosophy. Philosophy is the study of virtue, by means, however, of virtue itself; but neither can virtue exist without the study of itself, nor can the study of virtue exist without virtue itself. For it is not like trying to hit a target at long range, where the shooter and the object to be shot at are in different places. Nor, as roads which lead into a city, are the approaches to virtue situated outside virtue herself; the path by which one reaches virtue leads by way of virtue herself; philosophy and virtue cling closely together.

In this account of philosophy, it is not clear whether Seneca is ventriloquising those "certain members of our school" throughout, or whether he is speaking in his own voice. The ambivalence is important. Philosophy is at once separate *and* inextricable from wisdom. It must necessarily be so: a single discourse cannot communicate ideas to an

irrational mind and correctly describe perfect reason, as philosophy is supposed to do, without a break somewhere, a rupture which can only be eliminated by the bringing into line of the philosopher's mind with reason.

Attention to the texture of Seneca's discourse is thus not only necessary because he is a "literary philosopher" but because he is preoccupied with language itself – the problems it causes by mediating between the individual Stoic and the truth about the cosmos. Not only is philosophy necessarily expressed in language, but in its mediatory function between flawed human logic and true divine logic, language is analogous to philosophy. I thus concern myself as much with meta-textual questions in this dissertation as with questions of style and content.

One meta-textual issue with which I do not much concern myself, though it would surely fall into the same category of philosophically significant critical issues, is the distinction of a consciously constructed authorial persona from the author Seneca.⁴⁰ I hope this will not be understood as an abandonment of sensible critical precautions about equating an author's written persona with his historical personage. It is rather an attempt to avoid the trap into which critics preoccupied with persona theory sometimes fall, that is unwittingly validating a naïve view of the recuperability of the intentions of the "real" writer by careful analysis of the constructed authorial I.⁴¹

⁴⁰ On the facticity of the letters, see footnote 11 above, I am agnostic, or rather sceptical that any clear or meaningful distinction between "real" and "literary" letters can be upheld. On the equally vexed question of the tragedies' performance I likewise abstain, and for similar reasons: the historical circumstances of performance do not impact upon interpretation of the text now. On the debate surrounding performance, see Fantham 1982 34-49 and Fitch 2000 for a survey of the arguments. In brief, the critical positions are that the plays were recited by a single voice (Zweierlein 1966 9-11, Dihle 1983, Goldberg 2000) or by several voices (Fantham 1982 34-49, Tanner 1985), performed on private stages (Calder 1983) or performed in public (Lefèvre's review of Zweierlein 1968, Schiesaro 6 n9, Walker 1969, Kelly 1979, Herington 1982, Sutton 1986).

⁴¹ Critical thought about literary *personae* was formulated through the writings of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, but the modernist idea that there might be a clear division between writer and character frequently creeps

In one way, I make Seneca's philosophical project a squarely Neronian one, in the sense in which recent scholars have asked us to understand the Neronian aesthetic.⁴² Seneca, after all, was writing at the same time as his nephew Lucan described the defining moment of Roman history as a series of baroque images of self-cauterisation: brothers fighting hand to hand with brothers, an entire state turning a sword on its own viscera. As we have seen, the philosopher is interested in splitting and chopping too.⁴³ Many scholars of the early empire have looked to the period's tumultuous political history to explain its literary predilection for the grotesque.

Seneca's dark mood has been identified with other writers from or concerned with the Julio-Claudian period. Segal cites Regenbogen for his identification of Seneca's language with that of Tacitus, both reflecting "a world in which the experience of suffering and death is pushed to exaggerated extremes" and "the individual appears hemmed in on all sides by the suffering and horror of life, and only by the free choice of death is the Stoic hero-sage offered a way out".⁴⁴ Seneca's prose treatises remind Roller of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* (they "are filled with competing moral judgements based in competing ethical systems")⁴⁵ and Littlewood finds that "the isolationist Stoic cast of [Seneca's] moralising is characteristically Neronian."⁴⁶

Seneca was at the centre of the politics of his day, eventually at the cost of his life. His works reveal tantalisingly little of his political involvement, though one might follow

into even otherwise theoretically up-to-date readings of Classical texts. See Elliott 1982 for a discussion of the concept of *persona* and its development.

⁴² For doubleness and contradiction in Neronian literature see e.g. Henderson 1987, Masters 1992, Bartsch 1994.

⁴³ Diogenes Laertius reports that the tripartite division of Stoic philosophy goes back to Zeno (the school's founder), and suggests that the division can be thought of with the metaphor of philosophy as an animal, with logic as its bones and sinews, ethics as its fleshy parts, and physics as its soul – LS 26B (Diogenes Laertius VII 40). Barnes 1997 treats Seneca's attitude to logic; Wildberger 2006 his attitude to physics.

⁴⁴ Segal 1986 11-12 and Regenbogen 1930 211-8.

⁴⁵ Roller 2001 64.

⁴⁶ Littlewood 2004 1.

several fruitful studies which explore Stoicism's political implication in order to extract a historical reading of Seneca's metaphors.⁴⁷ I do not stray into such historicising readings, though I sympathise with those who see Seneca's refusal to comment on politics as a kind of pointed statement of his inability to do so.⁴⁸ Even the supposedly private formats he favours – letters addressed to a friend – never stray into the kind of political and social discussions in which their great model, Cicero's letters, engages. Fantham's comments upon Horace's *Epistles* are pertinent:⁴⁹ one can understand all literature of the empire as written with the emperor looking in, to the extent that the

⁴⁷ Several historians have interested themselves in the political dimension to and effects of Stoicism, a or perhaps the dominant strain of thinking amongst the Roman elite from the second century B.C.E. onwards. Habinek 2000 sees Seneca's renown as owing to his mastery of a new kind of fame: no longer the zero sum *gloria* of the republic, but a *claritas* which did not diminish the honour of his contemporaries.

Brunt 1975 looks at the Stoics' apparently contradictory attitude towards political authority in order to understand "the effects that Stoicism had on men's attitudes to the Principate, the essentially monarchical form of government created by Augustus... At the very outset an apparent contradiction confronts us: Stoics seem to be both upholders and opponents of the regime" (7). He concludes that the Stoics' preoccupation with integrity of action rather than outcome meant that they "had no theoretical preference for any particular form of government, monarchical or Republican. They acknowledged the value of the state, and they accepted that an individual whose position in the world and natural endowments permitted him to render the state some service had a duty to take part in public life, but only under certain conditions. His preoccupation with political activity must not be such as to impair his spiritual welfare, and even though the value of every action derived wholly from the agent's state of mind and not at all from the external consequences of the action, it was senseless for a man to involve himself in public cares, if it were certain from the start that he could achieve nothing so long as he acted as a good man should" (31-2).

Shaw 1985, addressing the questions, "How and why did Stoicism become the dominant system of thought shared by the leading men of the ancient Mediterranean over a vast epoch of five centuries or more?" (19), agrees with Brunt's emphasis on the flexibility of Stoicism. He argues that the philosophy's enduring popularity in the ancient world, from its conception in the fourth century B.C.E. onwards, can be put down to its providing a framework for understanding and justifying hegemonic rule: Stoicism's depiction of a "Divine Economy" wherein every man has his place replaced the egalitarian ideals of the *polis*. It provided not only an apology for power, but also guidance on how that power should be exercised and negotiated at every level ("Stoicism had taken a decisive step in recognising all ranks of men, even slaves, as having a role to play in society" 40).

But whereas Shaw sees Stoicism as bolstering the new regimes, Roller 2001 sees it as offering an alternative to it, in reaction to a changing political climate. The promotion of Stoic virtue as the highest good allows aristocrats to save face, now that the traditional Roman goods of public and political service were closed off to them. Roller's view ultimately supports Shaw's: as long as they had recourse an alternative ethical set which could operate undisturbed alongside the mainstream one, the elite had no reason to challenge the imperial status quo. For Roller 2001 125 "the particular ethical discourses that are made to compete in the works of Lucan and Seneca, and the ways in which they are made to compete, constitute an engagement with and exploration of the possibilities for and limits of exercising power in the new sociopolitical order."

⁴⁸ So Henderson 2004 158: "The *Letters* never mention [Nero]." (see further 158-160). See Gauly 2004 191-207 for Nero in the *Naturales Quaestiones*.

⁴⁹ See Oliensis 1998 6-7.

imperial overreader is absorbed into the psyche of the text, its unacknowledged superego. In this sense, silence about politics can be understood as revealing of its very force: even occasional remarks about the most innocuous courtly goings on would suggest that the text retains an independent political sense, however weak, but the deadened silence suggests that the pressure of empire has crushed all voices but that of empire itself.

The Neronian period presented a challenge to writers: whereas Augustus' artistic programme gave the state a voice which spoke through culture itself, this voice was so distinctive that others could be raised against it: against the martial epic and religious symbolism of the public sphere arose love poems and satires, *nugae* self-consciously unworthy of absorption into the imperial culture. But the aesthete Nero could not abide any private voice: the court became the centre for the exchange of light verse, and the emperor himself recited scandalous dramatic parts in public.⁵⁰ Nero's artistic leanings can thus be understood as an expression of his totalitarian impulses – a desire to pull men's friendly poetic exchanges, light verses, lyrical expressions of erotic desire and even their philosophical musings, which in years gone by might have seemed controversial – under the influence of empire. In the consolation to his mother, Seneca writes that of his two brothers, one involved himself in politics and the other lived a life of philosophical retirement.⁵¹ The reader immediately sees that it is Seneca himself who is the truly modern brother: combining public life and private study in one.⁵²

⁵⁰ Suetonius *Nero* 21.3.

⁵¹ *Ad Helv.* 18.1. Griffin 1992 339 "At no point does Seneca's enthusiasm for philosophy and leisure blind him to the contrary claims of public life. In fact, years before any of these crucial works were written, when Seneca was living in the enforced *otium* of exile, he consoled his mother with a picture of his two brothers as embodiments of the different virtues of the *bios praktikos* and the *bios theōrētikos*."

⁵² Habinek 2000 emphasises Seneca's modernity, Herington his stylistic innovation: 1982 511-12, "On objective questions of style and ancient literary history, Quintilian's opinion may usually be accepted; and so here. He is to be believed when he represents Seneca's work as nothing less than a one-man revolution

Although I generally decline to find historical allegory in Seneca's writings, I do note the resonances between Seneca's preoccupation with the fate of individual self-expression in the face of a cosmic reason which identifies itself as the single, timeless, univocal truth of the universe and a culture in which the traditional outlets for private elite self-expression, in politics, display, and even in literature, were being increasingly absorbed into a single imperial project.

Drama and prose.

In discussing tragedy alongside the prose works, I do not mean to suggest that generic distinctions are unimportant. Generic exigencies on the tragedies mean that they do not explicitly construct any arguments about philosophy. I do not wish to pretend that either their purpose or effects are identical to those of the philosophical works alongside which I discuss them. Nevertheless, an implicit worldview *is* constructed in the tragedies (as in any work of literature), and it bears analysis. What may be controversial about my approach is not that I undertake an analysis of imagery and narrative to look for the underlying epistemic presuppositions of a poetic text, but that I apply the same pressure to the imagery and narrative drive in *philosophical* works, and insist that in their case meaning is communicated through the same the associative and discursive means, as well as by logical exposition of argument (indeed I will suggest that at times the manner of expression belies the apparent substance of what is expressed, and that this ironic

against the entire tradition of Rome, and indeed of Greece also. All the other authors in Quintilian's survey could be neatly slotted into a traditional genre; Seneca, alone, attempted almost all the genres. Other Romans might painfully acquire a style, like pupils in the eighteenth-century Royal Academy, by sedulous imitation of the Old Masters, and delicate variations on them; Seneca both neglected and despised the ancient models, substituting a manner of writing that was all his own."

interaction is itself significant). The intent is not to show that all Seneca's writings are philosophical, or none of them. But I do hope to demonstrate that the same structures of thought operate across Seneca's works, and that these structures were not clean, theoretical constructs, but contingent upon cultural and philosophical influence, and a distinctive literary project.

As we have seen, the gruesome indulgence of the tragedies seemed, throughout much of Seneca's critical history, hard to reconcile with the sober moralist of the prose, and his Stoic worldview. Fitch's remark is typical: "The strong impression of moral chaos cannot easily be reconciled with the Stoic conception of a universe governed by divine providence" (Fitch 1987 41). Leaving aside the fact that Seneca's prose contains baroque excesses which can quite hold their own against the gore of his plays and the more general observation that the sense of Seneca *Philosophus* as an earnest and pedestrian moralist requires a willfully straight-faced reading that does not do justice to the levels of humour, irony and complexity in his prose, the single authorship of the poetry and the prose has long been established by attention to the Stoic themes in the plays.⁵³

In fact, Seneca's decision to write both philosophy and drama is not controversial so far as concerns the Stoic tradition. One might assume that a philosophical movement which held up the elimination of all emotion as the ultimate aspirational ideal would not have

⁵³ Moreover, it will be seen that I concur completely with Tarrant's assessment of the prose works as being, contrary to much scholarly opinion, just as pessimistic in outlook as the tragedies: "The tragedies and the prose works have usually been thought to represent markedly different outlooks on human life. As Fitch writes in the introduction to his excellent new Loeb edition of the tragedies, "moral philosophy in antiquity is optimistic, which tragedy is not" (Fitch 2002 22). But just how optimistic is the outlook of Seneca's prose works? Schiesaro refers in passing to the "restrained optimism" of these texts (Schiesaro 2003 20-1), and Fitch himself perceptively observes that "despite the overt optimism of the philosophical works, their emphasis on the extremes of experience, on adversity, torture, violent death, gives them at times a darkness of timbre comparable to the tragedies." Taking this line of argument further, I would suggest that while Senecan philosophy holds out the ideal of a life lived under the control of reason and in harmony with nature, these works offer a depiction of actual life in which weakness, vice and corruption are so prevalent that grounds for optimism are slim indeed." (Tarrant 2006 5).

much time for poetry and other literary pursuits. But the early Stoics actually embraced poetry fervently: Chrysippus is said to have quoted Euripides so much in one book that it was nicknamed Chrysippus' *Medea*.⁵⁴ Seneca affirms this judgement on the wisdom to be found in poetry: *quam multi poetae dicunt quae philosophis aut dicta sunt aut dicenda* (*Ep.* 8.8, "how much poets say which is either said by philosophers, or should be").

Among the lost works of Zeno, Chrysippus and Cleanthes are numerous tracts which seem to take poetry as their subject.⁵⁵ Cleanthes even wrote Stoic poetry himself, a Hymn to Zeus. Seneca claims that, "Cleanthes used to say, 'as our breath produces a louder sound when it passes through the long and narrow opening of the trumpet and escapes by a hole which widens at the end, even so the fettering rules of poetry clarify our meaning'" (*Ep.* 108.10, *Nam ut dicebat Cleanthes, 'quemadmodum spiritus noster clariorem sonum reddit cum illum tuba per longi canalis angustias tractum patentiore novissime exitu effudit, sic sensus nostros clariores carminis arcta necessitas efficit'*).

Thus, some critics have reconciled Seneca's avowed Stoicism with his tragic works by suggesting a strongly philosophical agenda for them. It is beyond doubt that the tragedies use that language, imagery and ideas of Stoicism.⁵⁶ However, the fact that Seneca used a Stoic idiom and worldview in his drama does not settle the question of how these plays fit into his philosophical outlook. Critics have tackled this issue in various ways.

One version of the view which finds the plays to be first and foremost Stoic vehicles sees them as straightforwardly offering negative *exempla*, in order to show people how *not* to

⁵⁴ Diogenes Laertius 7.180.

⁵⁵ See Delacy 1948 241, with n1. For the Stoic attitude to poetry, see Delacy 1948, Tieleman 1992 219-48.

⁵⁶ Rosenmeyer 1989 *passim*.

act.⁵⁷ Other interpretations of the plays' moral meaning hinge on the Stoic sense that poetry in general and tragedy in particular can get across truth by allegorical means. Dingel is the strongest proponent of a total separation between the prose and dramatic projects, and a pessimistic use of Stoic imagery in the tragedies.⁵⁸ Other critics also find that in the tragedies Seneca to be exploring a dark world of anti-Stoicism.⁵⁹ For Schiesaro the meaning of the tragedies escapes authorial intent, and repressed horror undermines Seneca's avowed Stoicism.⁶⁰ Several writers follow Schiesaro in seeing the tragedies as a Platonic *furor* rising up in libidinous reaction to the strictures of Stoicism.⁶¹

This idea of poetic *furor* need not be anti-Stoic though. A confidence in the power of unreason to bring men around to reason is at the heart of the Stoics' liking for poetry in the first place. Long established in philosophy as a medium which affected the heart rather than the head,⁶² poetry could move a man to reason by irrational means. For Posidonius, the Middle Stoic thinker who lived around a century earlier than Seneca, and who was enormously influential at Rome, poetry was a tool which could manipulate a person emotionally into a certain state of mind – at which point they were susceptible to

⁵⁷ Regenbogen 1930 189ff and Marti 1945 were the first influential proponents of this view. See also Paratore 1957 56ff and Shelton 1977 34f.

⁵⁸ Dingel 1974 *passim*, but e.g. 94-10. Dingel 1974 107: Medea's anti-Stoic sentential are "*una negazione dello stoicism da parte di Seneca*". Schiesaro 2003 21 offers the most compelling criticism of Dingel's excesses: "By pitting 'tragedies' and 'prose works' against each other he forces very different texts into two seemingly homogeneous and compact categories."

⁵⁹ E.g. Staley 2009 42 quotes Henry and Walker 1963 357f: "In [the epistles] Seneca is concerned often to assert the Stoic view of the universe as an ordered whole; the plays reject entirely the Stoic view and proclaim disorder. In other words, the Seneca of the tragedies is, so to say, disloyal to Stoicism." Boyle 1997 32-33: "Stoicism is no outer ideological clothing but part of the dramatic texture of the plays, in which the worldview is generally unStoic, even a negation of Stoicism, central principles of which are critically exhibited within a quite different vision."

⁶⁰ Schiesaro 2003; for the Freudian repressed see 21ff; see also Henry 1982 829f, "should one perhaps see S's tragedies as a means of expressing what his philosophy could not find room for, this element of the monstrous in human nature?"

⁶¹ Schiesaro 2003, Littlewood 2004, for Staley 2009 42, 229-32 Seneca's poetry is to do with sublimity, but it also offers moral instruction.

⁶² Plato *Republic*, 607b5–6: "there is an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry".

the attack of reason, which would allow them to abandon emotion altogether.⁶³ Poetry was a ladder one climbed up then kicked away. Not only are irrational things portrayed in Seneca tragedy, but the form itself is irrational.⁶⁴ Several critics have contended that Senecan tragedy should be understood in precisely this way.⁶⁵

Thus, negative exempla are not simply presented to be cogitated and rationally rejected, but they work on the emotions of the audience and, bypassing its faculty of reason, induce it to reject them. Pratt expands, “The function of exempla in the drama is probably to be linked with the Posidonian theory of catharsis. Posidonius’s Platonising view that the soul has three distinct capacities – irrational, emotional, and rational – carries over to the thought that the irrational and emotional capacities can be moved only by forces of their own nature. That is, they can be moved only by means that appeal to our emotions, like music, rhythm, poetry. This thinking is related, of course, to the Stoic recognition of the direct power of poetry and also explains the role of *exempla* in poetry. Positive *exempla*, whether in poetry or elsewhere, instruct the rational capacity. Negative exempla purify the non-rational capacities most effectively when they use the power of poetry homeopathically. They confront the ‘patient’ with the experience of his own symptoms, which is conveyed in the exemplum.”⁶⁶

The obvious danger in this approach is that the reader will enjoy depictions of vice too much, or in the wrong way.⁶⁷ It is hard to keep straight what is a negative exemplum which one must rationally dismiss as a bad role model, what is a negative exemplum to whose charms one must submit in a way that is irrational but which will ultimately steer

⁶³ Pratt 1983.

⁶⁴ De Lacy 1948. See further Fantham 1982 22-24 on Seneca on poetry’s ambivalent effects.

⁶⁵ Long 1986 220; see further Pratt 1983 63, who cites Edelstein 1966 59.

⁶⁶ 1983 76

⁶⁷ Schiesaro 1997.109-111 on Senecan tragedy. C.f. Gross 1989, 59, Richlin 1992a 221 on the Hostius Quadra episode in the *N.Q.* 1.

one towards reason, and what is a negative exemplum to whose charms one will submit and be none the better for it.

The problem of how to read the tragedies in relation to Stoicism may be illuminated by placing it alongside another perennial critical issue among readers of the Senecan corpus: the counter-intuitive closeness of virtue and vice in Seneca's depiction. Though virtue and vice are opposed to one another in the Stoic universe, and much of Seneca's corpus is dedicated to attaining the former and eliminating the latter, critics have noted with perplexity that Seneca's descriptions of the two often make them seem oddly alike.

This reflectivity between vice and virtue can be seen throughout Seneca's works.⁶⁸

Berno develops most fully Seneca's conception of vice as the distorted reflection of virtue in her study of the *Naturales Quaestiones*: for her a relationship of 'specularità' between virtue and vice is a key concept in Senecan thought, and she finds parallels between good and bad phenomena and behavior throughout the *NQ*, brought out by lexical similarities which she masterfully unpicks. Virtue and vice appear throughout the book as eerily similar, with some perversion serving as the crucial differentiator which draws them irreversibly apart. As Berno puts it: "Queste opposizioni esprimono, in ultima analisi, le controposte visioni del mondo del filosofo e dei viziosi, in quanto ad uno dei termini corrisponde la natura... all'altro ciò che va contro di essa... Tutto ciò... rappresenta anche una modalità espressiva di uno schema tipico del moralismo senecano, quello che, attraverso l'antitesi tende a rappresentare il conflitto tra vizio e virtù nei termini di una lotta tra le sfere del positive e negative".⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Many critics comment upon this: in the *Natural Questions*, see Leitão 1998 143-6, Berno 2003a *passim* and 59 n.101, Williams 2012 55-60; on the dialogues, Wilcox 2008 467-8; on tragedy, see note 48, above.

⁶⁹ Berno 2003a 20-1. Indeed, certain of the discussions about the relationship between the moralising digressions and the scientific content of the *N.Q.* look rather similar to debates over the relationship between the tragedies and the prose text, since some of the digressions are so scurrilous. Scholars who dismiss

The liking of Stoics for schematisation provides a parallelism between virtue and vice which might seem counter-intuitive but which provides a satisfying symmetry, a kind of story-book logic. Vice is the *unheimlich* distortion of virtue: the very familiarity of aspects of a vicious behavior are precisely what render its perverted twist all the most distasteful and shocking. It also demonstrates the difficulty and the precariousness of virtue, which can so easily go horribly wrong, and be transformed into something absolutely foul.

One can see from Graver's clear schematisation of the Stoic view of the passions and the sage's state that the two mirror one another.⁷⁰ But it is not just that virtue and vice are symmetrical – they also have an intimate relationship. Seneca at times evinces the Posidonian view that vices can be dependent upon virtue: in *De Ira*, anger is “the enemy of reason, but a passion which appears only where reason is found.”⁷¹

Rosemeyer cites Chrysippus' view, at SVF 2.1170, “that in nature's production line, the most valuable commodities are often also, because of their delicacy, most vulnerable to corruption,” and Aulus Gellius:

Morbi quoque et aegritudines partae sunt, dum salus paritur. Sicut hercle... dum virtus hominibus per consilium naturae gignitur, vitia ibidem per adfinitatem contrariam nata sunt.

digressions as bearing no significance for the other portions of the work are Capponi 1996 105-12, Donini 1982 192-6. Codoñer 1989 1803-8, Gauly 2004 e.g. 121 (their relationship is a “Dialogizität”). Berno 2003a and Limburg 2007 *passim* assert a connection between the prefaces and the rest of the books. Rosenmeyer 1989 105-6: “I suspect that Seneca would find the issue trivial. If physics is the science of how the world behaves, then ethics must be its mandatory junior or perhaps even senior partner. In any case, formal or intellectual straitjacketing is not one of his priorities. True, each of the books of the *N.Q.* is tidily restricted to the discussion of a different topic or bundle of topics. But within that frame, anticipations, cross-overs, and repetitions are given a free run, and now and then Seneca allows his preoccupation with moralising to break through, no matter what the context. Teasingly, on at least two occasions (2.59.1 and 4b.13.1), both at the ends of their respective books, Seneca pretends that he needs to be reminded by an interlocutor that the scientific focus is not as important as talk about the ethical issues raised by the science.”

⁷⁰ Graver 2007 38-60.

⁷¹ C.f. Posidonius fr. 155 Edelstein and Kidd 1972: *cit.* Pratt 1983 64.

Disease and illnesses are born as health is being produced. Indeed, while men are endowed with virtue by the design of nature, vices are generated alongside by an adverse affinity.⁷²

Seneca is fascinated by the inextricability of virtue and vice in human life. Nature, though, for the Stoics functions as an abstract principle: the model by which we ought to live our lives, the truth inside ourselves, a reification of virtue, reason, and god. Studies of nature thus ought to take Seneca outside the contingency of human existence and allow him a glimpse at the ideals towards which he is himself moving. However, overwhelmingly Seneca finds the natural world just as confused and conflicted as the human one. The mirroring or mutual dependence of virtue and vice seems inescapable. One of the main reasons for this is that the discourse of nature is always focalized by and through the philosopher, and it says as much about him as about its ostensible objects outside him.

Seneca's sense of the inveterate self-reflexivity of philosophy, in all its forms, is underscored by his sense of his own brand of philosophy's genealogy. It is generally agreed that one major influence on Seneca's style of informal philosophical musings was the genre, or quasi-genre, of diatribe. This Hellenistic form was a kind of Socratic and Cynic sermonising, giving opinions on moral themes with the help of rhetorical strategies – *exempla* from everyday life and history, jokes – aimed at persuading rather than logically proving.⁷³ Its invention was credited to Bion of Borysthenes, about whom little is known.

⁷² Rosenmeyer 1989 24-5.

⁷³ For the form, see Bultmann 1910, Oltramare 1926, Jocelyn 1982 and 1983.

According to Griffin, Seneca is unlikely to have been familiar with the original Hellenistic works,⁷⁴ but diatribe's influence was widely felt in Rome. It had been taken up with enthusiasm by Stoics, including Crispinus and Stertinius, who are parodied in Horace *Sat.* 2.3 and 2.7. In fact, the satirists themselves were influenced by diatribe. For Mayer, diatribe is the "catalyst which wrought the transformation" of Greek popular philosophy into satire.⁷⁵ Horace called his satires *Bionei sermones* (*Ep.* 2.2.60), and diatribe's influence on his work and Persius', in particular, has been widely noted.⁷⁶

Several elements inherited from diatribe are features of both satire and Seneca's writings: vignettes drawn from everyday life, strawman objections from an anonymous interlocutor, a highly conversational and excitable rhetorical style.⁷⁷ Seneca's conversational philosophising sets itself up neither as a crib to canonical Stoic philosophy⁷⁸ nor as the exposition of an innovative philosophical system. It may rather been seen as Roman satire's more severe sister.⁷⁹

Seneca's straight-faced sending up of himself in letters which describe his hopelessness at exercise and squeamishness at the baths have an obvious satiric tone. His interest in the scatological comes across most clearly in his own satiric effort, the *Apocolocyntosis*, but is visible also in the philosophical works. Potential intertexts with satire abound when one begins to look for them. The name of Seneca's most frequent interlocutor, Lucilius, might be read as a nod to the genre's father, particularly since Seneca's Lucilius' move to Sicily is tantalisingly suggestive of his older namesake's famous *Iter*

⁷⁴ Griffin 1992 14 n3.

⁷⁵ Mayer 2005 149.

⁷⁶ See Anderson 1982 13–49: "Horace as Stoic ironist".

⁷⁷ See Williams 2012 67–75.

⁷⁸ Long 1986 117 "At least as early as the first century BC handbooks were available giving summaries of philosophical doctrines."

⁷⁹ Though see Wilson 2008 for a spirited denunciation of readings of other genres into Seneca's philosophical letters.

Siculum.⁸⁰ The satirical Lucilius told his secrets to books, as to faithful friends (Horace *Sat.* 2.1.30-4). The book as friend motif appears in the letters (Sen. *Ep.* 2: one must not read too many books, lest one end up like a man who is always travelling, with many acquaintances, but no friends; *c.f.* *Ep.* 6: books as poor substitutes for friends and *Ep.* 64 on reading Sextius) and characterises the letters as a whole: both Seneca and (we are to suppose) Lucilius pour themselves into their writings. And Seneca's Neopolitan *nekuia* of *Ep.* 57 (the road so deep in mud he might as well have sailed, *Ep.* 57.1) is reminiscent of Horace's muddy journey south to Brundisium (*Sat.* 1.5). *Satis* is as much a watchword for Seneca as for satire.⁸¹

Seneca's self-scrutiny often verges into self-satire. Writing about his disapproval of his wife's *fatua*, her female clown, Seneca remarks, *si quando fatuo delectari volo, non est mihi longe quaerendus; me rideo* (*Ep.* 50.2, "whenever I wish to enjoy the quips of a clown I am not compelled to hunt far; I can laugh at myself;" the wife's clown suddenly became blind, though did not know it: in the same way, writes Seneca, are we all blind to our own faults). Practically the defining feature of Roman literature is its arch self-regard (and uncovering this tendency has been particularly congenial to our own postmodern age): satire is a reflection of that, as is Seneca's introspection. Furthermore one reason for a renewed interest Seneca now is a prevailing sense that criticism must move past the self-awareness and sense of its own contingency instilled by post-structuralism. Seneca, too, sought to escape from a relentless self-regard into an understanding of the world without reference to the self. But, like modern critics, he was not so naïve as to

⁸⁰ *Sat.* 3, 98-109 (Marx).

⁸¹ Horace's satire 1 ends, *iam satis est*.

suppose this could be effected by abandoning lessons learned about the relationship of the subject to discourse.⁸²

Nature and Stoic Philosophy

Nature had central significance in Stoic philosophy. The founder of the Stoic school, Zeno, had declared that the final end for the Stoics was to “live according to nature.” He claims that this meant, in practice, living according to virtue. Living according to nature, *kata physin* or *secundum naturam* became the watchword for the Stoic school, with nature and virtue deeply implicated.⁸³ Later Stoics expatiated upon the formulation: living according to nature means selecting the things that are natural. This adds a further dimension to the central imperative: now one must exercise one’s reason correctly in order to make the right decisions about what is natural.⁸⁴ This reason was what connected man to god: god *is* reason, and our own privileged status as thinking beings is due to our own share of the spark of divine reason.⁸⁵ Thus, the selecting of the things that are according to nature is also to act in accordance with our own nature, by exercising our divine reason.

⁸² Satire shares this “reflective” character especially with New Comedy. For comedy as a *speculum uitae* (“mirror of life”) in ancient thought, see Brink 1982 211, on Horace, Epistles 2.2.168.

⁸³ See Striker 1991, Brennan 2005, 134-151, “Final ends.” Brennan 2005 134-138 for history of the concept of the final end in Stoicism and debates within the school.

⁸⁴ On the nature of the Stoic good and its relationship with reason: Long 1970/71, M. Frede 1999. LS 29 B (Seneca *Ep.* 113.2 = SVF 3.307, part), LS 31 B (Diogenes Laertius 7.46-8 = SVF 2.130, part). God is reason: LS 54 B (Cicero *On the nature of the gods* 1.39 = SVF 2.1077, part).

⁸⁵ The idea that divine reason was either fire or a kind of fire was pervasive in Stoicism: LS 46 A-D. That humans alone shared in reason: LS 53 A5 (Origen, *On principles* 3.1.2-3 = SVF 2.988, part), 52 R (Plutarch, *On Stoic self-contradictions* 1057F = SVF 3.175, part), 53 T (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 8.275-6 = SVF 2.223, part). On Stoic reason: M. Frede 1994.

The cosmos itself is governed by god, fate or reason, which pervades all matter, giving it form⁸⁶ (reason and matter being the two principles: both are *corporeal* but by definition only the latter is *material*).⁸⁷ The Stoics held the unity of all in God as the governing principle of their physics, ethics, and logic⁸⁸ (and consequently the parts of philosophy were also deemed intimately connected).⁸⁹ Thus the world's history is pre-destined to work out according to the working of Fate or God.⁹⁰

Nature, then, is closely connected to virtue, reason, god and fate.⁹¹ The precise balance of the relationship between these constructs in the minds of Stoic thinkers is a subtle matter that is difficult to extract from the sparse source material for the early Stoa. Certainly it is a relationship that was reformulated by successive philosophers over the three hundred years of Stoicism upon which Seneca drew. What remained constant was the goal for man: virtue and a life lived *secundum naturam*. If a man could manage to align his thinking with nature, then total reason was his. He could no longer make mistakes.⁹² He was also absolutely virtuous, and could commit no vice. He was subject to no emotions ('passions', *pathai*) – for emotions are merely false judgements based

⁸⁶ The world is god: LS 43 A (Diogenes Laertius 7.148-9 = SVF 2.1022, 1132), LS 44F (Diogenes Laertius 7.137 = SVF 2.526, part).

⁸⁷ On the active and passive principles: LS 44B (Diogenes Laertius 7.134 = SVF 2.300, part, 2.299). God pervades all: LS 46 A, LS 54 A.

⁸⁸ Unity of all LS 29 D (Plutarch *On Stoic self-contradictions* 1054E-F = SVF 2.550, part).

⁸⁹ On the tripartite division but ultimate unity of philosophy. LS 26A (Aelius I, Preface 2 = SVF 2.35), 26B (Diogenes Laertius 7.39-41), 26C (Plutarch *On Stoic self-contradictions* 1035 A = SVF 2.42 part), 26D (Sextus Empiricus *Against the professors* 7.19 = Posidonius fr. 88 part). LS I 26 161 "The ethical end, 'living in agreement with nature,' requires a mind fully in tune with god's causal role within the world and with the systematic understanding of the rules of reasoning that logic provides). For Seneca on the tripartite division of philosophy, see my discussion of *Ep.* 89, in the introduction.

⁹⁰ Identity of fate and god: e.g. LS 46 B (Diogenes Laertius 7.135-6 = SVF 1.102, part). On the possibility of free will in Stoicism, see: Wildberger 2006 320-351.

⁹¹ For explicit articulations of this syncretism by Seneca see *N.Q.* 2.45.1-3 and *Ben.* 4.7.1-2. See Wildberger 2006 21-48.

⁹² See Hankinson 1999 59 for references. On the infallibility of the sage see LS 31 B (Diogenes Laertius 7.46-8 = SVF 2.130, part), LS 41 G (Stobaeus 2.111.18-112.8 = SVF 3.548, part). On Stoic accounts of true and false perception: Long and Sedley 1987 i, 83-6, Taylor 1980.

upon a faulty apprehension of the world.⁹³ He experienced instead *eupatheiai*, “good emotions or proper feelings,” which were the logical and correct responses that replaced emotion in those who had achieved virtue.⁹⁴

This blessed state of sagehood becomes all the more covetable when one considers that before one has attained true and full virtue and reason, one is absolutely shut off from them.⁹⁵ There are no half measures in Stoicism. One cannot be semi-virtuous or

⁹³ On emotions see Fillion-Lahille 1984, M. Frede 1986, Ledbetter 1994, Brennan 1998, Graver 2007. On Stoic epistemology more generally see Annas 1980, M. Frede 1983, Annas 1990, Brennan 1996, M. Frede 1999, Hankinson 1999. Epistemology and emotion are inextricable for the Stoics, because they saw emotions as a species of judgement based upon false perceptions about the world. The Stoics differed in their analysis of sense perception from the Epicureans, who thought that all impressions are true. For the Stoics, sense perception presented a cognitive impression to which one assented. Whether or not the cognitive state achieved by assent could be called knowledge, *epistēmē*, rather than merely cognition, *katalēpsis*, depends upon whether one has the wisdom to judge the perception correctly. On impressions and sense perception: LS 39 A-G, with commentary, I 239-241. On the criterion of the truth, LS 40 A- T, with commentary I 249-53. On knowledge and opinion, LS 41 A-I, with commentary, I 256-9.

⁹⁴ See Graver 2007 51-53.

⁹⁵ LS 41 I (Stobaeus 2.68.18-23 = SVF 3.663). The quote refers to how the *Phaulos* is shut off from wisdom. All non-sages are *phauloi*: see Brennan’s comment on the term: “In Greek [the non-sage] is called the Wretch (*phaulos*), or the Witless (*aphrōn*), but using these terms in English might suggest that the Stoics were referring only to an extreme sub-class of vicious types, instead of referring to all of us, no matter how respectable and upstanding” (2005 45 n.3).

See further LS 41 commentary 257, “‘Ignorance’ accommodates all cognitive states, including ‘cognitions’ (certified true beliefs), which fall short of the impregnable stability and systematic consistency – hand over fist (A5) – that belong to the wise man’s scientific knowledge. The absolute disjunction between scientific knowledge and ignorance is an important instance of the Stoics’ ruthless insistence on excluding any mental disposition between excellence and its opposite (virtue/vice, wisdom/folly, sanity/insanity, *c.f.* I and see 611). Nor is this breached by the admission that ‘cognition’ is common to both classes of people (C5) or ‘between scientific knowledge and ignorance’ (B2). The same quasi-intermediate status belongs to ‘proper functions’ in ethics (59B4, F1). Inferior people will typically perform many of these – looking after their health, their parents etc – and thus share the same moral domain as the wise man. Since, however, they lack his virtuous and perfectly consistent disposition, even their proper functions, though objectively right, are counted as ‘wrong-doing’ (59F3). It is just the same with the evaluation of cognitions Neutral though trustworthy in themselves (B2), they acquire positive or negative epistemic status from the strength or weakness of the mind to which they belong. The wise man’s grasp of truths is so secure and systematic that his commanding-faculty is identical to ‘truth’ (3P 2, 4). That of the inferior man, by contrast, is so insecure that even those truths of which he does have cognition do not save him from comprehensive ignorance.”

This obviously creates a problem for Stoicism: how is the non-sage supposed to begin to choose things in accordance with nature, when he can only know what is according to nature after he has achieved sagehood? So Long 2001 150-1: “But if Stoic moral theory is unintelligible when divorced from Nature, how practicable is their system when Nature is placed in its true perspective? A human being is to live as Nature wills, that is, obedient to reason. But reason here means a sound reason, reason that accords consistently with Nature. How is one to know whether one’s reason meets this condition? As far as I can see the Stoics give no satisfactory answer to this question. What they did was to offer the sage as a paradigm. By

slightly wise. Before one has attained the wisdom to make the correct choices in life one is stuck making the wrong choices: this amounts to valuing things which are really only indifferent (a technical Stoic term) as goods (the only good is virtue and reason; one can exercise this in choosing preferred indifferents, but this is quite different from holding these indifferents to be themselves good).⁹⁶ In fact, it makes no difference if one happens to choose the right thing in any given situation, since without access to wisdom one cannot possibly have chosen the right thing for the right reasons and thus have not

describing characteristics of the sage they purported to be stating the properties of a person whose reason accords with Nature. And here we do get a circle: Nature's will is not determinable as a practical principle independently of what the sage does; and what the sage does is to fulfil Nature's will. But the sage is as rare as the phoenix. Hence Nature becomes still more elusive. Unless there are sages we cannot knowingly live according to Nature, and perhaps there are no sages. This is the dilemma of Stoic ethics. Nature promises a destination which is approachable by no known road. Faced with this problem, Stoic philosophers erect a superstructure of moral rules around their primary principles. It can, I think, be shown that the rules are consistent with the theory that produces them. But wise and humane though they are, these rules provide no guarantee of virtue and happiness to their observers. The rules are according to nature, and therefore right; but to know what it is about nature that makes them right, to obey the rules as a moral principle, is only possible for someone of perfect reason; and perfect reason is something beyond the powers of any rules infallibly and willingly to bestow."

Though see Inwood 2005, Chapter Four "Rules and Reasoning in Stoic ethics", 95 "in Stoic ethics, we see that, far from being a source of rigidity, rules and laws are more closely connected to a theory of moral reasoning which emphasises flexibility and situational variability," that is Stoicism assumes that ordinary folk are able to make moral judgements, and are not merely expected to have recourse to rules they do not understand. Inwood 2005 Chapter 10, "Getting to Goodness", argues that this is possible because by nature people have a kind of "cognitive dissonance" which means that they can extrapolate the idea of virtue from non-virtuous acts (286, on *Ep.* 120.4-5). Bénétouil 2009 97-125 draws a similar conclusion, on *parakolouthēsis*, understanding, in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius: "Pour l'homme, l'objectivité est donc accessible mais n'est pas immédiate," (109, with footnote 17, which gives references to other discussions of this issue). See also Hahm 1992.

⁹⁶ See Sellars 2006 110-114, Inwood 1985 194-215, Striker 1991, Irwin 1998. for the choosing of indifferents, and the relationship between virtue, vice and the indifferents. On Stoic ethics in general: Inwood 1985, Brennan 2005.

Ep. 71.32-3: *Cito hoc potest tradi et paucissimis verbis: unum bonum esse virtutem, nullum certe sine virtute, et ipsam virtutem in parte nostri meliore, id est rationali, positam. Quid erit haec virtus? iudicium verum et immotum; ab hoc enim impetus venient mentis, ab hoc omnis species quae impetum movet redigetur ad liquidum. Huic iudicio consentaneum erit omnia quae virtute contacta sunt et bona iudicare et inter se paria. Corporum autem bona corporibus quidem bona sunt, sed in totum non sunt bona; his pretium quidem erit aliquod, ceterum dignitas non erit; magnis inter se intervallis distabunt: alia minora, alia maiora erunt.* "The matter can be imparted quickly and in very few words: "Virtue is the only good; at any rate there is no good without virtue; and virtue itself is situated in our nobler part, that is, the rational part." And what will this virtue be? A true and never-swerving judgment. For therefrom will spring all mental impulses, and by its agency every external appearance that stirs our impulses will be clarified. It will be in keeping with this judgment to judge all things that have been coloured by virtue as goods, and as equal goods. Bodily goods are, to be sure, good for the body; but they are not absolutely good. There will indeed be some value in them; but they will possess no genuine merit, for they will differ greatly; some will be less, others greater."

exercised virtue or reason. The hope is that one will come to understand virtue by analogy with other things (*Ep.*120.4): but it is also true that virtue is of a completely different order to the everyday things which might be held analogous to it, and until wisdom has been attained such an understanding is not useful. In Letter 21, Seneca tells Lucilius that obtaining wisdom is like going from darkness into light, but then he goes on to describe a light which is a false good, the gleam of fame (*Ep.* 21.2). The passage shows the slipperiness of metaphor in Seneca's hands: one arresting image might illustrate perfectly a philosophical point – but the image can never be confined to that one meaning, but takes on different, contradictory valences. To be sure, the contradiction might only exist on the associative, imagistic level, but in a writer who relies on images to communicate these connections this can hardly be disregarded. The non-*sapiens* may also learn philosophical rules and apply them in his life. In this way, he may have an approximation of what the good looks like but this is absolutely not the same as understanding the good. This is an important point: what distinguishes a sage is not the propositional content of his thought or the things he chooses, but rather the criterion of reason according to which he exercises his judgment.⁹⁷

Worst of all, if one is not exercising virtue, one is vicious. Just as there are no degrees of virtue or wisdom, there are no distinctions within vice.⁹⁸ All sins are equal. Ignorance

⁹⁷ *Stude, non ut plus aliquid scias, sed ut melius.* *Ep.* 89.23, “study, not in order to add anything to your knowledge, but to make your knowledge better.” See Kerford 1978.

⁹⁸ LS 61 I. On virtue, vice and indifferents, see n. 13 above. Sellars 2006 110 “According to Arius Didymus (5a), Zeno divided things that exist into three groups: things that are good, things that are bad and things that are indifferent. The only things classified as “good” are virtue and things that participate in virtue. Likewise, the only things that are “bad” are vice and those things that participate in vice. (Instead of “virtue” and “vice,” we might translate *arête* and *kakia* as ‘excellence’ and ‘imperfection’.) Everything else is “indifferent” (*adiaphoron*). But *all* the sage’s actions are virtuous and *all* the non-sage’s actions are vicious – even if they objectively act in precisely the same way. This is because the acts in themselves are indifferent, it is in the choosing that virtue is – or is not – exercised. So Brennan 2005 37: “Sages... are completely virtuous, and their virtue permeates every one of their actions.... Nor are some of their actions more virtuous than others... It is tempting to think that we can tell, in advance, what sorts of actions virtuous actions are... But the Stoics deny this. They also deny that any one vicious action is more vicious than another. It is a

and vice absolutely engulfs those who have not attained reason – and as the reader might have surmised, this is more or less everyone. Seneca at least is unconvinced that anyone has ever been a sage.⁹⁹

Coming to live according to nature is thus something of an uphill struggle. One can learn the Stoic precepts, but one has no way of independently judging their veracity, since one has no access to the reason which could be the only measure of that. One can work hard to incorporate Stoic teaching to a greater and greater extent into one's life, to eliminate one's attachment to the worldly indifferents of power and wealth, give over one's life to the study of logic, ethics and physics – and still at the end of it be mired in an ignorance and vice which is no less than when one started.

Nevertheless, the works of Seneca are dedicated to Stoic learning. He sincerely promotes the philosophy, and is explicitly interested in helping himself and others along the path towards Stoic wisdom. He believes in progress along this path.¹⁰⁰ But like all Stoics, he is aware of his alienation from nature and the unlikelihood of his ever true

bad thing to murder your parents. It is the sort of thing that non-Sages do – though not many, luckily – and it is a vicious action, which stems from their vice. And if you are a non-Sage, it is also a bad thing to brush your teeth – even if you brush them in the same way that a Sage would, it is still a vicious action, because done by a non-Sage. Indeed, if you are a non-Sage, it is a bad and vicious thing to honor your parents selflessly and from a heart brimming over with love and esteem. It is no less vicious than the murder; it is vicious to the same degree, and for the same reason, that the murder is: because it stems from a vicious state of the soul. Someone who honors their parents selflessly and lovingly may be making progress, but their progress does not make them any more virtuous or happy, and it does not make their action any less an act of vice.”

⁹⁹ Hankinson 1999 59: “the Stoics were doubtful whether such a superhuman ethical cogniser ever had existed: Sextus, *M* IX 133, =54D LS; Alexander, *Fat.* 199.16, =SVF 3.658, =61N LS. However, true knowledge about the world is nonetheless *possible* for everyone, *contra* the Academic Sceptics.”

¹⁰⁰ Progress in Stoicism: LS I 259, “By allowing all normal people to have some cognitions, albeit weakly held in most cases, the Stoics provided a basis for ‘progress’ (see 59I) exactly analogous to their doctrine of ‘proper functions’. What perfects these latter is not a change in their objective content, but the expert understanding, consistency and moral integrity of their agent. So too with the conversion of cognitions into scientific knowledge. The evidence does not suggest that the wise man must grasp more facts than other people. His scientific expertise is rather a function of what he knows and *how* he knows what he knows – systematically, completely securely, so rationally grounded that no reasons can be furnished which could possibly subvert it (c.f. 41H). His ignorance of nothing (41GI) does not imply literal omniscience, but the absence of all doubt, uncertainty, and instability from his cognitive state.”

accordance with it. For the modern reader, not prone to the same kind of totalising, all-or-nothing thinking as the Stoics, this attitude towards nature – holding it up as a crucial phenomenon which contains and unifies everything and represents a blueprint for living while also recognising its inaccessibility – is deeply alien. And it is precisely this attitude which I examine in what follows, through close readings of passages in which Seneca deals directly with nature and the natural world.

Natura looms large in Seneca's works. Of course, the valences attached to the term *natura* by a Roman reader were not governed only by Stoic orthodoxy. Etymologically speaking, *natura* or *phusis* is the force or principle by which things are born (*nascor*) and grow (*phuō*). Our own word nature retains much of the breadth of meaning the Romans gave *natura*.¹⁰¹

I will not be attempting to extract an analytic definition of the term. It seems perverse to impose a formal structure upon the thoughts of this most prolix and discursive of philosophers, whose own aversion to the Stoic tendency towards logic-chopping is explicit. Furthermore, the implication of nature with reason means that I will examine and problematize the terms of his discourse as well as propositions formally put forward.

In fact, as will be clear from these opening remarks, my dissertation focuses not so much on what the reader might expect from a study of nature – though I do follow nodes of imagery through Seneca's works, mutating and growing as they take on new associations and meanings along the way – but on what I call the discourse of nature: the productive tension and set of problems invoked by discussing nature at all. In fact, this is not a side-issue but the heart of Seneca's understanding of what nature is.

¹⁰¹ Boyle 1987 231-4 is an excellent summary of the various meanings Seneca attributes to *natura* throughout his works. He notes that, "A.O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935) 447-56, distinguish 66 senses of the term [*natura*]" in Latin literature.

Scholars following Foucault use the term discourse to mean the speech permitted by a society or discipline, whose boundaries restrict what it is even possible to think, so that speech is self-policing and reproduces the very power structures which govern it.¹⁰² This is indeed the sense in which I use the term. The discourse of nature is the one which takes nature – the Stoic god, *logos* – as its object, but the Stoic identification of nature with reason and with the universe itself means that nature inevitably governs the discussion as well. A synonym for the discourse of nature is philosophy, where philosophy is understood to be man's making sense of the cosmos. Naturally then, the restrictions on this discourse are important in the understanding of Seneca's Stoicism, and his sense of nature. My argument is that Seneca himself in his discussions of nature attempts to find the limitations of its discourse, in order to better understand the thing – that is, everything – itself.

Discourse also has a felicitous etymological feature: the idea of running back and forth between two topics nicely suggests what I propose to be the centre of Seneca's Stoicism, the gap between man and nature. This is the gap which all his philosophy proposes to go some way towards closing, by bringing man, Seneca himself, or Lucilius, or Nero, or the anonymous reader, closer to virtue. But any discourse on nature also itself contains that gap: the text mediates between the flawed human and divine nature, as a result of speaking about the perfection of the Stoic cosmos in the imperfect Stoic's voice. A discourse might attempt to hide that gap (by speaking authoritatively about virtue and how to obtain it), or it might draw attention to it. The Senecan text uses a series of strategies to draw attention to its own limitations, to this schism.

Seneca sees nature as ineffable, or at least hard to express: *facilius natura intelligitur quam enarratur* (Ep. 121.11). A tortoise cannot articulate why it feels better on four legs

¹⁰² Foucault 2002 (first ed. in French 1969) is the fount of modern discourse analysis.

rather than stuck on its back, but it will spend hours trying to roll over (*Ep.* 121.8). A child cannot explain what his constitution is, but he nonetheless has a constitution (*Ep.* 121.10-11). However, though many cannot discuss their own nature because they do not have the necessary vocabulary or discursive capacity, if we, who do have some of the conceptual machinery necessary for constructing an account of our own natures, attempt to do so we will adulterate the perfection of the divine logos at our core by our flawed viewpoint. In fact, it is those who do not and cannot conceive of their own natures who are most attuned to them. It is precisely our attempt to articulate our nature that alienates us from it – though it is also this capacity which makes us capable of reason and virtue.

Chapter Summaries.

In **Chapter 1**, I look at the metaphor which recurs throughout Seneca's work of the day for a man's life. Like the day, a man's life runs on unstopably, with darkness closing in at the end. But it is the endless repetition of days which makes the metaphor interesting. At first sight this seems an aspect of the metaphor which does not fit a man's life. But by looking at *Naturales Quaestiones* Book 3, I show that just as Seneca draws a parallel between the human body and the earth, so he connects a man's life and the entire history of the cosmos, the latter of which *does* repeat itself endlessly, being reborn after its destruction. In that first book of the *N.Q.* Seneca creates a tension between the human experience of life, as running from beginning to end, and the cosmic cycle of life, wherein the end of the world heralds the beginning of a new cycle. He posits that the two views of life are a question of perspective: Stoic philosophy aims to coax man into taking the cosmic viewpoint, and seeing death as just a single point in a life cycle which never ends. In fact, from the cosmic viewpoint the point of the destruction of the cosmos is the moment that encapsulates life in its purest form because at any other point during the cosmic cycle the world is slowly but inexorably degenerating and becoming corrupt, but at the very moment its complete destruction gives way to its new beginning all its future is contained in embryonic form, perfect and not yet decayed.

This then is why Seneca sees philosophy as an embracing of death: to assume the cosmic viewpoint one must see that one's own death is indifferent in the cycle of the universe, and that in fact death is at the heart of life. To accept this is for the subject to renounce his own individuality: a death in itself. It is not hard to see why it is so difficult for Seneca to do this.

Chapter 2 continues to look at how Seneca explores the theme of mortality, by looking at his treatment of the earth and the underground in the *N.Q.*, a selection of letters, *Oedipus* and *Thyestes*, all of which draw on imagery relating to death and the underworld. I contrast these to Seneca's consolatory works and the attitudes evinced in those, asking if there is not a contradiction between the depiction of death as frightening and leading into an uncanny underworld and the apparently more rational and measured approach recommended by the consolatory tradition which Seneca adapts for Stoic purposes. My solution to this apparent discrepancy is that Seneca sees both terror of death and calm acceptance of death as imperfect solutions. Fear is an irrational reaction to death. But the kind of acceptance encouraged by consolations is an act of willful blindness to the true enormity of death. It mimics the sage's calm embracing of death but since it is not motivated by the true wisdom which entails full comprehension of mortality it is not the same thing, and it may in fact hinder the attainment of this comprehension because of the complacency it induces. Thus, although the ultimate aim is to combine both the apprehension of death's sublimity entailed in the horrific descriptions of death found in the tragedies and elsewhere and the calm acceptance of it recommended by the consolations in a truly wise and virtuous outlook, non-sages can only vacillate between the two imperfect extremes.

Chapter 3 moves from the earth to the sea. Sailing is a common metaphor for progress towards wisdom in Seneca's works, but he also seems preoccupied by the figure of the shipwreck and the failure of ships to reach shore. I demonstrate that for Seneca, the shipwreck is both the disastrous end of a philosophical journey and its necessary starting point, because for the Stoics one cannot commence one's advance to perfection before one has admitted all one's faults. Advancing towards wisdom is seen to be a

more difficult procedure than it at first seemed, and reaching the final destination is all but impossible. Disaster on the way to wisdom and its acknowledgement by the *proficiens* is given an added significance by the fact that until wisdom has been attained, a Stoic's understanding of philosophy and his own philosophical voice are alienated from true *logos*. The only point at which a Stoic can be sure of speaking in accordance with nature is the point at which he points out his own faults, which certainly are vicious.

Chapter 4 continues to look at seafaring. For Seneca sailing is a means by which man confronts nature: using those powers of reason and ingenuity which align him with nature at its highest, he takes himself beyond the bounds set by nature into the sea. Sailing is thus an ambivalent act: it appears at once ingenious and transgressive. It becomes in Seneca an emblem for the giving of laws in general, with law-giving seeming to mark the transition from a prosperous but unphilosophical golden age into a modernity in which vice but also philosophy are present. But though myth posits a historical moment at which sea-faring was first introduced, Seneca finds that in philosophy the transition from naïve pieces of advice about particular situations to the rational understanding of general laws is not yet complete. The chapter explores Seneca's treatment of the birth of sailing and of laws in Letter 90 and *Medea*, and relates them to the abstract discussion of philosophical precepts and dogma (*praecepta* and *decreta*) in Letters 94 and 95.

The final chapter, **Chapter 5**, ascends to the sky. In a reading of the final three books of the *N.Q.*, which all deal with phenomena in the air, I show that although what is in the air should be the most pure and transcendent objects of Seneca's study, in fact these books show that study of these regions far removed from human experience can be most

revealing of the human mind, since they are the area of natural science in which speculation and informed guesswork are most required. In fact, we find reflections of ourselves in the sky. But Seneca is concerned that gazing too much on our own reflection is not good for us: although it is right that we recognize our own connection with the furthest reaches, we must understand that we are not a privileged part of the cosmic whole.

Furthermore, reflection provides a model by which we can understand how the splits Seneca sees in philosophy can be reconciled with the idea of a cosmic whole. Though divided into divine and human, theoretical and practical, philosophy's relation to itself is recursive. The distance between men and gods is replicated within philosophy to give the terrestrial and celestial branches, again within the higher celestial branch, and so on, so that there is always a base, human element, in every rarefied godly strain, and yet beyond that, always a pure, divine absolute which eludes the grasp of man every time. Philosophy is a *mise en abyme*, a universe unto itself which can reflect and contain even what is excluded from it: even though philosophy is at a complete remove from trivial human indifferents, that very remove, that absolute difference, is also found again, inside philosophy.

The final book of the *N.Q.* reminds us that reflection is the mode which governs the entire universe: in fact there is only one cosmic reason which is reflected and refracted everywhere, as in a hall of mirrors. Thus any action in the cosmos affects all the rest. For this reason lightning (the subject of the final book) is an evidential sign rather than a linguistic one, and so is clearer than language. But the fact that the universe is univocal, that change happens by reflection, also means that communication is ultimately alien to

it. Seneca concludes the *N.Q.* with an abrupt shift to the subject of death. This cannot be absorbed into a philosophical discourse, but must be pointed out, in the signifying manner of lightning. One must only confront it. The totalising force of death is at the heart of philosophy because Stoicism reduces everything to univocal fate, which is the same thing as death.

Chapter 1.

I begin my study by following one metaphor through its different incarnations in various Senecan works. The figure of a day can represent a man's life, the cycle of generations and the cosmic cycle, wherein the world's history from creation to destruction is played out infinitely. The common metaphor also serves to connect these three different phenomena to one another. In this chapter I look at the ways in which Seneca uses this fusion of ideas and images to explore mortality, the acceptance of mortality demanded by Stoicism, and the difficulties with this acceptance. I find that the problem of man's mortality, its relationship with wisdom and the relationship into which it draws him with the cosmos, is an articulation of a central tension within nature.

Some of the most memorable direct evocations of nature in Seneca's works are to be found in the context of descriptions of its violation. This is most obviously true in the tragedies, where the tragic character's actions against nature are the central theme. It is striking that direct references to nature in the tragedies (*i.e.* those instances where the word *natura* is actually used) overwhelmingly occur in the context of birth and generation, evoking the word's etymological root, of *nascor*.

The baleful lament of Thyestes which forms the prologue of the *Agamemnon* is typical; reflecting on the parricides and incests of his house, he declares,

uersa natura est retro:
auo parentem, pro nefas, patri uirum,
gnatis nepotes miscui—nocti diem.

Nature has been turned backwards:

Parent with grandparent, for shame, husband with father,
grandchildren with children have I mingled – day with night.

From this brief passage it is clear that nature is identified with the normal cycle of generations, so that children's incestuous union with their own parents reverses the normal direction of sexual and procreative energy. This cycle of generations is also identified with the sequence of day and night, which find themselves correspondingly confused.

Similarly in *Phaedra*, the perversion of nature is specifically identified with incest, and the corruption of normal reproductive practice this represents:

*miscere thalamos patris et gnati apparas
uteroque prolem capere confusam impio?
perge et nefandis uerte naturam ignibus.
cur monstra cessant? aula cur fratris uacat?
prodigia totiens orbis insueta audiet,
natura totiens legibus cedit suis,
quotiens amabit Cressa?*

Phaedr. 171-7

Are you planning to mix up father and son's beds,
and to seize a jumbled progeny in your impious womb?
Go ahead and upturn nature with your unmentionable burnings.
Why do monsters retire? Why is your brother's [the Minotaur] hall empty?
Will the world always hear of unfamiliar prodigies,

will nature always cede its laws,
whenever a Cretan woman loves?

In the *Oedipus*, the prophetess Manto, performing an extispicy on a cow and finding her pregnant with a two-headed calf, declared *natura uersa est* (*Oed.* 371, “nature is upturned”); the portent is a response to Oedipus’ parricide and incest. In the *Thyestes*, the Chorus asks of Atreus’ killing of his nephews, “Does nature accept any crime still greater or more terrible?” (*Thy.* 745-6, *An ultra maius aut atrocius | natura recipit?* Since he goes on to serve them to their father for dinner, the answer is yes). The familial killing and eating of the children by the father represents a similar reversal of the general cycle of life.

Thus, in the tragedies one important, and arguably the principle, association of *natura* when it is directly invoked, is the cycle of generations. This cycle is associated with the passage from day to night. In the following passage from *Hercules Oetaeus*, the unfinished tragedy usually but not always attributed to Seneca, Hercules claims to have mastered Nature. Nature here does not apparently have any particular association with reproduction, but the context of his claim is a direct address to the Sun:

*te, clare Titan, testor: occurri tibi
quacumque fulges, nec meos lux prosequi
potuit triumphos, solis excessi uices
intraque nostras substitit metas dies.
natura cessit, terra defecit gradum:
lassata prior est. nox et extremum chaos*

*in me incucurrit: inde ad hunc orbem redi,
nemo unde retro est.*

Herc. Oet. 42-9

You, bright Titan, be my witness: I have met you
wherever you shine, nor could your light keep up with
my triumphs; I have outstripped the turnings of the sun
and the day set within my bounds.

Nature gave place, and the earth failed my step:
it was exhausted first. Night and total chaos
would rush at me; as far as this earth I returned,
from where no one comes back.

The passage of the sun and the normal succession of day and night here appear as representatives of the normal course of nature, which Hercules has subverted by pitting himself against night and going down into the underworld. The separation of the living and the dead are presented as analogous to the succession of night and day.

This valence is common in the tragedies, where the sun is a powerful symbol for the normal working of nature. In some Stoic accounts the sun, as a bearer of divine fire, had an intelligence of its own.¹⁰³ The natural world around the tragic actors frequently

¹⁰³ "Divine fire: god, aether, soul and *pneuma* are all said to be versions of the divine fire, or sometimes mixtures of air and fire. Cleanthes considered the sun to be the ruling principle or *hegemonikon* of the cosmos (SVF 1.499), an analogue of the *hegemonikon* of the human soul. Zeno deemed that "the sun and the moon and each of the other stars are intelligent and prudent and have the fieriness of designing fire" (LS 46D = Stobaeus 1.213, 15-21 =SVF 1.120, part); given that Zeno's soul has eight parts, these might conceivably be identified with the sun, moon, earth, and five stars. See Reesor 1989 3 and and Hunt 1976 45-59, who regards the identification of the fiery *aether* at the edge of the universe with the governing fire as a Chrysippean development.

The discrepancy between whether fire or a mixture of fire and air was the governing principle may also be explained by historical development. "The earliest formulations of this theory [of the active and passive principles] appear to have identified the active principle with fire. Later versions of the theory,

exhibits a horrified and horrifying sympathetic response to their perversions of nature: this can take different forms (in *Thyestes* the Chorus describe an earthquake which seems to result in the falling in of the constellation: 789-884), but the most frequent figure for this is the sun which attempts to turn back upon itself, in horror at the actions committed onstage – the conceits of *Thyestes* (in fact, the sun's recoiling was an established part of the myth, and is referred to several times in the play: 636-8, 776-8, 784-8, 789-884, 1035-6)¹⁰⁴, *Agamemnon* (908-9), and *Hercules Furens* (58-62) – or is slow to rise (*Thy.* 120-1, *Ag.* 42-3, 56, *Thy.* 120; cf Lucan 7.1, where the sun rises slowly on the morning of the battle of Pharsalia; in *Phaedra*, Hippolytus exhorts the stars and sun to hide for shame of his step-mother's desire, 674-9).¹⁰⁵

The *Oedipus* opens with this very image.

Iam nocte Titan dubius expulsa redit

Oed. 1

Now, with night expelled, wavering Titan returns.

associated with Chrysippus, replace fire with the concept of "breath" or *pneuma*, possibly reflecting the increasing importance that this latter concept was gaining in the sciences of the day, especially biology. These two characterisations are not unrelated, in so far as breath or *pneuma*, conceived as the principle of life within a living being, was thought to be intimately related to warmth or heat" (Sellars 2006 87). But fire did not lose its importance entirely: according to Diogenes Laertius, for the Stoics: nature is an artistically working fire, going on its way to create" (6.156).

See further on fire, *aether* and *pneuma*: Verbeke 1945, Sambursky 1987 1-7, 21-48, Lapidge 1973 240-78, Lapidge 1978 161-85, Bloos 1973 52-89, Longrigg 1975 211-29. LS 46, 47 and 53.

Is divine fire the same as normal fire (or the air of *pneuma* the same as normal air)? The question is vexed: Cooper 2009.

¹⁰⁴ There is some debate over whether all the references refer to a single movement of the sun, or several. See Volk 2006 for a discussion of the motif in the *Thyestes*, with bibliographic references to the debate at 183-4 with 183 n. 2.

¹⁰⁵ Boyle 2011 *ad Oed.* 1, refers to Curley 1986 91-100 for the "*dubius* motif."

The opening line of the *Oedipus* enacts the hesitant sunrise, beginning in the darkness (*iam nocte*, “now, by night”) which is transformed, grammatically and imagistically, by the end of the line. The line condenses the associative valences of the hesitant sun.

The first and final words of the line, *iam... redit*, “now... it returns” express a tension between the present moment and the cyclic pattern of the cosmos. The tension is suggestive for metadramatic reasons: *Oedipus*, a play about rediscovering the buried past, may be played and replayed, read and re-read. *This Oedipus* in particular is inevitably a replay: a new version of an Attic classic. The opening of the play at dawn remind us that the actions represented in the drama take place in a single day, and will be over in a day. The sun, then, acts as a meta-dramatic reminder of the nature of tragedy: limited in time both within and without the fictional bounds of the play, moving, from its opening verse, inexorably towards a conclusion. This opening image points forward to the inevitable sunset. But it also draws the audience (or reader) into the drama: one is to imagine the sun passing slowly over the stage (whether or not Seneca’s dramas were actually or were intended to be performed), as if we were under the same sky as the dramatic characters.

Even when the sun stutters, as here and as often in Senecan drama, its stumbling is rendered the more piquant for the fact that we know that ultimately, its course must continue: it must, like the audience, see the action to its conclusion. The sun’s passage across the sky is not merely a figure for fatal predestination, but also an instance of it. This may also be instantiated in a prophecy and (metaphorically) in a play (which literary convention requires to be neatly concluded in fewer than two thousand lines), but it governs our lives no less than the characters we see onstage.

The regularity of the sun's movement thus represents the procedure of the same cosmic order as does the cycle of generations. The repeated focus of Seneca's tragedies upon incest and familial killing (one or the other being present in every one of his works) is not merely a reflection of available source material (though he admittedly had a rich seam to mine) but bespeaks Seneca's conception of what constitutes the normal functioning of the cosmos: heavenly bodies turning in their regular cycles, and generations living and dying with a similar predictability.

But the sun's stuttering in the face of egregious tragic vice is also a reminder that nature is complicated by the presence and actions of humans. As humans we partake in that divine reason which is composed of the same fiery *aether* as is the sun itself. Nature is not only around us but within us. Our share of the divine reason also allows us, uniquely in the cosmos, to act contrary to divine reason, against nature. And the pathetic fallacies which Seneca so often favours in his tragedies suggest that our perversions can have a poisoning effect, can radiate outward and impact the proper functioning of nature outside ourselves.

At least the movement of time in its forward direction, the passage of the sun across the sky, and the approach of a man to his own death seem fixed bounds for human life. This inexorable passage of time might then be a promising place to begin a Stoic study into nature; time being a basic and unalterable property of the cosmos, and one with important consequences for human life. When one turns to the beginning of Seneca's only work explicitly dedicated to the examination of nature, the *Naturales Quaestiones*, whose first book is known through the faulty manuscript tradition as Book 3, one finds precisely such a preoccupation with the passage of time.

In this context, the themes of Book 3, Seneca's own mortality, and the end of the world, are rather less perplexing than they might otherwise appear. The book, which not only takes us through some rather unsalubrious and unpromising caves beneath our earth, but ends with a description of the deluge that comes at the end of the cosmic cycle, might seem a rather inauspicious beginning to a work of such scope. And though it is understandable that Seneca introduce the phenomenon of passing time early in the work, we are still left to puzzle out why he begins with a meditation on death, and takes us beneath the earth's surface, rather than, for example, an image of sunlight or dawn. Why does Seneca begin a study into natural phenomena with the end of the world? This chapter offers an answer to that question.

*

Before it closes with a description of the end of the world, *N.Q.* 3 opens with a meditation on old age.¹⁰⁶

*Non praeterit me, Lucili virorum optime, quam magnarum rerum fundamenta
ponam senex, qui mundum circuire constitui et causas secretas eius eruere
atque aliis noscenda prodere.*

N.Q. 3.praef.1

¹⁰⁶ For Book 3, see Stahl 1960 92-96, Gauly 2004 96-104, 214-218, 235-237, Gross 1989 103-147, Waiblinger 1977 38-53, Berno 2003a 65-110, Limburg 2007 149-182, 377-411, Williams 2012 75-80, 110-116.

It does not pass me by, Lucilius, best of men, how I am laying the foundations of great things as an old man, in settling on going round the world and digging up its hidden causes, and giving forth things to be known by others.

Seneca introduces himself as *Senex*: the phonic similarity is freighted.¹⁰⁷ He insists that although the years have passed him by (*praetereo* is commonly used of time¹⁰⁸), the size of his new project has not.

Thus, this work of physics, which will contain truths which transcend historical particularity, is, at its very beginning, grounded in the same chronology as is the author. The work's very existence is unfolded in the same running-out time as its writer's life: being so old, the question is when he will find the time to write it (*quando tam multa consequar, tam sparsa colligam, tam occulta perspiciam?* *N.Q.* 3.praef.1, "when shall I follow what is so many, collect what is so scattered, perceive what is so hidden?").

The *subject* of study, on the other hand, is introduced not in temporal terms, but with *spatial* metaphors. Seneca is *laying the foundations* of a project which will allow him to *go around* the world and *dig up* its causes and secrets. It is an appropriately physical introduction to this book on the physical sciences. Furthermore the metaphorical language surrounding the project is paradoxical from the start: what does it mean that Seneca is laying the foundations to uproot the foundations?¹⁰⁹ Armisen-Marchetti's description, made in the context of Seneca's prose, of metaphor as "the irruption of the concrete into the abstract" seems particularly apt here. This is all the more true given the borrowing from space of metaphors of time passing (*praetereo*), which surreptitiously

¹⁰⁷ Several scholars make this point, eg, O'Gorman 2000 153 n 51, Henderson 2004, 1: "Seneca the ultimate *senex*," Ker 2009 70, 84.

¹⁰⁸ O.L.D.: *praetereo* 4 (intr., of time): "To go by, pass."

¹⁰⁹ *Pono* is an ambiguous word. As here, it can have the sense of lay down, place before, but it just as often means the opposite, to lay or put *aside*. *C.f.* praef. 18 - *nihil est autem apertius his salutaribus quae contra nequitiam nostram furoremque discuntur, quae damnamus nec ponimus*.

deconstructs the opposition set up in that opening sentence between the scholar, Seneca, who exists in time and whose time is running out, and his scholarly enterprise, which is an edifice whose foundations he must lay, or its subject, hidden underground, which are, that is, things which exist in space but to which passing time is immaterial. The causes and secrets are not in the past; they are still there, ready to be dug up, like layers of sediment, pressed down underground, but running right through and themselves composing the rock. The image is appropriate to a Stoic theory of causality, whereby causes are immanent in the thing itself.¹¹⁰

The manner in which time impinges on the study is through the pressing timeframe of its author's mortality. This intrusion of the temporal seems not incidental, but rather integral to the study. This is a project begun at the end of life, to understand all of life, and Seneca insists that it is the very loss of life which inspires him. The reproach of old age is not the little time left, but the years he has already wasted ("consumed," *remittat ergo senectus et obiciat annos inter vana studia consumptos*, *N.Q.* 3.praef. 2, "my old age should let me off because of this and throw in my way years used up in pointless studies") and loss of life itself is not only the anticipated loss – the one which leaves him so little time – but also the losses that have gone before, in which life has consisted (*tanto magis urgeamus et damna aetatis male exemptae labor sarciat*, praef. *N.Q.* 3.2, "let us press forward all the more, and let work repair the losses of an age badly spent").

This line of reasoning recalls another passage of Seneca. The first letter in the *Epistulae Morales* also begins with a meditation on the theme of the passage of time. Again, Seneca recommends philosophy as a means of holding on to life as it slips away:

¹¹⁰ C.f. Leitão 1998 146-150 for an articulation of precisely these views of time in Seneca's work. Leitão's analysis differs in his analysis of the interplay of these two views of time in Seneca's works, which he sees as clashing in the end of *N.Q.* Book 1: he sees them as simply explaining an unintentional discrepancy in the characterisation of Hostius Quadra.

On Stoic causality, see Bobzien 1998 and Salles 2005.

Ita fac, mi Lucili; vindica te tibi, et tempus, quod adhuc aut auferebatur aut subripiiebatur aut excidebat, collige et serva.

Ep. 1.1

That's it, my Lucilius; free yourself from yourself, and gather and save your time, which until now has been removed from you, or stolen, or has fallen away.

The sentiment in the *N.Q.* is the same as the one Seneca expresses here, that by careful and philosophical living it is possible to gather up the time one has left.¹¹¹ Here, in the *Naturales Questiones*, Seneca even suggests that it is possible to get back what has already gone by: *quidquid amissum est, id diligenti usu praesentis vitae recolliget* (*N.Q.* 3. *Praef.* 3, “whatever has been lost, the mind will recover it by careful use of present life”). In the letter, Seneca encourages Lucilius to see life as not leading up to death, but already suffused by it,

Quem mihi dabis, qui aliquod pretium tempori ponat, qui diem aestimet, qui intellegat se cotidie mori? In hoc enim fallimur, quod mortem prospicimus; magna pars eius iam praeterit. Quicquid aetatis retro est, mors tenet.

Ep. 1.2

What man can you show me who places any value on his time, who reckons the worth of each day, who understands that he is dying daily? For we are mistaken when we look forward to death; the major portion of death has already passed. Whatever lies behind us are in death's hands.

¹¹¹ This is a sentiment which Seneca often expresses: we will live longer by making sure that we are truly living in each moment. See e.g. *ad Marc.* 12, 22, *Ep.* 99.11-12, *De Brevitate Vitae passim*, with Armisen-Marchetti 1995a.

The presence of death in life is, as we will see, key to understanding Book 3 of the *Naturales Quaestiones*. But it does not immediately seem to explain how philosophical living might allow one to recover time lost. In the preface to Book 3, Seneca continues by asking, how, in his old age, he might make time for such a project, with so little time. *Nox ad diem accedat* (*N.Q.* 3.praef.2, “let night approach the day”). He will write into the night. As I have argued, the image of a day often stands for that of a man’s life, another valence that might be added to the complex of nuances associated with the image of the sun in the tragedies. Death had been associated with darkness since Homer, so the setting of the sun naturally recommended itself as a metaphor for dying.¹¹² Furthermore, the *regularity* of the sun’s setting was a reminder that death was always with us, even in life – and the interminable repetition can even make the non-Stoic wish for death,

*Memini te illum locum aliquando tractasse, non repente nos in mortem incidere
sed minutatim procedere. Cotidie morimur; cotidie enim demitur aliqua pars vitae,
et tunc quoque cum crescimus vita decrescit. Infantiam amisimus, deinde
pueritiam, deinde adolescentiam. Usque ad hesternum quidquid transit temporis
perit; hunc ipsum quem agimus diem cum morte dividimus. Quemadmodum
clepsydrum non extremum stilicidium exhaurit sed quidquid ante defluxit, sic
ultima hora qua esse desinimus non sola mortem facit sed sola consummat; tunc
ad illam pervenimus, sed diu venimus.*

...

*Quosdam subit eadem faciendi videndique satietas et vitae non odium sed
fastidium, in quod prolabimur ipsa impellente philosophia, dum dicimus
'quousque eadem? nempe ex pergiscar dormiam, <edam> esuriam, algebo*

¹¹² Dying heroes in the *Iliad* are often described as being overcome by darkness, and Hades is the “kingdom of darkness,” 8.368; see further Morrison 1999.

aestuabo. Nullius rei finis est, sed in orbem nexa sunt omnia, fugiunt ac sequuntur; diem nox premit, dies noctem, aestas in autumnum desinit, autumnus hiemps instat, quae vere compescitur; omnia sic transeunt ut revertantur. Nihil novi facio, nihil novi video: fit aliquando et huius rei nausia.' Multi sunt qui non acerbum iudicent vivere sed supervacuum.

Ep. 24.19-20, 26

I remember that you once treated that commonplace, that we do not suddenly strike death, but little by little advance on it; we die every day. For every day some part of our life is removed, and furthermore as we grow, our life shrinks. We lose our infancy, then our childhood, then our adolescence. Until yesterday, whatever of time has passed, has passed away; we even share the very day we are leading now with death. Just as the last drop does not drain the clepsydra, but whatever flowed away before, so the final hour, at which we cease to be, does not on its own make a death but only completes one; then we arrive at it, but we have been a long time coming.

...

A glut of doing and seeing the same things overwhelms some people, not a hatred of life but an exhaustion with it, into which we slide with philosophy itself pushing us, as we say, "how long the same things? Of course, I shall awake from sleep, I shall be hungry, I shall be bored, I shall be cold, I shall be hot. There is no end of things, but all things are connected in a circle, they run away and they follow. Night presses on day, day on night, summer gives way to autumn, winter presses on autumn, which is checked by spring. All things pass

thus and are returned. I do nothing new, I see nothing new; at some point a sickness even of this thing arises.” There are many who judge life not bitter, but empty.

The sense that the inquiry is necessarily personal is strengthened by the parallel between this project and Seneca’s wonted evening meditations on the day past:¹¹³ the end of every day is an appropriate time to look back at the beginning (even he will try to draw out this day as late into the night as he can).

And to add a further dimension to the metaphor, the peculiar nature of Stoic virtue erased temporal concerns: so total was wisdom and virtue that one did not need to concern oneself with how long it lasted. This was simply irrelevant. Having achieved virtue one might die fulfilled at any point. Thus Seneca could point out that a virtuous day was not just a metaphorical figure for a virtuous life, but in a meaningful sense equal to it: *honestam vitam ex centum annorum numero in quantum voles corripe et in unum diem coge: aequae honesta est* (Ep. 74.27, “reduce the virtuous life in number from a hundred years to as little as you wish – even force it into one day: it is just as virtuous”); *Nam, ut Posidonius ait, ‘unus dies hominum eruditorum plus patet quam inperitis longissima aetas’* (Ep. 78.28, “For, as Posidonius said, “one day stretches out more for educated men than the longest age for the uninformed”).

Seneca develops the image most fully in Letter 12:

¹¹³ *De Ira* 3.36. *Cum sublatum e conspectu lumen est et conticuit uxor moris iam mei conscia, totum diem meum scrutor factaque ac dicta mea remetior ; nihil mihi ipse abscondo, nihil transeo.* “When the lamp is taken out of my sight, and my wife, who knows my habit, has ceased to talk, I pass the whole day in review before myself, and repeat all that I have said and done: I conceal nothing from myself, and omit nothing.”

'Molestum est' inquis 'mortem ante oculos habere.' Primum ista tam seni ante oculos debet esse quam iuveni – non enim citamur ex censu; deinde nemo tam sene est ut improbe unum diem speret. Unus autem dies gradus vitae est. Tota aetas partibus constat et orbis habet circumductos maiores minoribus: est aliquis qui omnis complectatur et cingat – hic pertinet a natali ad diem extremum – est alter qui annos adolescentiae excludit; est qui totam pueritiam ambitu suo adstringit; est deinde per se annus in se omnia continens tempora, quorum multiplicatione vita componitur; mensis artiore praecingitur circulo; angustissimum habet dies gyrum, sed et hic ab initio ad exitum venit, ab ortu ad occasum.

*Ideo Heraclitus, cui cognomen fecit orationis obscuritas, 'unus' inquit 'dies par omni est'. Hoc alius aliter excepit. Dixit enim *** parem esse horis, nec mentitur; nam si dies est tempus viginti et quattuor horarum, necesse est omnes inter se dies pares esse, quia nox habet quod dies perdidit. Alius ait parem esse unum diem omnibus similitudine; nihil enim habet longissimi temporis spatium quod non et in uno die invenias, lucem et noctem, et in alternas mundi vices plura facit ista, non <alia>: *** alias contractior, alias productior.*

Itaque sic ordinandus est dies omnis tamquam cogat agmen et consummet atque expleat vitam.

Ep. 12.6-8

“It is annoying,” you say, “to have death before your eyes.” That thing ought to be first before the eyes for old just as much as young. For we are not called according to the censor’s roll. And no one is so old that he does not shamelessly hope for another day. Moreover one day is a step forward in life.

Our whole life corresponds to parts and has greater circles drawn round smaller ones. There is one which encompasses and encircles all; this extends from birth to the last day. There is another, which encloses the years of our adolescence. There is one which holds our entire childhood in its circumference. Then there is a year in its own right, containing within it all the times by whose multiplication life is composed. The month is hemmed in by a tighter circle. The day has the tightest turn, but even this comes from beginning to end, from rising to setting.

For this reason Heraclitus, whose obscurity of speech gave him his nickname, said, "One day is equal to every." People take this in different ways. For he said that days are equal in hours, nor is this a lie; for if the day is a 24 hour period, all days must be equal among themselves, because night gains what the day loses. Another man said that one day is equal to all days in its likeness; for a period of the longest duration has nothing, which you will not find in one day, that is light and night, and into infinity makes alternation between these more numerous, not one way when it is more contracted and another when it is drawn out longer.

And so every day should be ordered, as if it drew up the series, and used up and fulfilled life.

Seneca's point that the day can be held to include the night as well as the daytime is the same move of subsuming two opposites into the same larger whole that we will see he makes at the end of Book 3. For now it is enough to note that this strong and well developed image of circularity allows Seneca to understand periods of different lengths of time as fundamentally analogous, and that not only the obviously repeating days and

years are to be thought of as cyclic but also the ages of our lives.¹¹⁴ Book 3 is an exploration of the same idea, in a different philosophical mode.

The day-as-life is a beautiful and piquant image: whereas the day will dawn anew after the sun has set, and do so for all time, a man's life ends with sundown, so to speak. It hints at the "life cycle", the giving way of older generations to the new – but this hopeful image can never be without the sense of loss of the particular individual.

That valence is present here at *N.Q. 3.praef.2*: Seneca can write into the night, but at some point the light must go out, and there will be no new dawn for him.¹¹⁵ The impression is underscored if Williams is correct in attributing the quotation in the following paragraph to Vagellius' Phaethon: *tollimus ingentes animos et maxima parvo | tempore molimur* ("we arouse our minds to greatness and we strive for grand accomplishments in the little time we have left").¹¹⁶ All men's lives form an endless cycle of sunrises and sunsets, but like Phaethon, as Williams points out, any one man only experiences his own life as a single ride into the sunset, ending in death and not to be repeated.¹¹⁷ Phaethon was Plato's metaphor for poetic inspiration. In this passage, the journey from the beginning to the end of life over the course of a long day also mirrors the movement of the *text* from beginning to end, as Seneca writes it. His implication is

¹¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of this passage see Tarrant 1982. Tarrant comments that, "There is, to my knowledge, no other extant classical text which likens human life to a set of concentric circles. The widespread notion of the "ages of man," or Lebensalter, describes separate units within a human life, not progressively larger periods of time such as a day, a month, and a year. The description of a year as a circle is as old as Homer; and Heraclitus probably described youth as a circle," speculating that since Seneca quotes Heraclitus here, Seneca may have borrowed the image from him (1982 66-7). Tarrant argues that the image of the circles, along with the anecdote that follows about a Syrian tyrant who staged his own funeral every day, has the following moral: "Pacuvius is locked inside the circle that is his life, consigned to endless, tedious repetition of the same action. For the wise person, however, each day is profitable, adds something to experience, offers some new perspective. To avoid the tedium of merely expanding the areas of our circles, Seneca seems to say, we must learn to live on the edge" (Tarrant 1982 69).

¹¹⁵ Williams 2012 39 notes an allusion to the Elder Pliny's practice of using up every spare minute in study, including late at night, and while being carried around in a sedan chair.

¹¹⁶ Williams 2012 32.

¹¹⁷ See Staley 2010 45-6, Littlewood 2004 123. Euripides' Phaethon recalls in its first ode the dawn of a day.

that the text itself will track his life, that his death will bring about its end. The analogy between the text and life, conceived as the latter is by Seneca as a circle or cycle, is underscored by the fact that in its original format *N.Q.* 3 was a scroll of papyrus held in one hand and gradually unfurled to read, while rolling it up again from the top in the other.

The start of the *N.Q.* depicts an author whose end is approaching, but who claims that it is his approaching end which presses him forward to gain more knowledge. Seneca's drive for natural philosophical completion propels him towards death. But he also suggests that that his remaining days will expand to accommodate this quest for knowledge. Lost time can be regained for the present by sparing usage – *quidquid amissum est, id diligenti usu praesentis vitae recolliget*¹¹⁸ (*N.Q.* 3.praef. 3, "whatever has been lost, the mind will recover it by careful use of present life"). It does not matter how much time has been lost (*hoc dicerem si puer iuvenisque molirer, ibidem*, "I would say this if I were a boy or a young man struggling) – because any time is too short") – *nullum enim non tam magnis rebus tempus angustum est (ibidem*, "for no time is not too narrow for great things"). This paradoxical claim (the particular paradox which it recalls is Zeno's), that a reduction in time has no effect whatsoever on the amount of activity to take place in that time, makes sense when one remembers what we have said about the nature of Stoic virtue and wisdom: it is so total that it is unaffected by the passing of time – a minute equals a day, which equals a lifetime.

Yet Seneca's *life* can never attain this atemporal perfection, even if he were to achieve wisdom. Virtue will not make him immortal, just indifferent to time. And there is a

¹¹⁸ *Recolliget* here picks up *tam sparsa colligam* a few lines earlier (*praef.* 1) and both echo the exhortation to *collect* time in the opening words of the *Moral Epistles*: *Ep.* 1.1: *Ita fac, mi Lucili; vindica te tibi, et tempus, quod adhuc aut auferebatur aut subripiabatur aut excidebat, collige et serva*. "That's it, my Lucilius; free yourself from yourself, and gather and save your time, which until now has been removed from you, or stolen, or has fallen away."

strange sense that it is precisely the approach of the end which makes it possible to fit in more knowledge. Seneca will not complete his study despite the press of his mortality, but because of it. There is something about working hard at the end that affects the self – *crescit animus, quotiens coepti magnitudinem attendit et cogitat quantum proposito, non quantum sibi superstit* (*ibidem*, the mind grows, whenever it concentrates on the size of the undertaking and ponders how long there remains for what is proposed, not how long remains for it). The *mind* grows when it considers the size of the task. Supposing a bilingual pun on *phuō* (the etymological root of the Greek word for *natura*, *phusis*), and considering the associations of the verb *cresco* with biological growth, the image is of the mind taking life itself from its mental task. The composition of the text becomes like the creation of a universe, the *materia* on which Seneca exercises his own creative *ratio*. But this life-giving exercise does not eliminate the incontrovertible fact of his own mortality, it relies upon it.

Even in the opening passage, then, we see that death is crucial to an understanding of Seneca's natural scientific project. As much as Book 3 of the *N.Q.* is a book of origins (the start of the work, dealing with the underground sources of rivers), it is also a book of endings (the end of Seneca's life, and of the world). More than this, origin and ending are from the beginning intertwined: it is his approaching end which has inspired Seneca to begin.

*

That Seneca's study militates against conventional chronology is underscored by the fact that the authors from whom he takes pains to distinguish himself in his introduction

are not rival philosophers but historians. These writers consume themselves (*consumpsere se*), “while they compose the deeds of foreign kings and whatever peoples have suffered or dared in turn” (*N.Q. 3.praef. 5, dum acta regum externorum componunt quaeque passi invicem ausique sunt populi*). Seneca suggests that his own enterprise is superior, since it is better to extinguish one’s own ills than to hand down for posterity those of others.¹¹⁹

The denunciation might be said to highlight the present work’s parallelism to history, rather than its distance. What trope is more proper to Roman historiography than a denunciation of predecessors?¹²⁰ Historians too write in retirement, at the ends of their lives.¹²¹ Seneca’s anxious desire to distinguish his natural history from history bespeaks a wish to get away from the world of men since no great distinction between men and the rest of nature can really be upheld. And natural history is more beneficial to man than history because it provokes the understanding of man’s true place in the cosmos.¹²²

Quaestio is a literal translation of the Greek *historia*. Though *quaestio* is never used in Latin to mean ‘history,’ with the Latinisation *historia* or terms like *annales* or *origines*

¹¹⁹ For Seneca’s relationship with history, see Armisen-Marchetti 1995b.

¹²⁰ Eg. Thucydides’ denunciation of poets and *logographoi* (1.21.1). Dionysius *Ep. Pomp.* 3 accuses Thucydides of malice towards Athens and holds up to favourable comparison his compatriot Herodotus. By contrast, criticisms of Herodotus, as a liar, were common in the ancient world; an example is Plutarch’s essay *On the Malice of Herodotus*. In Cicero’s *De Oratore* Antonius (41-4) discusses the early Roman historians with a very unfavourable comparison to the Greeks (damning with faint praise, he exhorts his interlocutor Catulus to go easy on the Romans, who were really just producing an “aggregate of the annals”, and thus are not even worthy to be judged by the standards of real historiography. Catulus agrees, musing that even though Coelius “hacked away like the man of limited ability that he was neither a scholar nor particularly suited to rhetoric,” nonetheless, “he was better than his predecessors”). Polybius frequently derides other historians (e.g. the overly dramatic style of Phylarchus 2.56.6-13, the patchy research, excessive patriotism and faulty style of Zeno and Antisthenes 16.14-20). The entirety of his theoretical discussion about the nature of history writing, which takes up all his Book 12, is based around a sustained attack on the Sicilian historian Timaeus, who provides an *exemplum* of bad historiography. Later, Tacitus would inscribe himself in the same tradition, implying the partiality of previous writers on his period in the *Annales* (1.1). Woodman claims that ancient historiography is best viewed in terms of praise and blame, rather than modern standards of historical truth (1988 41-3).

¹²¹ E.g. Sallust BC 4.1.

¹²² On Seneca’s relationship to historiography, see Castagna 1991, Andre 1995, Damon 2010. See also the bibliography on *exempla* in Seneca at n. 19.

preferred instead, it should not be forgotten that Herodotus himself borrowed the word ἱστορία from *scientific* discourse.¹²³ Whereas history concerns itself with the deeds of men, *natural* history treats the deeds of gods. Both, however, are characterised as devastating for mankind (*quanto potius deorum opera celebrare quam Philippi aut Alexandri latrocina ceterorumque qui exitio gentium clari non minores fuere pestes mortalium quam inundatio qua planum omne perfusum est, quam conflagratio qua magna pars animantium exaruit? N.Q. 3.praef. 5*, “how much better to celebrate the deeds of the gods than the robberies of Philip or Alexander and of the others who by the destruction of peoples were no less famous blights on mankind than the flood by which the whole land is inundated, than the conflagration by which the greater part of living creatures is burned up?”).

But still, Seneca insists upon a difference between himself and the historians. History inquires into what has been done, natural history into what is to be done (never mind that Seneca’s expatiation on the theme of fortune’s fickleness at *N.Q. 3.praef. 8* channels the *historian* Herodotus).¹²⁴

Seneca’s examples of fortune’s effects resonate with history (Herodotus determines to treat great and lesser cities equally, because they will rise and fall over time; Thucydides makes a similar point when he imagines the ruins of Athens and Sparta¹²⁵) but also with tragedy: *regna ex infimo coorta supra imperantes constiterunt, vetera imperia in ipso flore cecidrun*t (*ibidem*, kingdoms which have risen from the depths have established

¹²³ Dewald and Marincola 1987 9. “Herodotus’ methodology did not, of course, arise out of nothing. It was influenced by the Presocratic philosophers and the Ionian natural scientists.” Grethlein 2010, “It would be problematic to argue that Herodotus was simply influenced by the medical writers, and it is more appropriate to view him as part of a larger intellectual movement with a unique voice”. See also Boedeker 2000.

¹²⁴ Also Herodotean is Seneca’s adoption of the method of recounting the opinions of others before passing judgement himself at 5-9: *quidam iudicant... quidam existimant... quidam existimant... quibusdam haec placet causa...*

¹²⁵ Thucydides 1.10.3.

themselves ruling from on high, old powers in their very flower have fallen).¹²⁶ Mention of reversals of fortune recalls Aristotle. We recall Seneca's earlier comment that many writers have used up their lives in writing about trivialities – this reference to tragedy allows us to wonder if he includes himself in this (he has already said he used up his life in *vana studia*).

Whereas historians record the lives and deaths of men, his work will take its life force from his encroaching death. The historians consuming themselves must remind us of Seneca, whose old age reproaches him with years 'consumed' by *vana studia*. But he turns away from those idle things. The example Seneca gives of a subject of a history is Hannibal: an old man (*senex*) scouring (*quaerere* – an echo of the work's titular *quaestiones*) every corner (thanks to Horace, *angulus* is a philosophically loaded – Epicurean – word¹²⁷) of the world (*N.Q.* 3.*praef.*6). Seneca ultimately appears most like, not a historian, but the object of their study, like Hannibal. Seneca, a *senex* himself, will himself search into every corner of the world. Like Hannibal, then, he is a baneful figure, feeding off death, albeit in his case, his own, as opposed to the Latins massacred by Hannibal.¹²⁸

Seneca's preoccupations with genre here signal that he is aware of the *N.Q.*'s own status as a text, his preoccupation with history suggests that he is thinking about how a

¹²⁶ Berno 2003 102-108 comments on the tragic resonances in Book 3; Berno 2003a *passim* is very good on tragic allusions and parallels throughout the *N.Q.*.

¹²⁷ Conte 1994 314: "The *angulus* translates into Horatian terms the experience of the *sapientum templa serena* that Lucretius proposes to his readers".

¹²⁸ At *Ep.* 51.4, Seneca urges Lucilius not to repeat Hannibal's mistakes: *Id agere debemus ut irritamenta vitiorum quam longissime profugiamus; indurandus est animus et a blandimentis voluptatum procul abstrahendus. Una Hannibalem hiberna solverunt et indomitum illum nivibus atque Alpibus virum enervaverunt fomenta Campaniae: armis vicit, vitiis victus est* ("We ought to see to it that we flee to the greatest possible distance from provocations to vice. We should toughen our minds, and remove them far from the allurements of pleasure. A single winter relaxed Hannibal's fibre; his pampering in Campania took the vigour out of that hero who had triumphed over Alpine snows. He conquered with his weapons, but was conquered by his vices"). The implication is that as he was trailing across frozen wastes, Hannibal was a good model.

text can contain a man's life. Studying nature should be a way for this text to escape the petty, temporal concerns of human life (concerns which make history so much the lesser genre than natural science) – but we have already seen that this text from the moment of its inception has been intrinsically related to one particular petty temporal concern of Seneca's own life: the inescapable fact of his own encroaching mortality.

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Considering the apparent importance of mortality for the study, which has not yet been fully explained, it would appear that it is no coincidence that Seneca's search for secret causes takes him first of all into the hidden recesses of the earth – from where life arises and to where it will return.

After the prologue, Seneca announces his intention to study *terrestriæ aquae*, the waters beneath the earth's surface, for what reason (*qua ratione*) they arise, if any reason should (*si qua ratio*) supply them (N.Q. 3.1.1). This is not merely a statement of subject matter, but also an establishment of his scientific principles, his optimistic assumption that the world is fully knowable, that there is a single *ratio* which, if discovered, will explain nature in general: *quamcumque rationem reddiderimus de flumine, eadem erit rivorum ac fontium* (N.Q. 3.4, "whatever explanation we will have given for rivers, it will be the same one as of rivers and springs").

My emphasis in this chapter upon the metaphorical valences of digging underground is not meant to call into question the sincerity of Seneca's geological and physical theories. In Book 3, Seneca interacts with the ideas of Aristotle, Xenophanes, Anaximander,

Empedocles and Anaxagoras among others, and there is no reason to suspect the seriousness of his engagement. More importantly, for the Stoics, physics was inseparable from the other parts of philosophy. It was quite possible for Seneca to discuss natural scientific theories alongside questions we would regard as more properly philosophical about mortality and the grounds of knowledge. That he should imbue the physical phenomena he discusses with metaphorical valences which evoke other philosophical issues should be taken rather as a marker of Seneca's skill and subtlety as a writer than as evidencing any irony or disinterest in his treatment of his natural scientific subject.

Sunt et sub terra minus nota nobis iura naturae, sed non minus certa (N.Q. 3.16.4 "there are laws of nature beneath the earth, less known to us, but no less certain"). Given Seneca's avowed aim to dig up secret causes and give them forth to be known (*causas secretas eius eruere atque aliis noscenda prodere*), we may suppose that one reason for the primacy of the study into what is beneath the earth is its metaphorical usefulness: looking beneath the surface and digging deep can stand as easily for an inquiry into hidden causes in Seneca's Latin as in our English. But the vast caverns that lie beneath our earth also do literally contain the secrets to much of what lies on the surface: the even level of Lake Fucinus, no matter how rainy it has been, is to be explained by an underground source (N.Q. 3.3), and the continual flowing of rivers must have the same explanation (N.Q. 3.4). But the precise nature of the water cycle is a matter for debate (N.Q. 3.5-11): the underground's unknowability prevents anything more than reasoned speculation.

Thus, the underground provides the perfect space to search for those truths about nature which are hidden from us, but which affect our lives. An inquiry into the sources (*origines*) of rivers demonstrates that hidden origins can be found beneath the earth

literally as well as metaphorically. Seneca insists that his digging deeper will allow the student better to know what is on the surface as he concludes his preface (*N.Q. 3.praef. 18*): *deinde in occultis exercitata subtilitas non erit in aperta deterior*. Once one has mastered thinking about what is hidden one can use that subtlety to think about what is in the open.

How far it is possible to know what lies beneath while remaining, as we readers and Seneca the writer do, physically on the surface, is another matter. At times it seems that the truth is accessible from above, thanks to our skills of reasoning: one can easily tell that Lake Fucinus is supplied from an underground source because it has the same appearance whether or not it has been raining (*N.Q. 3.3*). But more often there appears to be a great division between the surface and the depths. Dismissing the idea that rain could impact underground water supply, Seneca points out that as a dedicated digger (of vines; *diligens fossor*, *N.Q. 3.7*) he knows from experience that rainwater never permeates even ten feet down: the depths of the earth are separated from the surface.

*

The discussion of the source of Lake Fucinus is the opening of a long description of what things are like underground. In Seneca's vision, it is an awesome and intimidating environment:

*Sunt et illic specus vasti ingentesque recessus ac spatia suspensis hinc et inde
montibus laxa; sunt abrupti in infinitum hiatus, qui saepe illapsas urbes
receperunt et ingentem ruinam in alto condiderunt*

There too there are vast caves, and huge recesses, and empty spaces with overhanging mountains here and there; there are sudden gulfs stretching to infinity, which have often swallowed fallen cities and buried the great ruin in the deep.

The idea that cities fall into these gulfs to their destruction leaves no doubt that the strangeness of the environment is hostile, or at least alien, to human life as it is normally lived. Given that the idea of digging underground has been established as a means of finding out the hidden truth which will serve as key to our very understanding of the cosmos, it may seem somewhat surprising that once he brings the reader down under the earth, Seneca presents a dangerous and terrifying environment. But from another perspective, Seneca draws on precisely the imagery we might expect him to for the construction of this environment: the description of *stagna obsessa tenebris et lacus ampli* ("marshes filled with darkness and broad lakes") evokes the underworld, an association which brings us back to the intimate relationship between inquiry and mortality suggested in the prologue.

But this sinister environment does not occasion reflections upon mortality. Rather Seneca draws on a more primal reaction to the murky underworld: he depicts it as a disgusting, *unheimlich* place. The underground breeds creatures, but strange ones, like sinister prodigies: *sed tarda et informia ut in aere caeco pinguique concepta et aquis torpentibus situ; pleraque ex his caeca ut talpae et subterranei mures, quibus deest lumen, quia supervacuum est* (N.Q. 3.16.5, "but slow and unformed because they were conceived in the blind, fat air, and in waters turgid by inactivity; many of these are blind, like moles and underground mice, who lack the light, because they have no need of

it").¹²⁹ These congenitally slow, blind underground creatures hardly seem to point the way towards the greater cosmic understanding sought by Seneca in his underground enquiry. Having gone beneath the earth for insight, Seneca finds only blindness.

These creatures are as difficult to interpret when encountered here as they would be if dug up from the earth and counted as a baleful prodigy. And Seneca insists that this can happen: that Theophrastus reports fish being dug up from the ground in "certain places." Seneca insists that though here we might fall back on "many urbanities" (he may be thinking of remarks by those most urbane poets, Horace and Ovid, about fish in trees¹³⁰) we should not. It is as if he is telling us to resist the urge to make these unusual animals fit into our everyday, city-bred worldview, to resist, that is, the urge to interpret them at all.¹³¹

Mention of Theophrastus' account of fish dug up from the ground leads Seneca a digression. It is the first of several lengthy moral excursuses in the *N.Q.* which serve to remind the reader that the study of natural history is not, for a Stoic, a merely academic pursuit. Again, Seneca resists associating the underworld with a meditation on mortality, and instead draws a more disgusting association. This time the disgust is with ourselves and the levels to which we stoop in our pursuit of luxury. The reader should not be surprised at the idea of fish being dug up with a hoe, as *incredibilia sunt opera*

¹²⁹ Elsewhere in Seneca mice are symbols of philosophical misguidedness: at *Ep.* 49.6 Seneca demonstrates syllogistic logic's potential for the ridiculous: *Mus syllaba est; mus autem caseum rodit; syllaba ergo caseum rodit.*

¹³⁰ *Od.* 1.2.9 (fish get stuck in elm trees in the deluge), *c.f.* Horace *Ars.* 30 (a dolphin in the woods as a monstrous variation on a familiar subject). Ovid. *Met.* 1.296 also has, in homage to Horace, a fish in an elm tree in a flood. A dolphin in the woods is an *adunaton* in Archilochus fr. 1.22.6-9 (West).

¹³¹ Fish are a proverbially silent creature. The fish stands for philosophy as an impenetrable and uninterpretable thing in the anecdote about Diogenes the Cynic at D.L. 6.36: "Once a man came to him, and wished to study philosophy as his pupil; and he gave him a *saperda* and made him follow him." This may be interpreted as equivalent to Diogenes' getting up and walking about as a riposte to an argument against motion: mute nature contrasted to a language that is endlessly decomposable.

luxuriae, quotiens naturam aut mentitur aut vincit (N.Q. 3.17.2, “the works of luxury are more unbelievable, how often it deceives or overcomes nature”).¹³²

One particular *opus* of luxury is the focus of Seneca’s attention, the custom of watching a mullet change colour as it dies in a jar on the table at a dinner party,¹³³

Parum videtur recens mullus, nisi qui in convivae manu moritur. Vitreis ollis inclusi afferuntur et observatur morientium color, quem in multas mutationes mors luctante spiritu vertit.

N.Q. 3.17.2

A mullet scarcely seems fresh, unless it dies at the hand of the diner. They are brought in trapped in glass jars, and the colour of their death throes is observed, which death turns through many changes in their struggle for air.

Seneca stretches out his account of this practice over 9 paragraphs in total – first with a description of sumptuary customs (N.Q. 3.17.2-3), and then with some fragments of direct speech from the supposed spectators of the death: *quo coctum piscem? quo*

¹³² For ancient sources on underground fish, see Vottero 1989 412 n. 9, Williams 2012 76 n.74.

¹³³ Because of their muteness, fish were associated with death in Greek and Roman culture; see, for example, Ovid *Fasti* 2.571-8 for the role of a fish with its mouth sewn up in the rites of the mute goddess Tacita during the Feralia, a festival of the dead. Fish are a site of moral opprobrium against luxury in Seneca. *Eg. Ep.* 90.7-8: *Ego vero philosophiam iudico non magis excogitasse has machinationes tectorum supra tecta surgentium et urbium urbes prementium quam vivaria piscum in hoc clausa, ut tempestatum periculum non adiret gula et quamvis acerrime pelago saeviente haberet luxuria portus suos, in quibus distinctos piscium greges saginaret.* (“But I, for my part, do not hold that philosophy devised these shrewdly contrived dwellings of ours which rise story upon story, where city crowds against city, any more than that she invented the fish-preserves, which are enclosed for the purpose of saving men’s gluttony from having to run the risk of storms, and in order that, no matter how wildly the sea is raging, luxury may have its safe harbours in which to fatten fancy breeds of fish.”) *C.f.* *Ep.* 90.15. At *Ep.* 90.24 Seneca comments that ships – invented by men, but not (*contra* Posidonius) wise men – follow the model of the fish.

See Limburg 2007 212-235 for a detailed discussion of Seneca’s attitudes towards what she calls “table luxury,” with detailed references to primary and secondary literature about Roman moralising about alimentary indulgence.

On the mullet passage: Alexander 1955, Waiblinger 1977 43-53, Gross 1989 134-5, 142-4, Gauly 2004 96-104, Williams 2012 75-80 Berno 2003a 65-110, Citroni-Marchetti 1991 161-167. Berno 2003a 71 n.20, 21, 22 and 23 give a wealth of references on mullets.

exanimem? in ipso ferculo expiret (N.Q. 3.18.2, Why a cooked fish? Why a dead one? Let it die on the very serving dish), *hodie eductus est? nescio de re magna tibi credere. huc afferatur; coram me animam agat* (N.Q. 3.18.3, Was it caught today? I do not know how to trust you in such a great matter. Let it be brought here; let it force out its spirit before me), *nihil est moriente [mullo] formosius* (N.Q. 3.18.4, nothing is more beautiful than a dying mullet), *nihil est enim illa formosius* (N.Q. 3.18.6, nothing is more beautiful than it), including a description of just how exactly the fish looks as it dies (N.Q. 3.18.5). The death of the mullet is dragged out – or rather it is repeated or returned to continually. Seneca recreates the pleasure of watching that fleeting moment through his description. The continual repetition and return to the description illustrates how *unsatisfying* this pleasure is – it cannot last, and whets the appetite for still more of the same – which does not go any further to sating desire. The decadence that leads men to regard as rotten any fish which does not die before them leads to further evils – the crossing of oceans (N.Q. 3.17.1) and infidelity to family and friends (N.Q. 3.18.6).

Sarcastically, Seneca says that experiencing this pleasure is to realise that previously one has been circumscribed (*longa somniculosae inertisque luxuriae neglegentia quam sero experrecta circumscribi se et fraudari tanto bono sensit*, N.Q. 3.18.1, “how late has the long neglect of sleepy and inert luxury woken up and realised that it is limited and cheated of so much good”). This sentiment, along with the unsatisfactory nature of the pleasure evidenced by the drive continually to repeat it, is in another sense familiar from the tragedies and Seneca’s other prose works.¹³⁴ The pleasure obtained from vice is

¹³⁴ At *Thy.* 889-90, Atreus’ elation at his evil deed turns to dissatisfaction – and the sense that even this is not enough: *bene est, abunde est, iam sat est etiam mihi. | sed cur satis sit?*

Apart from tragedy, another instance of death as entertainment, which might be perceived as analogous to the pleasure of watching a mullet die, is gladiatorial combat, for which see Seneca’s *Ep.* 7.3-5. See also Shelton 2000 for spectatorship of death in the *Troades*.

one to which there is no natural limit.¹³⁵ The lack of any possible fulfilment leads to a sense of constant dissatisfaction, and an insatiable drive to gain yet more vicious pleasure. The paradox is that it is the very disregarding of limits prescribed by nature which leaves one feeling circumscribed.

In one sense, then, the denunciation of the mullet-eaters is akin to diatribes against luxury across Latin literature and in other Senecan passages. The description of how this vice tends to breed others, as we have seen, also falls into Seneca's general understanding of the nature of vice as evinced elsewhere. But the passage is nonetheless troubling. Why would Seneca insert a discussion of luxury and vice into the first book of his treatise on natural science? Even allowing for the close association in Seneca's Stoic understanding of morality and physics, it is not obvious why the beginning of a book which announces its purpose as to dig beneath the surface for the truth which will bring humanity towards wisdom finds when it goes down underground not knowledge but vice. The unnatural vice of the mullet-eaters is even introduced in connection with the purportedly *natural* fact of finding fish underground.

Seneca's characterisation of the underground is entirely negative. Fish from rivers in the depths of the earth are *pinguia et differta, ut ex longo otio corpora, ceterum inexercitata et tenebris saginata et lucis expertia, ex qua salubritas ducitur* (N.Q. 3.19.2, "fat and distended, as bodies are from long inactivity, besides unexercised and stuffed in the dark, and unfamiliar with the light, from which health is drawn"). Those who ate some such specimens, at Caria, died. These underground fish, utterly unsalubrious and utterly natural, recall how all fish seem to the jaded diner: putrid if not killed at the table (N.Q. 3.18.3).

¹³⁵ Ep. 16.9.

Elsewhere, Seneca tells us that *Natura* has hidden injurious things beneath the earth, presumably to protect us (Pliny has the same idea).¹³⁶ So these strange discoveries are not incompatible with the idea of a providential nature. These creatures, horrible to us, have their inscrutable place in the order of the cosmos, but their offensiveness to humans has led to them being placed underground, out of our way. That explanation is perfectly coherent, but it does not account for the distinct suggestion that the investigation into the underground, previously recommended as a step towards knowledge, itself might be corrupting.

The philosopher's narrative can be caught up in the pleasure of watching a dying mullet, as the drawn out treatment of the subject suggests, and as Seneca comes close to admitting when he concludes that he himself has been indulging himself in the description: *non tempero mihi quin utar interdum temerarie verbis et proprietatis modum excedam*, (*N.Q.* 3.18.7, "I do not restrain myself from using words recklessly sometimes, and I cross the bounds of propriety;" these words remind us that Seneca has produced many thousands of lines of verse describing death and suffering for aesthetic pleasure in his tragedies").¹³⁷

Men who peer into caves are in danger of death; even birds flying over some caves can be killed (*N.Q.* 3.21.1).¹³⁸ Why should the present investigation into the secrets of the earth, conducted by peering down from the surface, be any less hazardous? Similarly, water coming up from underground sometimes has properties which are harmful to mankind (so polluted by sulphur nitre, or bitumen as to be a risk to life when drunk, *N.Q.* 3.20.2, to turn objects immersed in it to stone, *N.Q.* 3.20.3-4, or to send men mad or to

¹³⁶ *Ep.* 110.9-10, Pliny *H.N.* 33.3.

¹³⁷ Williams 2012 78-9 identifies the grisly fascination of the mullet watchers with the depraved visual auto-erotics of Hostius Quadra in *N.Q.* Book 7.

¹³⁸ Lucretius *DRN* 6.740ff also speaks of Avernian caves from which deadly gases emanate, killing birds.

sleep as if drunk. *N.Q.* 3.20.5-6; at *N.Q.* 3.25.11 we learn that drinking dew-water causes scabs, blotches, and sores).¹³⁹ The potential for death in contact with things found underground may provide the link between the horrible underground and the underground as venue for scientific discovery. Seneca has already told us that his study takes its vitality from his own encroaching death.

In the case of the mullet-eaters it is the death of the fish which fascinates the diners: in the same way in which death on stage draws crowds, and in which Seneca's own death provides a spur for his writing, and perhaps for the reader's interest. Since Seneca has suggested that his own death will bring the text to a close, the reader's desire for more scientific knowledge which drives him to read on, is also a drive towards the closure provided by mortality, to see Seneca's demise.

More generally, looking into the earth provides us a glimpse of our own natures, at the heart of which is our own mortality. That this is so is underscored by Seneca's identification of the earth itself with the human body. This association is a venerable philosophical and natural scientific tactics.¹⁴⁰ Seneca develops the association throughout *N.Q.* 3, using it to make his academic investigation uncomfortably relevant to human life. The idea is expounded most fully at *N.Q.* 3.15. Nature rules the earth on the model of our bodies (*ad exemplar nostrorum corporum*), in which there are veins and arteries for blood and air respectively. In the earth there are also passages for water and air – *adeoque ad similitudinem illa humanorum corporum natura formavit ut maiores quoque nostri aquarum appellaverint venas* ("that nature has formed it so similarly to the human body that our ancestors have named *veins* of water"). As there are other liquids

¹³⁹ C.f.. Suetonius *Nero* 27 for Nero drinking water cooled with snow.

¹⁴⁰ See Limburg 2007 172-174, Althoff 1997, Beagon 1992 36-40, and Williams 2012 62 for references. For Lucretius, the earth has grown old and is past child-bearing age (*D.R.N.* 5.826). See also Edwards 1999 on the body and bodily suffering in Seneca.

in our body than blood, *alia necessarii, alia corrupti ac paulo pinguioris* (“some necessary, others putrid and a little fatty;” Seneca suggests brains, marrow, mucus, saliva, tears and the lubricant between joints) so there are in earth other liquids, some which harden quickly.¹⁴¹ Hence, Seneca suggests metal producing soil (with gold and silver as the sticky excreta of the earth) and substances like bitumen into which earth and water rot.

The earth is subject to the same sort of temporality as is the human body. At *N.Q.* 3.16.2, Seneca tells us that some springs are full for six hours and then dry for six, and some rivers are broad for months and narrow in others – “just as quartane fever comes on the hour, just as gout responds to the time, just as menstruation, if nothing obstructs it, keeps to a set day, just as birth is ready at its month, so waters have periods in which they draw back and in which they come forth” (*quemadmodum quartana ad horam venit, quemadmodum ad tempus podagra respondet, quemadmodum purgatio, si nihil obstitit, statum diem servat, quemadmodum praesto est ad mensem suum partus, sic aquae intervalla habent quibus se retrahant et quibus redeant*).

Similarly when the earth is struck, water gushes out, like blood from a wound. As when a vein is cut, it oozes till it has all flowed out, or until the cut is blocked. It may form a scar (*N.Q.* 3.15.5-6). Finally, the end of the world is described in terms of the rotting of the body of the earth: *quemadmodum corpora nostra ad egestum venter exhaurit, quemadmodum in sudorem eunt vires, ita tellus liquefiet et, aliis casuis quiescentibus, intra se quo mergatur inveniet. sed magis omnia coitura crediderim* (*N.Q.* 3.30.4, “just as the belly drains our bodies to discharge, just as strength goes into sweat, so the earth

¹⁴¹ This connection gives a new sense to the *causas secretas* which Seneca promised he would uncover in *N.Q.* 3. praef 1: both the Latin *secreta* and the Greek *ta apokritha* are used in the medical literature to mean ‘secretion’.

liquifies and, even with other causes at peace, finds within itself something in which to submerge itself. But I would rather believe that all things will come together”).

In *N.Q.* Book 5, Seneca explains first that the world expels a great quantity of air and breathes from hidden parts (*magnam vim aeris eicit et ex abdito spirat*, *N.Q.* 5.4.1), and then goes on to elaborate on this excretion of a gas by reference to a theory about which he cannot manage either to believe or keep to himself (*nec ut credam mihi persuaderi potest nec ut taceam*, *N.Q.* 5.4.2)

Quomodo in nostris corporibus cibo fit inflatio – quae non sine magna narium iniuria emittitur et ventrum interdum cum sono exonerat, interdum secretius – sic putant et hanc magnam rerum naturam alimenta mutantem emittere spiritum. Bene nobiscum agitur, cum quod edit semper concoquit; alioquin immundius aliquid timeremus.

N.Q. 5.4.2

Just as in our bodies there is an inflation from food – which is expelled not without great injury to the nostrils and sometimes unburdens the belly with a sound, sometimes secretly – thus they think this great nature of things to emit a breath when digesting food. It is well done for us, since she always digests what she eats; otherwise we might fear something more unpleasant.

It can be seen from the above examples that the earth is like a body chiefly in the aspects of frailty, disease and putrescence. The tendency to rot and so to die is thus thought of as a characteristic feature of the human body. We are encouraged to think of earth as body not in the sense of having an internal balance, but as a disgusting, leaky thing – painfully mortal, ready to decay; the word Seneca chooses to describe this distasteful character, *immundius* suggests that it is somehow intrinsic to the world,

mundus.¹⁴² The frailty of his own body is a major theme in Seneca's works, as frequent meditations upon old age (e.g. *Ep.* 12) and asthma (e.g. *Ep.* 54) attest.¹⁴³

Seneca encourages us to see that what we learn beneath the earth will be applicable on the surface: *crede infra quicquid vides supra* (*N.Q.* 3.16.4, believe that there is below what you see above). This is how natural history gives us the knowledge about ourselves which history fails to supply, and by which we can expel our vices (*N.Q.* 3.praef. 5): in learning about the earth, we are learning about ourselves. And the most important thing to know about ourselves is that we will die, that, in fact, we are already dying. The connection is all too pertinent for Seneca himself who, as we have seen, noisily denies being preoccupied by his own mortality and its implications for the work at hand. But here the dying earth, in all its putrescence, is itself the object of study. Though Seneca has explicitly introduced his study of nature as a way of *escaping* material concerns (*Cetera magno aestimata mortalibus, etiamsi quis domum casus attulerit, sic intueri quasi exitura qua venerint*, *N.Q.* 3.praef. 14, "other things prized greatly by mortals, even if some chance has brought it into the home, look on them as if they are going to leave the same way they came") and the body itself (*Ad hoc proderit nobis inspicere rerum naturam. Primo discedemus a sordidis. Deinde animum ipsum, quo sano magnoque opus est, seducemus a corpore*, *N.Q.* 3.praef. 18, "it will profit us to

¹⁴² *C.f. Ep.* 30.1-2, where an old man's ailing body is described as leaking. The idea of care of the self promulgated by Foucault depended upon man being able to regulate (mentally) the instabilities of his own body. Holmes 2011, 172, comments, "the author of *On Ancient Medicine* does not simply stress that humans are different from other living beings because they do not harmonise unthinkingly with their environment. He also shows little interest in how human nature does balance itself automatically. ... Human beings thus come to be defined not through the weakness of their natures but through their *deliberate* exercise of mastery over the physical world – both the world outside them and their own bodies." For Holmes, these physical sensations are unconscious, or separated from the controlling will of the subject, 108, "the idea of an *unseen* and *unfelt* space inside the person, that is, a space concealed by the skin and located mostly below the threshold of sensation, is crucial to the emergence of the physical (human) body and, more specifically, to the emergence of that body as an object of expert care." The English word 'world' is connected with the Old and Middle English word 'wer' or 'were', meaning 'man'.

¹⁴³ On Seneca's treatment of the human body in general and his own body in particular, see Edwards 1999 and 2005.

look into the nature of things for this reason. We first come from ignoble origins. Then we will lead the spirit itself, which must be healthy and great, from the body”), it seems we can only do this by confronting the most bluntly physical facts of our own mortality.

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The description of the mullets brings us to the final part of *Natural Questions* 3, which ends with a description of the end of the world (*N.Q.* 3.27-30.8).¹⁴⁴ Water, reduced to a part of human knowledge by this book, will eventually take over, until everything dissolves and becomes it. It should not be forgotten that this is the first book of a multi-book work: the rather extreme closural device of a description of the apocalypse heralds the beginning rather than the ending of the investigation. We are brought back to the question posed earlier this chapter. Why would Seneca choose to begin his work on nature with an investigation into the element which will eventually destroy the universe, and into which everything will ultimately dissolve? Why begin an investigation into the nature of the world with a vivid and extended description of the world’s end?

We have seen that Seneca has shown us that the knowledge which we find beneath the earth is the horrible and potentially dangerous knowledge of our own mortality.

Furthermore, the earth itself is to be thought of as analogous to the human body, albeit on a grand scale. Thus, in accepting our own mortality we also accept the mortality of the entire cosmos.

¹⁴⁴ For the cosmic cycle and conflagration in Stoic thought, see LS 46 A-P, with commentary LS I 277-79; for everlasting recurrence: LS 52 A-H with commentary I 310-313. On this passage see Gauly 2004 235-266, Berno 2012, Williams 2012 110-116.

However, the insistence upon our mortality must be a beginning of sorts, appearing as it does at the beginning of the work. A clue to how this can be is to be found earlier in the book, at *N.Q.* 3.13.1. Seneca declares that the Stoics agree with Thales that everything comes out of water – and then goes on to explain that this is because the Stoics believe that everything comes from fire.¹⁴⁵ Though apparently baffling, this movement points to the fact that in the cycle of the universe, the end of one cycle is the beginning of the next: the world ends in deluge which leads to fire – and from this emerges the universe, young again, and ready to repeat its entire history all over again.¹⁴⁶ The end of the cosmos, therefore, is also a new beginning.

Furthermore, in his description of the world's watery ending, Seneca reminds us that its entire history is not merely foretold but even *contained* in the start: *ab initio eius usque ad exitum quicquid facere pati debeat, inclusum est* (*N.Q.* 3.29.2, “what it must do and experience from the beginning to the end is included in it”). It is the same with a human life: the semen contains not only the beginning, but the entirety of a life: *ut in semine omnis futuri hominis ratio comprehensa est et legem barbae canorumque nondum natus infans habet* (*N.Q.* 3.29.2, “as the whole pattern of the future human is contained in its

¹⁴⁵ In other accounts of Stoic physics, “fire transforms itself into water through the intermediary element air” (Todd 1978 144). Heraclitus, whom the Stoics credited as a major influence, taught that everything came from fire; he also taught the doctrine of constant change, *panta rhei*, so the Senecan emphasis on both monism and mutability is perhaps owed to him. Heraclitus 40 (D. 90): “All things are requital for fire, and fire for all things, as goods for gold and gold for goods.” Kirk 1954 *ad loc.* claims that Heraclitus’ statements on this matter ought to be understood as metaphorical “The assertion that all things are exchanged for fire must have been intended as an *allusion* to Anaximenes’ doctrine [that all things come from water]...

Theophrastus’ mistake [commenting on this passage as if it were a natural scientific pronouncement] ... lies in ignoring the poetic and paradoxical nature of these statements concerning elemental change, and thus treating the mode of expression as irrelevant to the meaning” (1954, 20). See further, Long 1996 35-57.

¹⁴⁶ This is the *ekpurōsis*, an important part of Stoic doctrine. The earliest promulgation of this view is again Heraclitus: XLIIIA: “There is a Great Year, whose winter is a great flood and whose summer is a world conflagration. In these alternating periods the world is now going up in flames, now turning to water. This cycle consists of 10,800 years.” See discussion in Kirk 1954 147-153. *C.f.* Heraclitus 95 for the seed as the beginning and end of a life cycle: “A generation is thirty years, in which time the progenitor has engendered one who engenders. The cycle of life lies in this interval, when nature returns from human seed-time to seed-time.” See Lévy 2003 and Armisen-Marchetti 2006a for the idea of a recurrent cosmic cycle in Seneca. In *Ad Marc.* 26.6 Seneca similarly refers to a deluge preceding the conflagration.

seed, the unborn child has the law of his beard and his grey hair”). When Diogenes Laertius describes the Stoic doctrine of *ekpurōsis*, he claims that the cycles are not merely regulated by god, but god “being the demiurge of the cosmic cycle, in certain periods of time consumes the whole substance into himself and then again brings it forth from himself.”¹⁴⁷ That is, the entire substance of the universe at the moment of the conflagration *is* god (who is conventionally identified with *aether* in Stoic thought).¹⁴⁸

The emphasis on decay and dying throughout Book 3 is a reminder of the Stoic sense that every man is dying as soon as he is born. This fact is inscribed in his body, which slowly succumbs to frailty. Likewise, the earth itself is putrifying, breeding corrupted portents which themselves give way to vice. Death is present everywhere in life.

Whereas at the very beginning of the cosmic cycle, and the beginning of a man’s life, the entirety is contained as a perfect and uncorrupted whole, as soon as life begins, the process of decay sets in. Paradoxically, it is only the very moment of total destruction, of death itself, that escapes this decay.

This is why Seneca had described his life as it came to an end as the end of a day, and how his project could take life from the encroachment of his death: the day dawns anew, and his study of *Naturales Quaestiones* has at its heart that cosmic nature which has death as a crucial part of it. It is only with the death of one generation, the setting of one sun, that life can be preserved: the next generation, the morning sun arise.

Book 3 makes clear an important sense in which the wise man must embrace death. It is not merely for the same reason of the Epicureans, because he must achieve a state of indifference towards the indifferents, among which the fact of whether he lives or dies is numbered (though this is of course also true). It is also because death is the principle by

¹⁴⁷ DL 7.137.

¹⁴⁸ DL 7.139.

which life continues. Truly to embrace life, to accept that one's own current experience of life is a poor and partial alternative to the pure life force which animates the cosmos and transcends the experience of the individual whose corruption is evidenced by his ailing body as much as by his vicious behaviour, is also to embrace one's own death – to accept that one's own death is as much part of the atemporal whole of the universe as anything else, and that it is the condition for the continual arising of new life, in the next generation and the next cycle of the universe.

But of course, this is very difficult for any individual to do. Two different conceptions of life run through *Natural Questions* Book 3. The first is life as single and running out: the human body decays and dies, as Seneca reminds us as he starts the *N.Q.*, and the world is the same, as is brought out throughout Book 3. But paradoxically this conception of life is also associated with the idea of infinity – an infinity which is got not by extending time, but by dividing the time there is into infinitely smaller parts: though he has started late, his spirit, says Seneca, will expand to accommodate the task in hand (*N.Q.* 3.*praef.* 4). This finite life of human experience has its own, intensive, infinity. Writing a book about the universe is a way to cheat death, because it is the creation of pure life.

The second conception of life is as a cycle. The human body, as a part of nature, is subject to cycles and rhythms, which repeat into infinity (a true, extensive, infinity). Indeed, the entire world is, like a body, slowly decaying, and eventually it will turn completely to water, and the universe will be created over again. But though these

cycles may recur infinitely, each individual cycle does definitely end – indeed, Stoic physics decrees that the endings are fixed and may not be deferred.¹⁴⁹

The two conceptions are not at all materially different: they both take their start from the decaying body and world. They are rather two different perspectives on the same matter: the individual's, and the true Cosmic Perspective. The second conception of life is the true one, of course: it is the how nature looks to god. From that perspective death is not an ending but a sublation of all beginnings and ends, and the very principle which underwrites life.

Science writing must aspire to this cosmic perspective, the perspective of god, and of death. This is the point Seneca makes when he exhorts men not to write history (*N.Q.* 3.*praef.* 5). It is not that nature as a subject is more worthy in any moral sense (the acts of the gods are just as great plagues on humanity as are men like Philip and Alexander) – but writing about men will commit one to the temporal perspective of humanity. One must not, as do historians, attempt to preserve human lives or offer compensation for their deaths through *fama*, but see them for what they are: temporary, perishable.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ C.f. the Deleuzian concepts of *aiōn* and *chronos* as set out – and attributed to the Stoics! – in Deleuze 1990, 4-5, 61-64. Deleuze quotes Brehier 1912 11-13 as an authority for his views. As Sellers 2007 points out, elsewhere he relies on Goldschmidt 1953.

Sellers 2007 gives comprehensive accounts of the evidence for early Stoic theory of time and Deleuze's sources, concluding that "there is certainly no evidence to confirm that the theory of *aiōn* and *chronos* made famous by Deleuze was in fact a Stoic theory" (204). But surely Deleuze's labelling of the concepts as Stoic suggests that he came to them after meditation on Stoic material; on the evidence of Book 3, it seems that Seneca came to a similar – though not identical – understanding of time, in the context of thinking about Stoicism. In neither case does this mean that there was an early Stoic doctrine explicitly setting out the same view.

¹⁵⁰ Rosenmeyer 1989 162-3 comments, "Seneca says that it is better to study nature and ethics than to write of the exploits of kings and nations; it is better to study the future rather than the past. The figures upon whom on this occasion he turns his back are Alexander, Philip, and Hannibal. In the tragedies however he trains his sights upon legendary heroes who are cut from the same cloth as Alexander and Hannibal. The truth is that neither in his treatises and letters nor in his dramas does he concern himself with either the future or the past. Both of them come in as auxiliaries to support the principal focus, which is entirely upon the here and now, in the form of either a despotic present or an equally burdensome philosophical

The task of the Stoic is thus to embrace his own death; to see that his death is part of the life cycle, the principle by which life exists. As Williams points out, if only we are able to attain this cosmic perspective, we will see the insignificance of our worldly struggles, our little lives. *N.Q.* 3 begins by taking this task upon itself – by looking at the destruction of the cosmos in all its sublimity. As Williams notes, man's reaction to glimpses of the cosmic viewpoint is stupefaction – it seems to him sublime.¹⁵¹ The catch is that from the position of the living this cosmic perspective, the perspective of death which sees that death is pure life, is difficult to accept, even disgusting.¹⁵²

Seneca shows this. In his description of the apocalypse, he hovers on the lived experienced of human life – *quam longo tempore opus est ut conceptus ad puerperium perduret infans; quantis laboribus tener educatur; quam diligenti nutrimento obnoxium novissime corpus adolescit! at quam nullo negotio solvitur* (*N.Q.* 3.27.2, "how long a

generality. Together they make up an aggregate vision that ties in with every facet of the Stoic scientific tradition."

¹⁵¹ Williams 2012 treats at some length the idea of the sublime in connection with Book 6 of the *N.Q.*, seeing it as an idea developed under Lucretian influence. "We shall monitor this consolatory presence in Book 6 in due course; but a more urgent priority in this chapter is to argue for the fundamental influence of Lucretius on Seneca's treatment of earthquakes. Although important headway in assessing the Lucretian impact on Natural Questions 6 has been made by Arturo De Vivo in particular, our concern here is with an aspect of Lucretian influence less visible in De Vivo's study: Seneca's emulation (or, better, his adaptation) of the Lucretian sublime in his own emboldened approach to nature—an approach that treats phenomena such as earthquakes not with a passive awe and helplessness, but with an active, controlling grasp of all phenomena as normative parts of nature's scheme. Doctrinal difference between Lucretius and Seneca, Epicurean and Stoic, fails to diminish the commonality that we shall observe between them as artists" (Williams 2012 214-5). This sublimity functions just as it did later for the Romantics: it expresses man's remove from nature, but also his place as part of it. See Weiskel's 1976 classic work on the Romantic sublime. For him sublimity occurs when discourse breaks down, and takes place in two modes, "anxiety" and "opposed strategies of resolution"; in the first, metaphorical mode, the breakdown of discourse leads to a subject attaching his own excess of meanings to an object (over-identification), in the second, the metonymic, the subject is unable to attach any meaning at all ('aphasia'). See Sellars 1999 on the Stoics and the Romantics through the prism of Deleuze's thought.

¹⁵² *C.f.* Heraclitus 68: "For god all things are fair and good and just but men have taken some things as unjust, others as just." Kirk 1954 comments, 184, "It is not that the human distinctions cease to have validity – for the only validity they ever had was validity *for men*. The distinction between rest and weariness will recognise this distinction for what it is: an essential feature of the human condition." In a footnote he continues, "It is possible to suppose, on one reading of 52-3 (D. 84), that by contrast to human beings the deity itself, as the all-pervading structure of the world, experiences rest and weariness together, as a single process of constant change. *C.f.* 89: "Death is all things we see awake; all we see asleep is sleep."

time is necessary for the infant to last from conception to childhood; with what great efforts is the tender one raised; with what careful feeding the humble body finally matures! But with how little work it is undone”), unable to resist viewing this life from a lived perspective, rather than the perspective which telescopes it into a single moment.

He cannot denounce history except by imagining himself as Hannibal, a lonely and terrible old man traversing the landscape which has itself become hostile by his presence on it. He is not a historian but a figure from history, already dead, what is more, he is a war criminal whose crimes we must accept as indifferent if we are too attain this cosmic viewpoint. For this is what attaining the cosmic viewpoint is: not only accepting one’s own mortality (accepting it so completely that one might as well be dead), but also accepting that the worst immorality and the most horrific loss of human life is as nothing in the eye of the cosmos, that is, becoming, from the limited human perspective, a monster.¹⁵³ The irreducible fact is that even though generations will spring anew, and the universe will be reborn to expand and contract infinitely, we do die. This dialectic, between the individualistic perspective whereby man’s life seems important and death terrible, and the cosmic viewpoint whereby a man’s life seems to have its place in the grand plan of the universe, is an articulation of the central tension in the discourse of nature.

For a grasp of the Stoic cosmos, man must face this transcendent life-in-death, the point of view of the cosmos. And there are ways it can be brought to our attention: in the death-in-life depicted in tragedy for example, and in scientific investigation. It is not a comfortable experience. The aesthetes at table staring at mullets are fascinated by the changes which come at the moment of death – and Seneca finds himself fascinated too,

¹⁵³ On death in Seneca, a major theme, see especially Ker 2009. On treatments of death as therapy against fear of death, see Nietmann 1966, Caponigri 1968 and Olberding 2008.

despite himself. But the mullet-lovers are disgusting, and they obscenely introduce infinity into the finitude of everyday life – this is the same obscenity of looking underground into never-ending pits, which might sometimes kill you, filled with an infinite supply of water, which eludes proper classification, the same obscenity as writing a book a book about this, the same obscenity as reading it. We are brought to ask whether the disgust we feel at these things is something which would fall away were we truly to embrace the cosmic perspective. The difficulty in wanting to abandon that disgust is what stands in the way of philosophical enlightenment.

Chapter 2.

In the first chapter we saw that the opening book of the *N.Q.* leads philosophy back into the cave whence Plato freed it and there confronts the mortality of not only the human body but the entire world. Acceptance of one's own and others' mortality is a common theme in Stoicism, as in other Hellenistic philosophies. In several works, Seneca confronts mortality in a familiar manner: by drawing on the store of consolatory tropes which Roman popular philosophy had amassed. Seneca wrote three formal consolations, an essay on the brevity of life, and several letters which dwelt on the themes of bereavement and death.¹⁵⁴

In those works he emphasises the uselessness (e.g. *ad Pol.* 2, *Ep.* 99.2), selfishness (e.g. *ad Pol.* 9, *Ep.* 63.2) and unseemliness (e.g. *ad Pol.* 6, 7, *Ep.* 63.1, 12-3, *Ep.* 99.2) of grief. He calls forth *exempla* of those who have borne grief with fortitude (e.g. *ad Marc.* 2-4, 13-16, *Ad Pol.* 14-16, *Ad Helv.* 7-10 12-3, 16), reminds the sufferer of the inconstancy of fortune (e.g. *ad Marc.* 9-11, 23, *ad Pol.* 1, 4, *Ep.* 63.15-6), and suggests that they take consolation in life's other pleasures (e.g. *ad Pol.* 6, 12, *Ep.* 63.11, *ad Helv.* 18) and in pleasant memories (e.g. *ad Pol.* 10, *Ep.* 63.2-3, *Ep.* 99.5). He argues that is

¹⁵⁴The relevant works are the Consolations to his aunt Marcia, to Polybius and to his mother Helvia (the latter on the occasion of his own exile rather than a bereavement) and Letters 63 and 99. *De Brevitate Vitae* and *De Providentia* also contain remarks on how death should be regarded.

On Seneca's consolatory literature see Fantham 2007, Ficca 1999, Ker 2009 Chapter 4, Williams 2006b and Wilson 1997 (on consolation in the Epistles). On consolatory literature in the Roman and Classical traditions, see the essays in Alonso del Real 2001 (edited volume on consolatory literature), Baltussen 2009 (discussion of Plutarch's consolation to his wife), Claassen 1996 (on Dio's imaginary dialogue with Cicero) and 1999 (a history of the consolatory tradition), Erskine 2005 (on Cicero), Graver 2002 (a commentary on Cicero *Tusc.* 3 and 4), Fern 1941 (on consolatory literature in general), Ochs 1993 Chapter 6 (on consolatory literature in general), Wilcox 2005 (on consolation in Cicero's letters), Scourfield 1993 (on Jerome's letter of consolation to Heliodorus). All these provide further bibliography. Hadot's comments in the context of philosophy as "spiritual exercise" are also relevant: 1987 13-15.

On the consolation on exile: Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1999 11-22, Lotito 2001 86-97, Williams 2006b.

the quality not the length of life that matters: we can all “lengthen” our lives by spending more of them truly living, and it is not right to complain about the foreshortening of a friend or family member’s life (e.g. *ad Marc.* 12, 22, *Ep.* 99.11-12, *De Brevitate Vitae passim*).¹⁵⁵ One helpful tactic against grief is meditation upon death: one’s own or that of a family member. By anticipating bereavement in advance one can steel oneself against its sting. This was a familiar piece of Stoic advice.¹⁵⁶ One got used to the idea of death, by introducing it, in thought, into one’s everyday life (e.g. *ad Marc.* 9.1-5).

The Stoic orthodoxy of these consolations varies. At times Seneca seems more concerned to give conventional consolations than philosophical insight (even comforting his aunt with the thought that men may have a happy afterlife, hardly a philosophically rigorous argument: *ad Marc.* 26). Even where there is a grain of Stoic truth, Seneca often takes a moderate position, allowing for example that some grief will be felt at the death of a loved one, but urging restraint in its duration and expression. Yet Stoicism urged the total expurgation of emotion. The mismatch is not particularly surprising. Committing to Stoicism is a long and difficult process and Seneca frequently deems an intermediary compromise position necessary for ultimate progression to the good. And in no matter was a hardline approach more likely to turn off potential beneficiaries of Stoicism than personal bereavement.¹⁵⁷ Seneca’s consolations deployed choice bits of Stoic wisdom to bring around non-Stoics to the acceptance of mortality, and the choosiness of the deployment stands out as a compromise.

¹⁵⁵ See Armisen-Marchetti 1995a.

¹⁵⁶ See Armisen-Marchetti 2008 on the *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* in Seneca, and Newman 1989 for the practice in Imperial Stoicism.

¹⁵⁷ Manning 1974 points out that Seneca’s consolatory strategy of moderating rather than eliminating emotion is Peripatetic (71). In examining why Seneca should have adopted it, he dismisses suggestions that Seneca was philosophically ignorant, that he changed his mind over the course of his career, or that he was simply too weak to commit to Stoicism, and argues instead that it was a practical strategy: the elimination of emotion was not to be expected in the non-philosophically trained bereaved, although moderation “does not represent his final position” (73). As will become clear, I follow his conclusions in this chapter.

Yet paradoxically, still more compromised are Seneca's apparently more orthodox pronouncements on grief. When Seneca attempts a consolation which is more hardline, he scarcely gives the impression of greater philosophical rigour. *Epistle* 99, addressed to Marullus and forwarded to Lucilius, self-defensively abandons tact and browbeats its addressee into seeing his grief for the death of his young son as laughable. As Wilson notes, Seneca's tone seems unreasonable ("[t]he letter is an impassioned attack on a passion," Wilson 1997 66), and is in fact so jarring that it is tempting to read the letter as deliberately exposing the violence inherent in consolation.¹⁵⁸ And despite the harshness of Seneca's tactics in the letter, it nonetheless advocates compromise (for example at *Ep.* 99.16, where Seneca recommends indulging such emotion as comes naturally, but not artificially extending grief).

This chapter explores parts of Seneca's corpus which drive home the fact of man's mortality for the reader. But what makes the pieces discussed herein interesting is the fact that the mention of death seems in these cases not intended to diminish its force, but actually to underscore its horror and pain. I will be asking why Seneca would do this. Is it in contradiction to the comfort he offers the bereaved in his consolations, and indeed to his Stoic convictions more generally?¹⁵⁹ Or is consolation only one Stoic therapeutic approach to death?

This very question was treated in a 2008 article by Olberding. Examining images of violent death throughout Seneca's corpus, she concludes that their philosophical function is to induce the reader to empathise with the sufferer, so that he does not

¹⁵⁸ Wilson makes this point: "Epistle 99 revisits the theme of grief broached in *Epistle* 63 but with this disconcerting departure: it turns back on itself to question the value of some forms of consolation as well" (1997 50).

¹⁵⁹ See my introduction for a general discussion of critical positions on the relationship between Seneca's tragedies and his philosophy.

accept death merely as an abstraction but as something that really will happen to him.¹⁶⁰

As will become clear, I agree with Olberding that Seneca sees complacency as a dangerous potential unintended consequence of consolation, and that the shocking nature of Seneca's imagery works to combat this. My argument here builds on Olberding's in order to identify the position of terror as well as of complacency within Seneca's philosophical framework.¹⁶¹

Acceptance of mortality is a part of the larger project of attaining the viewpoint from which the universe sees itself. An individual's death is absorbed into the grand scheme of things, wherein nothing is ever lost, or gained, but the cosmos merely unfolds in its preordained manner. But insofar as this viewpoint is to be attained through the philosophical study of the cosmos, a paradox is raised, as we saw in the previous chapter. In Book 3 of the *N.Q.*, Seneca concludes that death and even the end of the universe are part of the grander cosmic cycle: from the cosmic viewpoint an individual's life and death has no special place in the whole, and thus the perspective of the individual and the attachment to life ought to be transcended. But he draws this

¹⁶⁰ Olberding 2008 133 and *passim*. She points out that although death was frequently displayed in Roman society, in gladiatorial shows, the nature of display puts a distance between audience and actors which Seneca sought to diminish (134-48).

¹⁶¹ Olberding 2008 argues that in Seneca's Rome "there [was] perhaps no greater ignominy than to admit fear of death" (138) and follows the analysis of Gorer (see Olberding's citation on 138 and her bibliography) on 1950s horror comics in holding that at Rome, death entertainments "operate[d] as a "substitute gratification," a way to manage fear without directly acknowledging it" (139). Olberding compares the public spectacles' "pornography" of death to Seneca's "erotica" of death, the distinction being that the latter "generally ... feature[s] the somatic while simultaneously evoking something of its wider felt significance, an erotica of death entails an acute attention to the sufferings of the body that embeds these in a narrative complexity regarding the subjective distress they engender. Its "pleasure" consists not in abandonment to the physical, but in an enriched connection between the physical and its meanings for the subject. A death erotica is not the enemy of reflection, but its spur, stimulating the imaginative powers of the reader in the direction of her own end by requiring her close regard of the body and its acute fragility" (139). While it is plausible that Seneca's preoccupation with death responds to a repressed fascination in Roman society, *contra* Olberding I argue that Seneca seeks at the same time to uproot death from its placement in his audience's libidinous inner narratives as he embeds it therein. In Olberding's language, I will conclude that Seneca is interested not only in the conversion of libidinal energy into an erotic narrative but also in the surplus desire which cannot be contained in any narrative, but which compels the individual to repeat the erotic narrative again and again, tirelessly.

conclusion from a natural scientific study which, he is at pains to point out, is shaped by his own life and which draws its nourishment from his impending death. His individual existence and perspective is the scientific enquiry's necessary ground.

A similar point is made in Book 6 of the *N.Q.*, the book on earthquakes to which we will return frequently in this chapter. Seneca exalts a particular scientist, Callisthenes, and denounces Alexander the Great for his murder. Of the killing, Seneca says it is Alexander's eternal crime, which no virtue, no success in war, will redeem (*N.Q.* 6.23.2). If anyone should say he killed many thousands of Persians, or King Darius, or that he extended an empire, it will be answered, "and he killed Callisthenes" (*N.Q.* 6.23.3).

On the one hand this attitude is understandable, Alexander's imperial forays may have been great, but they were not good in the Stoic sense, whereas the work of the scientist was at least concerned with the good. And as several commentators have noted, given the circumstances of Seneca's death shortly after this was written, coupled with the vehemence of his condemnation of Alexander, it is difficult to escape the sense that Seneca is thinking of his own position in relation to Nero.¹⁶²

But the sense that the murder is greater than any other venture suggests that it is not being put into perspective, slotted into the grand patchwork which the cosmic viewpoint surveys. This, surely, is flawed from a philosophical perspective. Furthermore, Seneca suggests that it was precisely Callisthenes' martyrdom which demonstrates his philosophical credentials. The value of Callisthenes' genius is bound up in his mortality: his qualifications are as follows: *fuit enim illi nobile ingenium et furibundi regis impatiens* ("for he had a noble nature and did not submit to a wrathful king," *N.Q.* 6.23.2), and the crime of killing him outweighed great imperial ventures.

¹⁶² So Lana 1955 15. For bibliography on the passage see Williams 2006 144 n.32.

As at the beginning of *N.Q.* 3, it is suggested that the authority of the investigator comes from his death. As Seneca approaches death, his task becomes more urgent, and it takes life from his impending end. In just the same way, Callisthenes' investigations are validated by his murder.

Seneca does not merely insist upon death's indifference, but is interested in the point at which the individual is elided, in death, or in philosophical enlightenment. We have already seen how accepting and embracing death as the principle of life is necessary for clear philosophical and scientific vision. Death and knowledge have an intimate relation. This chapter looks more closely at that relation for a clue as to why Seneca sometimes chooses to portray death in ways counter to his consolatory picture of it. Again, we find that the underground is death's domain: the hidden depths where one must seek knowledge both of the world and of the human body, to which the earth is continually analogized. This positioning of death at the heart of life reminds us that death is both a part of the life cycle and its governing principle. The individual who retains his own partial perspective but looks into the *rerum natura* and sees not only what is living, but also the principles which govern life, principles which have more to do with death than with life, is a figure of fascination for Seneca, and seems to have an uncanny vision beyond the grave. The following discussions will look at Seneca's accounts of individuals facing death, and the incursion into their lives of their own mortality.

Thyestes.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ On the *Thyestes* see Hine 1981, Calder 1983, Picone 1984, Tarrant 1985, Giancotti 1988-9, Boyle 1993, Schiesaro 1994, Leigh 1996, Schiesaro 2003, Volk 2006.

In the tragedy *Thyestes* the distinction between the underworld and the world of the living is collapsed by restless ghosts and unspeakable crime. The imagery of the underground, and of earthquakes, is picked up by Seneca in his later prose descriptions, and despite generic differences, the same set of associations persists. The play opens with Tantalus arising from the underworld, called forth by a Fury as a kind of unwilling Muse, to inspire the house to greater misdeeds than his own. Tantalus' crimes are the ultimate source for the house of Atreus, and from the start Seneca emphasises the link between Tantalus' sumptuary punishment, and Atreus' sumptuary crime.

The precise dating of the *Thyestes* is uncertain, though according to Fitch it should be one of the later tragic compositions.¹⁶⁴ The story of the over-weaning king who, mad with jealousy and power, killed his nephews and fed them to their father seems to have been a popular subject among Roman tragedians.¹⁶⁵ In the play, the denizens of the underworld, and later those of the upper world, take on the characteristics of the underworld itself. The closeness of life and death, and their simultaneous rootedness in the earth itself is an important message of the imagery of this play.

In the play's opening lines, Tantalus asks, *quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit | avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?* (*Thy.*1-2, "who dragged me from the accursed lair of the spirits, me snatching at fleeting food with my hungry mouth?"). The first line establishes Tantalus as drawn out of the underworld, the second reminds us of the punishment he suffered there: bound beneath a tree whose fruit dangled before his face, but always receded just out of reach as he tried to take a bite. But in the context of the

¹⁶⁴ See Fitch 1981; his chronology is generally accepted.

¹⁶⁵ Known Roman *Thyestes* plays are by Ennius (*Thyestes*, 169 BCE), Accius (*Atreus*, before 130 BCE), Cassius of Parma (*Thyestes*, 40s or 30s BCE), Varius Rufus (*Thyestes*, 29 BC), Sempronius Gracchus (*Thyestes*, teens BCE), Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus (*Atreus*, before 34 CE), Pomponius Secundus (*Atreus*, before 60 CE), and Curius Maternus (*Thyestes*, sometime in Vespasian's reign). There is also an unreliable attribution of a *Thyestes* to Pacuvius. Erasmo 2004, 179 n.79.

underworld, Tantalus' greedy, gulping mouth reminds us of gaping and swallowing underground chasms. A few lines later, Tantalus asks if a worse punishment has been found than those of Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion, "or the punishments of Tityos, who stretched out in a huge cave, fed black birds from his dug out wounds" (*Thy.* 9-10, *aut poena Tityi, qui specu vasto patens | vulneribus atras pascit effossis aves*). Tityus is depicted as gaping like a cave, his wound (as Fitch translates in his Loeb edition) quarried by birds. Similarly in the first choral ode Tantalus' mouth sounds like a cave, especially given the counterfactual image of birds overhead: *stat lassus vacuo guttere Tantalus. | impendet capiti plurima noxio | Phineis avibus praeda fugacior* (*Thy.* 152-4, "Tantalus stands exhausted with an empty throat. Much bounty hangs over his poisonous head, more fleeting than the Phineian birds").

Conversely, the underworld itself becomes like the unfortunates imprisoned in it, in being afraid (and Tantalus trembles like the ground in an earthquake): Tantalus asks, what new punishment has been found, "which sad Acheron fears, at whose horror we too tremble" (*Thy.* 17-18, *quod maestus Acheron paveat, ad cuius metum | nos quoque tremamus*). Thus, from the start, the identification of the earth with the gulping human body is established, and it will be picked up throughout the play.

Another image from Tantalus, the dead man who has risen from the underground, suggests a different way in which the earth and the human body are implicated: *iam nostra | subit e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus* (*Thy.* 18-19, "now a crowd arises from our root which will defeat its own race"). The mention of rising up from the root brings to mind roots growing into the ground, and the earth as the giver of life. We perhaps imagine men having their birth from the earth, like plants. But that the lines are spoken by a man who has arisen from the earth, a dead man, reminds us how unnatural this image is: humans are not born from the underground (except metaphorically, in that

they emerge from the womb) but they are buried after their death. The idea that humation might be the planting of a seed, and that the dead may rise again, is deeply disturbing; but it suggests too the natural cycle of life – the old die to give way to the young. The natural cycle of regeneration is associated with death.

The image of crime as arising and growing is continued by the Fury who goads Tantalus, resolving the contradictory sense that earth is the place which gives life and place of death (*semper oriatur novum, | nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus, | crescat, Thy.* 30-32, “it arises always new, and not as one replacing another, and while crime is punished, it grows;” these lines are also suggestive of another complex of imagery in the play, that of the constellations). Clearly, the implication of birth and death is important in a play whose principle horror is the father who eats his own children, and so this double valence of the earth seems to reify the perversion of family relations: *fratrem expavescat frater et natum parens | natusque patrem; liberi pereant male, | peiusque tamen nascantur* (*Thy.* 40-42, “may brother fear brother and the parent the child and the child the father; may children die terribly, and yet be worse born”).

In this play, the earth, or even the entire universe, shakes as a sympathetic reaction to the horror of Atreus’ crimes. The house will physically crumble in response to its being undermined by such great impieties: *superbis fratribus regna excidant | repetantque profugos; dubia violentae domus | fortuna reges inter incertos labet* (the Fury, at *Thy.* 32-34, “let kingdoms fall to proud brothers, and may they seek exile; and let the ambivalent fortune of a violent house slide between uncertain kings”). But the earthquake imagery does not merely serve to evoke disaster and loss of stability (though it does this). It also has the very specific effect of suggesting a dissolution of the divide between the world and the underworld. The house is swallowed into the earth, and rumblings within the earth bring the underworld to the surface. The earthquake is the physical manifestation

of the process of this mixing of upper and lower worlds (though in a reversion proper to a world governed by feeling, this mixing is not depicted as caused by earthquake but rather earthquakes seem to occur as a reaction to it, or as a part of a broader depiction of a mixing of realms).

Thus the Fury exhorts Tantalus, *misce penates, odia caedes funera | accerse et imple Tantalo totam domum* (Thy. 52-3, “confound the Penates, summon slaughter with hateful death and fill the whole house with Tantalus”). The idea of filling the house with Tantalus is thematically relevant in that suggests a sense of being filled up by eating, but the incursion of the underworld into the world on the surface is also an unnatural pollution, and the Fury will go on in this speech to talk about pollution of the hearth by blood. The pollution is so horrific that Tantalus begs to be allowed to return to the underworld (*abire in atrum carceris liceat mei | cubile*, Thy. 70-71, “let me go back to the dark chamber of my prison”) asking when he will be able to escape the upper world (*quando continget mihi | effugere superos?* Thy. 82-83).

In the speech wherein Atreus’ murder of his nephews, which is performed as a gruesome sacrifice, is described, the messenger sets the scene as a perverted bucolic *locus amoenus* – a grove next to stagnant swamp (Thy. 641ff). The setting explicitly recalls an underworld scene of the spring in a sad shade and thick black marsh (*fons ... sub umbra tristis et nigra piger ... palude*) the messenger observes, *talis est dirae Stygis* (Thy. 665-666, it is such that of dreadful Styx). Death gods and ghosts seem to walk abroad:

hic nocte caeca gemere ferales deos
fama est, catenis lucus excussis sonat
ululantque manes. quidquid audire est metus

*illic videtur. errat antiquis vetus
emissa bustis turba et insultant loco
maiora notis monstra.*

Thy. 668-673.

Here in blind night, the story goes that the gods of the dead groan, and the grove sounds with rattled chains, and ghosts shriek. Whatever is frightening to hear, there is seen. An old crowd is sent forth from ancient tombs, and greater monsters than we know of leap in that place.

The grove is in a perpetual night – the night of the underworld (*nec dies sedat metum: | nox propria luco est, et superstitio inferum | in luce media regnat*, *Thy.* 677-679, “nor does day settle the fear: the grove has its own night, and the superstition of the dead reigns in the middle of light”). This is a place where oracles are sought (*hinc orantibus | responsa dantur certa, cum ingenti sono | laxantur adyto fata* *Thy.* 679-681, “from here certain responses are given by oracles, and fates are released from the depths”), suggesting that truth does come from within (within the earth, within the bounds of death). Though it is outside, a terrible divine voice echoes as if in a cave (*immugit specus | vocem deo solvente. |* *Thy.* 681-682, “the cave bellows when the god releases his voice”). It is in these uncanny and sinister surroundings that Atreus sacrifices the young princes.

In the grove we see that the earthquake functions both as a sinister portent alongside others (a comet, *Thy.* 698-699, a libation transformed to blood, *Thy.* 700-701) and as a sort of master term: everything shakes (*Thy.* 696-698) and it is precisely this unsteadiness of the world which seems to produce the other portents. The tremor also mimics the shuddering that constitutes a human reaction to the horrors (*exhorrustis?* “do

you shudder?” the messenger asks the Chorus at *Thy.* 744; the Chorus at *Thy.* 829-834 declare, *trepidant, trepidant | pectora magno percussa metu, | ne fatali cuncta ruina | quassata labent | iterumque deos hominesque premat | deforme chaos, | iterum terras et mare cingens | et vaga picti sidera mundi*. “Tremble, tremble do our hearts, struck by a great fear, lest everything collapses shaken by deathly ruin, and again shapeless chaos presses on gods and men, again girding the land and the sea nad the wandering stars of the painted world”). A weeping statue (*flevit in templis ebur, Thy.* 702) looks forward to the broken statue of *N.Q.* 6 (discussed below).

The shaking of the world in an earthquake is imitated on a smaller scale by the organs which Atreus extracts from the bodies of the princes in a perverted version of a sacrificial extispicy. The messenger describes the event at *Thy.* 755-758: *erepta vivis exta pectoribus tremunt | spirantque venae corque adhuc pavidum salit; | at ille fibras tractat ac fata inspicit | et adhuc calentes viscerum venas notat* (“guts town from the living heart tremble, and veins breath and the still shaking heart leaps; but he handles the fibres and inspects the factes and examines the still warm veins of the viscera”). Again, the human body and the earth are made parallel, this time in being subject to tremors from within. Furthermore, the point is made that looking inside the body can bring knowledge of hidden things (in *N.Q.* 3, as we have seen, Seneca will analogise scientific discovery with looking within the earth), and the further point that this looking inside can be horrific (as in a human sacrifice).

Another way that movement inside can bring knowledge is seen at *Thy.* 999-1004. At the banquet Atreus serves for him, Thyestes begins to feel ill, and asks why his innards shake – then calls for his sons (*quis hic tumultus viscera exagitat mea? | quid tremuit intus? sentio impatiens onus | meumque gemitu non meo pectus gemit. | adeste, nati, genitor infelix vocat, | adeste. visis fugiet hic vobis dolor – | unde obloquuntur?* “what is

this tumult which stirs up my viscera? Why do my insides tremble? I feel a burden I cannot bear and my breast groans with a groan not my own. Come here, children, your unhappy father calls, come here. This pain will flee when I see you – where are you hiding?”). Thyestes’ sensing of the truth in his gut before he knows it is analogous to the way the truth can be hidden under the surface in *N.Q.* 3 – and that the way he must bring the truth out is horrible is suggestive for how we ought to view Seneca’s incursions under the surface in that book: *volvuntur intus viscera, et clausum nefas | sine exitu luctatur et quaerit fugam: | da, frater, ensem (sanguinis multum mei | habet ille): ferro libris detur via* (*Thy.* 1041-1044, “viscera are churned within, and shut off, evil struggles with no escape and seeks a way out: brother, give me the sword (it has much of my blood): let a way out be given to my children by the blade”).

The whole world reacts in sympathy with these tremors, in a disturbing version of the pathetic fallacy. The choral ode at *Thy.* 769ff describes the sun turning back in sky because of the underworld’s eruption. In full knowledge of the horror perpetrated by his brother and, unwittingly, by himself, Thyestes makes an address to the Earth, Tellus, asking how she can be still (*Thy.* 1006-1021).

Thyestes’ question at *Thy.* 1007, *sustines tantum nefas | gestare, Tellus?* (“can you stand to bear only evil, Earth?”) reminds us that the earth not only bears these outrages, but has borne them in the sense of giving birth to them, since the earth is the giver of all life. Thyestes feels that such enormities merit a shaking of the earth to its foundations, so that the actors are plunged into the underworld, because it would not be right for the earth to be still on such an occasion (*immota, Tellus, pondus ignacum iaces, Thy.* 1020, “Earth, do you lie motionless, a sluggish weight?”), but also because a plunge into the underworld will put an end to matters (*nosque defossos tege Acheronte toto, Thy.* 1015f, “hide us buried beneath all Acheron”). The point, surely, is that earth is both the

giver of life (in the sense that crops arise from it, and in the metaphorical sense that humans appear from within another human's body), but also the site of the dead – the place wherein bodies are buried and the underworld is situated. The conflation of the beginning and end of human life into one site gives human existence a strange circularity.

Eventually, Thyestes calls for the maker of the universe to bring about its destruction: thunderbolts are too slight a weapon, this total disaster ought to be achieved by an earthquake: *manuque non qua tecta et immeritas domos | telo petis minore, sed qua montium | tergemina moles cecidit et qui montibus | stabant pares Gigantes, hac arma expedi | ignesque torque* (Thy. 1081-1085, “not with that hand by which you seek roofs and undeserving houses with your smaller weapon, but that by which the threefold weight of mountains fell, and the Giants who stood equal to mountains, send forth these weapons, and hurl fires”).

From the shocking images of *Thyestes* we are left with several impressions relevant to our study. The earth is the site of both life and death: from whence crops grow, but wherein corpses are buried, and where the underworld lies. The simultaneity of these two functions suggests both the horrific idea that the dead we bury may not be gone, but might unnaturally return, and the everyday rationalisation of death that the old gives way to the new, and death gives forth new life – so that the latter, comforting, idea is made to seem uncanny and horrible. Similarly, eating and digestion are both nourishing and producers of waste. A man who has given life to children may eat them again; their return to the belly recalls their incubation in their mother's womb, but is also their entombment. The giving of life and its taking away are collapsed so that, again, generation and life seem to have the rot of death at their core.

Thus, through its imagery, the *Thyestes* explores similar issues to the *N.Q.* 3, which finds that the philosopher must adopt the “cosmic viewpoint” from which the death of an individual is revealed to be indifferent and part of the lifecycle, and the destruction of the universe to contain in a pure and uncorrupted form the life-giving *ratio* which will drive its unfolding again. The occurrence of these ideas in a tragic context underscores their disturbing nature. Seneca’s tragedies are often viewed as thought experiments about a world totally given over to vice, but in this instance although the horrors certainly arise because the protagonists pursue the wrong goals, value the wrong things and are in every way completely alienated from the cosmic viewpoint (a point made explicit when Atreus complains that even his great crimes are not enough for him, *Thy.* 1052-67: this constant dissatisfaction is the hallmark of a *stultus*, see, *eg, Ep.* 16.9), but at the same time the cosmic viewpoint itself looks horrifying to the audience: death itself in all its inevitability is terrifying. This second impression is much more difficult to explain on Stoic grounds, but in my conclusion I do suggest one Stoic motivation.

We have seen that in *Thyestes* earthquakes are depicted as events which break down the barrier between the underworld and our own world; thanks to the pathetic fallacy, there is no primacy between the event of the breaking of the barrier and the horrible events which at the same time cause and are caused by it. Later in the chapter, I turn to Seneca’s prose writings on earthquakes, finding echoes of this Thyestean perspective in them. But first I look at a second Senecan tragedy. Whereas the *Thyestes*’ depictions of death seem purely terrible, and thus more difficult to resolve within the bounds of Stoicism, in the *Oedipus* death and its trauma are explicitly associated with knowledge, and so it is here that we can begin to see a positive use for tragic horror.

Oedipus.¹⁶⁶

As we saw at the start of the previous chapter, the *Oedipus* begins with the dawn. The sun rises over a deadly scientific enquiry. Thebes is being ravaged by plague, and King Oedipus surveys “homes desolated by greedy plague” (*Oed.* 4, *auida peste solatas domos*). He must find out what is behind the disease, and how to stop it. As in the *Naturales Quaestiones* it will be seen that this ostensibly objective inquiry actual implicates the inquirer to the extent that he will turn out to be its solution. And as in the *N.Q.* the solution of the mystery also implicates the inquirer’s death: Oedipus will be destroyed by his discoveries.

Oedipus is a man to put his faith in knowledge: the (imagined) etymological association between the king’s name and *oida*, “I know”, is rightly prominent in the scholarship, and his quest for knowledge overshadows the story’s genesis as well as its trajectory: Oedipus became king by solving the Sphinx’s riddle, and the play will track his attempts to discover the truth.

A significant innovation in Seneca’s version of the Sophoclean play is the fact that Oedipus, a blustering do-gooder in Sophocles, is already racked with guilt at the Senecan play’s opening. Not only does he have a survivor’s unease (*quid rear quod ista Cadmeae lues | infesta genti strage tam late edita | mihi parcit uni?* *Oed.* 29-31 “why should I think that that Cadmean plague, a deadly slaughter for people spread so wide, spares me alone?”), but he declares himself the cause of the plague: *fecimus caelum nocens*, (*Oed.* 36 “I have made the sky guilty”). However, though this declaration is

¹⁶⁶ On the *Oedipus* see Mastronarde 1970, Schetter 1972, Costa 1973, Häuptli 1983, Poe 1983, Henry and Walker 1983, Lefèvre 1985, Davis 1991, Mader 1995.

made at the beginning, Oedipus does not act upon or seem really to understand it.

Seneca thus exacerbates the tension between what Oedipus knows and what the audience knows, by having Oedipus himself declare the solution to the mystery at the start, and yet still have to go through all the trouble of understanding it (just as the audience will sit through an Oedipus play despite knowing the ending, or because they know it).

Oedipus sees the devastation as the Sphinx's remains, rising up against the city (*Oed.* 106-108), and he will respond to it in the same way as before; he will use his brains, and back those up by finding out the answer from Apollo, *una iam superest salus | si quam salutis Phoebus ostendit uiam* (*Oed.* 108-109, "now there remains one salvation, if Phoebus should show the way to health"). But there is an ambivalence in how Oedipus seems to connect the plague to the monster. Is his guilt due to the fact he sees the plague as a miasma arising from the monster's body? Later, Oedipus will liken the offspring of his incestuous union to the Sphinx: *fratres sibi ipse genuit: implicitum malum | magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua* (*Oed.* 640-641, "he begat brothers for himself: a tangled evil, and a monster more bound up than his Sphinx"), again associating the Sphinx with *monstra* of his own creation.¹⁶⁷

The plague description itself channels Thucydides, via Lucretius (*D.R.N.* 6), and Ovid (*Met.* 7.589-90, 612). As Boyle notes, "[t]he uselessness of medical, religious, and other help was a theme which opened Thucydides' famous account (2.47.4) and became a commonplace of Roman descriptions of plague:" Lucretius, Virgil, Ovid, Manilius.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Mastronade 1970 300, makes a related point very well: "As with the heavens, the divination-scene, the descriptions of Laius and Tiresias, there is a metaphorical unity of the Sphinx with Oedipus: the monster is simply another manifestation of Oedipus' peculiar *fatum*, of his personality as Seneca reveals it. It is thus with full force that Laius calls the monster "Oedipus' own" in 641: *magisque monstrum Sphinge perplexum sua*."

¹⁶⁸ N. *ad loc.* 69-70.

Here already then is a suggestion that Oedipus' cleverness will not be enough to defeat this disease. The play will dramatize the acquisition of knowledge, but this suffering will not be fought with knowledge. Rather, knowledge will bring more suffering.

Oedipus' inquiry is into the cause of the plague, but it will of course bring him answers only about himself. And the play seems to suggest from the beginning that the answers may be applicable to humankind in general. The Chorus' first ode on the plague gives two stanzas to vivid descriptions of the disease's effects on Thebes' animal population (*Oed.* 133-153): sheep are dying, a bull dies at the altar before the priest can strike it, a racehorse dies midrace, throwing off its rider, the flocks die in the field along with the herdsman, the wolf, lion, bear, and snake are no longer fearsome. The images are striking, but an emphasis on simple expiration rather than particular symptoms of the plague give the passage the air of a meditation on mortality: ever renewing hordes of the newly dead crowding the banks of the Styx (*Oed.* 160ff) do not appear only in an epidemic. A reading of the plague which in terms of a metaphorical rendering of human mortality and its inevitability is backed up by evocation of Lucretius' description of the plague, which has precisely this purpose. A general study of dying fits the context of a hymn to Bacchus, a god associated with the life cycle, particularly in his guise of Dionysus, the mystery god who could assure devotees safe passage to the beyond. That we are encouraged to see Bacchus in such an aspect is suggested too by Tiresias' exhortation to the Chorus before the raising of Laius: *dum nos profundae claustra laxamus Stygis, | populare Bacchi laudibus carmen sonet* (*Oed.* 401-2, "while we release the gates of deep Styx, let a common song sound with praises of Bacchus").

The play is filled with language and imagery which evoke the life cycle and the cosmic cycle, the context in which, as we have seen, death and life become one. But the imagery of recurrence and return also refer to Oedipus' crime of incest. The

characterisation of incest as a reversion through the generations recurs throughout the play: Creon reports the oracle, *tecum bella geres, natis quoque bella relinques, | turpis maternos iterum reuolutus in ortus* (Oed. 237-238, “you wage war with yourself, and you leave war for your children, turned back again shamefully to your maternal origin”), Oedipus describes his action – *utero rursus infausto gravis, | egitque in ortus semet et matri impios | fetus regressit, quique vis mos est feris, | fratres sibi ipse genuit* (Oed. 637-640, “again heavy in an accursed womb, he led himself back whence he arose and returned impious offspring to his mother, and with that violence that is customary for beasts, he himself sired his own brothers”). The verb *vertere* is associated with incest when Creon quotes Laius’ threats: *incestam domum | uertam* (“I will overturn this incestuous house,” Oed. 645-646). On discovering the truth, Oedipus describes the situation thus: *retro reuersas generis ac stirpis uices* (Oed. 870, “the ways of birth and ancestry are turned back”).

Incest is cast as a reversion *against nature*, something which forces nature to disobey its laws. In the heavily allegorical extispicy,¹⁶⁹ among the many disturbing portents which signify the perversion of the circumstances, Manto observes that when the bull is struck, *uersus retro | per ora multus sanguis atque oculos redit* (Oed. 349-350, “turned back, much blood returns through mouth and eyes”), and shortly after, on seeing an embryonic heifer out of place inside its mother, who has never mated, utters the famous line, *Natura uersa est; nulla lex utero manet* (Oed. 371, “nature is upturned; no law remains for the womb”).

Also related to the idea of return is a vocabulary of turning, associated with the words *uertere* and *uoluere*. These too tend to reinforce the sense of an unnatural return or *perversion* of the natural order of things. Creon reports Tiresias’ actions, *carmenque*

¹⁶⁹ Davis 1991 treats the allegorical features of the ritual comprehensively.

magicum uoluit (Oed. 561, “and he turned a magic spell”), and Laius’ threat: *incestam domum | uertam* (Oed. 645-646, “I shall upturn and incestuous house”). Throughout the play, the act of returning is disavowed, and yet it occurs nonetheless: Jocasta declares, *haud est virile terga Fortunae dare* (Oed. 86, “it is not manly to turn one’s back to Fortune”). Oedipus explains why he cannot return home: *repetam paterna regna, sed matrem horreo* (Oed. 794, “I would seek my father’s kingdoms, but I shrink from my mother”). But the suggestion that he has already killed his father causes his mind to return in any case, *curas reuoluit animus et repetit metus* (Oed. 764, “the mind turns over its cares again and seeks again its fears”). And when he finally puts out his eyes, the action is described with cognates of *uoluere*: *scrutatur auidus manibus uncis lumina, | radice ab ima funditus uulsos simul | euoluit orbes* (Oed. 965-967, “Greedily he seeks out his eyes with clawed hands, and having dug to the deepest root at the same time he scoops out the gouged orbs”).

The sense of the immanence of repetition in nature is not discarded when Oedipus learns the truth. He describes himself as the *saeculi crimen* (Oed. 875, “shame of the age”), evoking the idea of ages arranged in a cycle, and perhaps too the Stoic universe, working its way towards destruction, in order to begin again (this idea is suggested too by Oedipus’ wish that he could be reborn and punished over and over again, Oed. 943-947). At Oed. 745-746, after the extispicy, whose allegorical significance spells out the connection between Oedipus’ uncleanness and the wretched fate of his children, the Chorus describes the original struggle of the *Spartoi* of Thebes, and *genetrixque suo reddi gremio | modo productos uidit alumnus* (“and the mother saw the children she had just brought forth returned to her lap”). Here again, return is figured as part of the life cycle. The imagistic association of the natural life cycle with unnatural reversion might be seen as a consequence of *sympatheia*, the harmonious universe’s reflection of every

event in all its parts. Such is nature's revulsion against Oedipus' sexual reversion that the normal life cycle is tainted by association.

More than triggering a blurring of the natural cycle of life and unnatural reversion of natural processes, the imagery of generational reversion establishes turning back as a characteristic motion of the play, even as Oedipus presses forward with his investigation. The paradoxical nature of this simultaneous forward and backward movement is brought out by another complex of language, surrounding the word *novus*. Oedipus complains that his incest has brought 'new births;' as Pratt observes, he is thereby depicted as a *monstrum*, associated with phenomena never before seen. The plague is described in a series of disjointed images: *semper novis | deflenda lacrimis funera* (Oed. 32-33 "always new, deaths to be wept with tears"), *luctu in ipso luctus exoritur novus* (Oed. 62, "a new grief arises into the same grief"), and the Chorus have a vision of the underworld, *ducitur semper noua pompa Morti* (Oed. 126, "an always new parade of Death is led"), before lamenting the disease, *o dira novi facies leti | gravior leto* (Oed. 180-181, "oh dreadful face of new death, heavier than death"). The word *novus* in these cases is imbued with a sense of repetition: "always new."

But as the play goes on, the word *novus* acquires a punning association with *novi*, I know: this is seen most clearly at Oed. 914, when Oedipus tells the Messenger, *ede quid portes novi*: "tell us what news you bring," or, "speak – what you bring, I know." The transformation of the 'new' into the 'known' as the play progresses does not come as a shock, given the prior sense of *novus* as the latest in a repeating series and the present perfect formation of *novi*. It is a powerful expression of the confusion into which the play throws origins and outcomes, causes and effects.

This elegant encapsulation of the forward movement which throws the mover back suggests that the forward drive of fate in the *Oedipus* is so strong that it is forced beyond the logical end point, the completion of the inevitable action. Fated actions are treated as so inevitable that they cannot be finished: the end of a movement forward is not completion, but a throwing back to the beginning, so that it can move forward all over again. This immanence of repetition in fate is inherent to the story: Oedipus fulfills the prophesy through taking action to avoid it; Seneca even inserts another prophesy scene (*Oed.* 291-402) into his play for the truth to be revealed gruesomely onstage, then ignored again;¹⁷⁰ Oedipus tells us at the beginning of the play that he knows he is responsible, then takes the rest of the play to find it out; Seneca rewrites the *Oedipus*.

This facet of the fated is expressed too in Oedipus' words at *Oed.* 943-947. Oedipus considers his crime so enormous that not only his punishment ought to be repeated, but his entire life (he cries, *novos | commenta partus, supplicis eadem meis | novetur. renasci semper ut totiens nova | supplicia pendas*, "let that same nature which found new births be renewed again for my punishment. Always to be reborn so that you may suffer as many new punishments"). But though Oedipus wishes for infinite repetition, he accepts that it is not an option for him. He settles for its opposite, or at least, an attribute of action which he declares to be mutually incompatible with repetition, but which is an acceptable substitute for it: *quod saepe fieri non potest fiat diu. | mors eligatur longa. quaeratur via | qua nec sepultis mixtus et vivis tamen | exemptus erres* (*Oed.* 948-51, "let what cannot often happen happen for a long time. A long death may be chosen. A road sought by which you may wander not mixed with the dead and yet exempt from the living"). Oedipus envisions a conclusion to the affair which is no conclusion: a long death, a road away from the living which does not quite reach the dead. At the end of

¹⁷⁰ On the metadramatic valence of the extispicy scene, see Schiesaro 2003 93-8.

the play, Oedipus slinks off somewhere between life and death looking remarkably as he did at its opening – an exile (*quam bene parentis sceptrum Polybi fugeram! | curis solutus exul intrepidus vagans – | caelum deosque testor – in regnum incidi*, Oed. 12-14, “how well I have fled the sceptres of my father Polybius! An exile released from cares wandering unafraid – I call the sky and the gods to witness – I happened upon a kingdom”).

Never reaching the conclusion of a life or a narrative is just as effective a way of keeping experience and suffering alive as an infinite repetition. Thus, the sense of hesitation which recurs throughout the play achieves the same end as the language of repetition, even as it militates against it. The mutual incompatibility of the two movements underscore the horrific impossibility of the situation. The striking symmetry with the start of the play suggests both that Oedipus has achieved his desire to have his experiences repeated infinitely, thus depriving the story of closure, *and* employs a standard literary device precisely for achieving closure. Indeed, the play’s ring composition is marked in its imagery: at the start of the play, Oedipus sees kingly power, metonymised with himself, as a rock, dividing the seas, and lashed by them: *ut alta ventos semper excipiunt iuga | rupemque saxis vasta dirimentem freta | quamuis quieti verberat fluctus maris, imperia sic excelsa Fortuna obiacent* (Oed. 8-11, “as high crags always receive the winds, and a cliff dividing the vast sea with rocks”). By the end, he is praying for the seas to separate him from his mother-wife: *dividat vastum mare | dirimatque tellus abdita* (Oed. 1015-1016, “let the wide sea divide and remote land separate”).

Discovery appears as a kind of memory in Seneca’s *Oedipus*. The uncertainty and hesitation of memory itself, noted by Oedipus (*redit memoria tenue per uestigium*, Oed. 768, “memory returns hesitantly in traces”), the old Corinthian slave (*adridet animo forma. nec notus satis, | nec rursus iste vultus ignotus mii*, Oed. 841-842, “the form

smiles on my mind. But it is not known enough, nor is that face again known to me”), and Phorbas (*dubitat anceps memoria*, *Oed.* 847, “doubtful memory hesitates”), remind us that one can never *have remembered*, without still *remembering*, unless having remembered is a synonym for having forgotten. The present perfect *novi* expresses another version of this idea: to know is always also to have known.

Oedipus *solves* the mystery of his birth, with an emphasis on the word’s etymological sense of loosening. The verb *solvere* recurs. It is used at times in a negative sense, for the dissolution of familiar structures and institutions: at *Oed.* 527, Oedipus declares, *imperia solvit qui tacet iussus loqui*, (he dissolves power who is silent when ordered to talk”) at *Oed.* 942, the Messenger, *solvenda non est illa quae leges ratas* (“that thing may not be dissolved which the laws have devised”), referring to the laws of nature. But a loosened state is also depicted as a relief, as when Oedipus describes his self-imposed exile from the house of Polybus, *curis solutus* (*Oed.* 13, “released from cares”), Creon describes his emancipation from the weight of power, *solutus onere regio regni boni*, | *fruor domusque ciuium coetu uiget* (*Oed.* 687-688, “released from the kingly burden, I enjoy kingly advantage and my home flourishes in the visits of citizens”), or Oedipus claims he has paid his dues to his father, *iusta persolui patri* (*Oed.* 998). And it evokes the untying of knots. Early on, the Sphinx is figured as a tier of knots (*nec Sphinga caecis verba nectentem modis* | *fugi*, *Oed.* 92-93, “I did not flee the Sphinx tying words in dark ways”), Oedipus as the untier, (*nodosa sortis vera et implexos dolos* | *ac triste carmen alitis solui ferae*, “I solved true knots of fate and implicated griefs and the sad riddle of the pitiless beast,” *Oed.* 101-102). Oedipus demands of Tiresias, *responsa solue* (“explain the responses,” *Oed.* 291). The problem, ultimately, is suffering, destruction, death: death itself is described in the same terms as a Sphinx, (*mors atra avidos oris hiatus* | *pandit et omnis explicat alas*, “black death gaping with greedy jaws

and unfurls all its wings,” *Oed.* 165-166): it poses a question. The nexus of meanings of *solvere*, solution to a problem, destructive dissolution, and liberation, impose a distinct sense on the outcome of the play, construing this solution (also likened to the untying of a knot, e.g. *Oed.* 773, *unanima coniunx, explica errores, precor*, “wife of one mind with me, explain these mistakes, I pray”) as both a destructive undoing but also a welcome release.

The process of *solving* a problem, achieving knowledge, is figured as the same as the dissolution that occurs in death and destruction. Knowledge is a process of simplification, a decomposing of things to their elements. And the knowledge Oedipus gains is not so much the information that he has committed patricide and incest, but a brute pain which induces an annihilation of a sense of self, so that he only suffers rather than exists.

Death and knowledge go hand in hand in *Oedipus*. Death is also found in the repetition which pervades the play, a repetition which by its association with the cycle of generations is also deemed to be the principle of life. The solution of the *Oedipus* seems to be that death and life are the same thing, viewed from different perspectives. Knowledge of this is cannot be assimilated into all the other things a man knows, but means becoming a living dead man, embracing fully the unity of life and death.

Interestingly, Seneca occasionally describes wisdom as being like this kind of death-in-life:

'Qualis tamen futura est vita sapientis, si sine amicis relinquatur in custodiam coniectus vel in aliqua gente aliena destitutus vel in navigatione longa retentus aut in desertum litus eiectus?' Qualis est Iovis, cum resoluta mundo et dis in

unum confusis paulisper cessante natura acquiescit sibi cogitationibus suis traditus. Tale quiddam sapiens facit: in se reconditur, secum est.

Ep. 9.16

‘What sort of life will there be for a wise man if he is left without friends and thrown into prison or abandoned among some foreign race or held back on a long voyage or cast out onto a desert shore?’ It will be as the life of Zeus, when the world has been dissolved and the gods have been blended into one, when nature comes to a stop for a while, he reposes into himself given over to his thoughts. The wise man’s behavior is just like this: he retires into himself, he is with himself.

*

In these two tragedies, we see that Seneca is willing to exploit the closeness of death to life, in the life cycle, and the sympathy of man with the universe, in the sense that his body is like an earth in miniature, for their horrific potential. Certainly, the intent of Seneca’s prose works (educational), and that of the tragedies (titillating), should not be conflated. These are two (or more) very different modes. But the recurrence of the same theme, the deep implication of life and death, in connection with similar imagery (the underground, the cycle of generations), in both the *Naturales Quaestiones* and the two tragedies examined points at least to that theme’s general significance.

It is worth asking then, how ought we to process the potential for fear and horror of this apparently central philosophical idea (so it is reasonable to assume from its

foregrounding in the *N.Q.*). And how can this reaction be turned into the philosophical learning which we are *supposed* to gain by looking under the surface of things? To answer this, I turn to some gentler, albeit not always less deadly, treatments of eruptions of the underground into our upper world, in the Letters and in the rest of the *N.Q.*

*

In Letter 49¹⁷¹ of the *Epistulae Morales*, Seneca writes that visiting Pompeii caused him to recall his dear friend Lucilius. He describes how buried memories are roused as if from the dead – they are not dead, though they may call to mind a dead person:

Est quidem, mi Lucili, supinus et neglegens qui in amici memoriam ab aliqua regione admonitus reducitur; tamen repositum in animo nostro desiderium loca interdum familiaria evocant, nec extinctam memoriam reddunt sed quiescentem irritant, sicut dolorem lugentium, etiam si mitigatus est tempore, aut servulus familiaris amisso aut vestis aut domus renovat.

Ep. 49.1

Yet sometimes familiar places call forth the desire lodged in our mind, and do not return a dead memory, but rouse one that is sleeping, just as the slave of a dead friend, or his clothes, or his house, renews the pain of mourning, even if it has been tempered by time.

¹⁷¹ There are no commentaries covering Letter 49, or articles dedicated to it.

This sense that the earth itself might contain memories of the dead is a gentler teasing out of the implications of burying the dead in the earth, and imagining that their spirits reside underground. It continues the association of the earth itself with a human body in a correspondingly subtle way: by implication, memories had not only been buried in the earth, but in the mind of a person who recalls them.

In Letter 70¹⁷² Seneca returns to Pompeii (*tuos Pompeios*) and more memories are stirred: *in conspectum adolescentiae meae reductus sum* (*Ep.* 70.1, “I returned to the sight of my adolescence”). Pompeii is Lucilius’ presumably because he is from there – but visiting brings up for Seneca the buried memories of his own youth. For, Seneca says, we do bury the times of our life: *sic in hoc cursu rapidissimi temporis primum pueritiam abscondimus, diende adolescentiam, deinde quicquid est illud inter iuvenem et senem medium in utriusque confinio positum, deinde ipsius senectutis optimos annos* (*Ep.* 70.1, “thus in this passing of most swift time we bury first our childhood, then our adolescence, then whatever there is between youth and old age, placed in the confines between both, then those best years of our old age”).

And at the start of Book 6 of the *Natural Questions* we are reminded just why Pompeii is such a *stirring* place:¹⁷³

Pompeios, celebrem Campaniae urbem, in quam ab altera parte Surrentinum Stabianumque litus, ab altera Herculaneum conveniunt et mare ex aperto reductum amoeno sinu cingunt, consedisae terrae motu, vexatis quaecumque adiacebant regionibus, Lucili, virorum optime, audivimus, et quidem hibernis diebus, quos vacare a tali periculo maiores nostri solebant promittere.

¹⁷² For Letter 70 see Maurach 1970 146-7, Evenepoel 2004, Scarpato 2007 and Olberding 2008.

¹⁷³ Book 6 bibliography: Stahl 1960 101-112, Gross 1989 238-274, Waiblinger 1977 79-90 (discussion of Books 6 and 7), Berno 2003a 239-290, Berno 2006, Limburg 2007 299-338, Williams 2006, Williams 2012 213-257, De Vivo 2012.

We have heard that Pompeii, the famous city of Campania, where the shores of Surrentum and Stabiae, on the one side, and those of Herculaneum, on the other, meet and which is drawn back from the open sea and girded by a pleasant bay, has sunk by a movement of the earth, and what regions lay adjacent troubled too, Lucilius, best of men, and indeed in those winter days which our ancestors used to promise to be free of such a danger.¹⁷⁴

It is appropriate that a town in an earthquake zone (the above-mentioned earthquake helps us date both the letters and the Natural Questions), the burning fields (*campi Phlegraei*), should bring to the surface what had been buried, including memories. Pompeii not only has strong associations for Seneca of his own youth and of his friend Lucilius, but it has its own robustly physical manner of bringing these to the surface. Although, as it seems from Seneca's prose, even the earthquake itself is immediately subsumed once again into that buried past, recounted as it is in an annalistic style: *nonis Februarii hic fuit motus Regulo et Verginio consulibus...* (N.Q. 6.1.2, "on the nones of February, in the consulship of Regulus and Verginio, there was this quake...").¹⁷⁵

And in the passage of the N.Q., the past stirred up by the earthquake is not a personal memory, but the shared memory of *maiores nostri*. The sense is that the earth contains not only particular valences from Seneca's own life, as in the letters, but is also a repository for all dead forebears. But the *maiores* have been recalled only insofar as their views have in fact been refuted by the occurrence of the disaster in winter. The precise identity of these *maiores* is left unspecified: is Seneca referring to a folk wisdom

¹⁷⁴ Ker 2009 107 notes that this sentence is structured to make the *terrae motu* the centre, with its effects radiating out from it.

¹⁷⁵ See Berno 2003a 240 n. 3 for bibliographic references for the earthquake of 63 C.E..

on earthquakes, or to authorities like Aristotle who have produced works on earthquakes, his scientific predecessors?¹⁷⁶ In any case, we see that this movement of the earth has taken away the ground from beneath our feet – the authorities (whether they be cultural or technical), on whom we ground our lives and our understanding, are no longer to be trusted.

But Seneca begins Letter 49 by chastising himself for being so lazy as to allow the vision of a landscape to stir up memories in that way: really he ought to have done it himself. As we have seen, in Book 3 of *N.Q.*, and throughout, scientific enquiry is depicted as a digging. Truth is buried beneath the surface, and one can hardly wait around for an earthquake to dredge it conveniently up.¹⁷⁷ And *N.Q.* Book 6, too, presents an investigation which will involve uprooting the past in some sense. In fact that is its appeal:

*quorum adeo est mihi dulcis inspectio ut, quamvis aliquando de motu terrarum
volumen iuvenis ediderim, tamen temptare me voluerim et experiri aetas aliquid
nobis aut ad scientiam aut certe ad diligentiam adiecerit*

N.Q. 6.4.2

So sweet is the investigation of these things to me that, although I published at one time a book on earthquakes when I was a young man, nevertheless I wanted

¹⁷⁶ In *Ep.* 54.3 Seneca refers to philosophical antecedents as *maiores*; Pliny 2.195 shows that Seneca's contemporaries retained the erroneous belief that earthquakes do not strike in winter.

¹⁷⁷ See Seneca's lament at the end of *N.Q.* 7: *Philosophiae nulla cura est. Itaque adeo nihil invenitur ex his quae parum investigate antiquae reliquerunt ut multa quae inventa errant oblitterentur. At mehercule, si hoc totis mebris premeremus, si in hoc iuventus sobria incumbere, hoc maiores docerent, hoc minores addicerent, vix ad fundum veniretur in quo veritas posita est, quam nunc in summa terra et levi manu quaerimus.* (*N.Q.* 7.32.4). "There is no interest in philosophy. Accordingly so little is found out from those subjects which the ancients left partially investigated that many things which were discovered are being forgotten. But, by Hercules, if we applied ourselves to this with all our might – if youth soberly applied itself to it, if the elders taught it and the younger generation learned it – we would scarcely reach to the bottom where truth is located, which we now seek on the surface of the earth and with slack effort."

to test myself, and find out whether age has added something to me either in terms of knowledge or certainly in terms of diligence.

Earthquakes bring up a personal memory for Seneca because he wrote a book on them in his youth: looking back on his old ideas, and testing them, will be sweet, *dulcis*.

Seneca lives in hope that age might have added something to him: in effect, he hopes to have one over his former self, in the same way that current thinking on earthquakes bests that of *maiores nostri*.

For before he begins to expound the old lore, Seneca feels he must explain that the old conjectures were rather inexact and simple (N.Q. 6.5.2, *opinionones veteres parum exactas esse et rudes*). We might detect a kind of Oedipal delight in this: the old must be taken with a pinch of salt (N.Q. 6.5.3, *cum excusatione itaque veteres audiendi sunt*). But the hostility is not really directed at the past, but at the part of the self which is lodged in the past (this particular set of *veteres* includes the early work of the *senex* Seneca). For, Seneca says, despite the short-comings of these old theories, any discovery we make should nevertheless be considered to have been dredged up by us from our forebears (N.Q. 6.5.3, *si quid inventum est, illis nihilominus referri debet acceptum*): all that remains is to brush the dirt off it (N.Q. 6.5.3, *postea eadem illa limata sunt*). The predecessors whom we have buried and whose ideas we have improved on return and are exhumed. Every seeming innovation is really just the robbing of a deeper grave.

However much has been done, every age will nevertheless *discover* (rather than *invent*) something else to do (N.Q. 6.5.3, *etiam cum multum actum erit, omnis tamen aetas quod agat inveniet*). The beginnings are always far from the finished product (N.Q.

6.5.3, *longe semper a perfecto fuere principia*), yet they are never lost (after all, we must listen to our elders, *veteres audiendi sunt*).

In all the cases cited above, the underground represents a past which is dead but not gone, and is waiting to be discovered. Digging underground in those passages does not confront one with the principle of death as the driver of new life – but with death as it appears in this life, an accumulated set of memories. Looking into the underground provokes a man into thoughtfulness but does not precipitate the radical change in consciousness that a shift from the personal to the cosmic perspective would entail. This thoughtfulness is necessary for philosophical enquiry, and it is a much more familiar and humane mode than the total abandonment of the human perspective, but it is not the end of philosophical enquiry.

A new scientific study is itself an earthquake. It shakes and forces out buried truths – *quorum ut causas **excutiamus**, et propositi operis contextus **exigit** et ipse in hoc tempus congruens casus* (N.Q. 6.1.3, “that we shake out the causes of these things, both the shape of my proposed work and the coincidental disaster in this time demand”) – not producing anything new, but shaking up buried knowledge, and rocking the foundations of what we think we know. The power of being able to control this shaking up of the past to bring new knowledge to the surface is not to be underestimated. The investigator is like a cult member, discovering the mysteries: if he has the right attitude, though human, he will have an insight into the hidden and the divine, without losing sight of his own mortality, he glimpses what is eternal.

magni animi res fuit rerum naturae latebras dimovere nec contentum exteriore eius aspectu introspicere et in deorum secreta descendere. Plurimum ad inveniendum contulit qui speravit posse reperiri.

It is the affair of a great mind to move aside the secret hiding places of the nature of things and not content with its external appearance to look inside and descend to the hidden places of the gods. He deems there more to be discovered who expects to be able to find.

Thus the investigator into the earth places himself in a relationship with the *maiores* who have made similar studies which is both antagonistic and Oedipal (he betters their outdated ideas) and dependent (all his ideas are really just their ideas, dredged up and dusted off). Knowledge is of the past, and the past is buried beneath the earth: it is dead, but it can be shaken out and brought to the surface, affecting the living like a ghost walking abroad.

That the intensity and unsettledness of Seneca's relationship with his scientific predecessors is fuelled by an association of the underground with the underworld is demonstrated by a passage in *N.Q.* 5, which describes a historical instance of men investigating the earth by actually going down into it, and developing a similar relationship with their forebears.¹⁷⁸ Seneca tells a story about Philip of Macedon's sending of his men into an underground mine. The mission is explicitly staged as an investigation into grievances suspected to have been committed by previous generations against the living: they set off *ut explorarent quae ubertas eius esset, quis status, an aliquid futuris reliquisset vetus avaritia* (*N.Q.* 5.15.1, "in order that they might find out what riches it had, what condition, whether ancient greed had left something for future

¹⁷⁸ On Book 5 see Waiblinger 1977 74-79, De Vivo 1989, Gross 1989 202-237, Berno 2003a 179-108, Williams 2005b and Williams 2012 171-212.

generations”).¹⁷⁹ As in parts of Book 3, where gold and minerals underground are like the filthy mucus hidden within a human body, in this passage, the underground is again clearly linked with men’s baser desires.¹⁸⁰

Seneca’s description of Philip’s men’s initial reaction to the underground scene is revealing. After a long journey they saw – not without horror – huge rivers and vast stretches of water, equal to ours on the surface. (*N.Q.* 5.15.1, *deinde longa via fatigatos vidisse flumina ingentia et conceptus aquarum inertium vastos, pares nostris ... non sine horrore visos*).¹⁸¹

The sight of these enormous waters underground produces a feeling of horror in the men because they see a world equal to their own but which is not theirs. The illegitimate attempt of these ancients to take control of what is underground in a mercantile fashion suggests that man cannot bear to have a part of nature which is not his, but going down there only forces him to face the full extent of his alienation from nature. But the landscape only becomes horrible because the men lose their humanity in attempting to appropriate it for their own.

¹⁷⁹ The philosophical and scientific search for hidden things beneath the surface is elsewhere associated with profit: at *N.Q.* 6.4.2 Seneca asks, *quod, inquis, erit pretium operae?* The opus in question is the *Natural Questions* itself, and the answer is clear: *Quo nullum maius est, nosse naturam*. Similarly, a little earlier, he has declared that nothing can be found worthier than a subject to which the mind not only lends itself but spends itself (*neque enim illo quicquam inveniri dignius potest cui se non tantum commodet, sed impendat*, *N.Q.* 6.3.4). Heraclitus used the metaphor of gold-mining in a similar way: Χρυσὸν οἱ διζήμενοι γῆν πολλὴν ὀρύσσουσι καὶ εὕρισκousi ὀλίγον, “Seekers of gold dig up much earth and find little,” Heraclitus VIII. Kirk 1954 105 comments that fragments VII-X (all on seeking) “recognise that the truth, the characteristic nature of things (φύσις), the prize of wisdom hunted by philosophical goldseekers, is not simply there for the taking.”

¹⁸⁰ Mining was a popular *topos* in the moralising discourse of the early empire. See Pliny *HN* 33.1, 34.166ff, Silius Italicus 1.231-3. See Beagon 1992 40 n. 37 for legal restrictions on mining (Pliny *HN* 33.78, *c.f.* 37.202). Sen *Ep.* 90.44: Even if the men of previous ages were not perfect, at least they searched not in the lowest dregs of the earth for gold. Even before Philip, men followed money into the deepest hiding places (*in altissimis usque latebris*, *N.Q.* 5.15.3).

¹⁸¹ For further discussion of this passage, see Williams 2005 419-422. Williams notes the evocation of a mythological underworld here, and the interplay of scientific discovery, ancestral inheritance, greed and vice in the passage’s imagery.

Philip's men descended to caves in which there was distinction between night and day (N.Q. 5.15.3, *specus in quos nullum perveniret noctium dierumque discrimen*). A perpetual darkness suggests death, but that is not the only association it has here. The rhythm of day and night regulates human existence. In abandoning to themselves to a realm devoid of this, the men lose their humanity: *hominem ad sidera erectum incurvavit et defodit* (N.Q. 5.15.3, "man, normally erect to the stars, was bent over and buried").

The members of the expedition became a sort of disgusting underground animal – crawling (*reptavit*) through warrens (*cuniculos*) amongst filthy wealth, forgetful of the day, forgetful of the better things of nature (N.Q. 5.15.4). This degradation to the level of animals is compared in turn to death: *ulli ergo mortuo terra tam gravis est quam istis supra quos avaritia ingens terrarum pondus iniecit, quibus abstulit caelum, quos in imo, ubi illud malum virus latitat, infodit?* (N.Q. 5.15.4, "so is the earth so heavy on any dead man as those upon whom great greed casts the weight of lands, from whom it steals the sky, whom it buries in the depths, where that great poison hides"). The earth, Seneca implies, lies heavier on those seeking profit in it, than on the dead.

As in Book 3, the underground itself looks like traditional depictions of the underworld, all sluggish rivers and sinister winds:

*illo descendere ausi sunt ubi novam rerum positionem, terrarum pendentium
habitus ventosque per caecum inanes experirentur et aquarum nulli fluentium
horridos fontes et alteram perpetuamque noctem; deinde, cum ista fecerunt,
infernus metuunt!*

N.Q. 5.15.4

They dared to descend to there where they, idiots, experienced a new state of things, conditions of hanging lands and winds through the darkness, and horrible

springs of water flowing nowhere, and a new and constant night; then, when they have done these things, they are scared of the dead!

Seneca mocks the men for fearing ghosts because in voluntarily having entered an underworld and foregone their humanity in search of base profit, they have already given up what is valuable in life, and embraced aspects of death. The men trembling at the sinister aspect of the environment into which they have stumbled do not realise that they themselves are the listless wraiths haunting it. This can also function as a comment on the men's actions with respect to their forebears. They are committing the crime they resentfully imputed to their ancestors – plundering the earth and leaving nothing for future generations. This is a more sinister, more pessimistic sense of the phenomenon which Seneca has described in the context of scientific investigation, whereby investigators into the earth end up repeating the investigations of their predecessors, even as they aim, antagonistically, to do better than them. The anecdote thus does not only illustrate the viciousness of pursuing wealth, but also the unhealthiness of man's relationship with his forebears, at least when he is governed by vice. The imagistic associations of the underground with the underworld obviously recommend it for this purpose.

But this moral is not complete when the anecdote ends. Seneca's comments in his narrative voice are also revealing. He explains that the pleasure with which he read the anecdote which he has just repeated (*N.Q.* 5.15.2, *cum magna hoc legi voluptate*), was from knowing that "our age labours not with new vices, but with those handed down from antiquity, and in our age greed did not first seek the veins of rock and treasure badly hidden in the darkness but those ancestors of ours, whom we celebrate with praises, to whom we complain we are dissimilar, led by hope cut down mountains and stood there, over riches, under ruins" (*N.Q.* 5.15.2, *saeculum nostrum non novis vitiis sed iam inde*

*antiquitus traditis laborare, nec nostra aetate primum avaritiam venas terrarum
lapidumque rimatam in tenebris male abstrusa quaesisse: illi maiores nostri, quos
celebramus laudibus, quibus dissimiles esse nos querimus, spe ducti montes ceciderunt
et supra lucrum sub ruina steterunt).*¹⁸²

Human knowledge is elsewhere described by Seneca as a treasure.¹⁸³ here we see that like gold, its pursuit can be corrupting. But the truly grubby thing we discover when we scrape beneath the surface is that our ancestors – buried now beneath the earth – were not the moral paradigms we assume. And what is really degrading about this discovery is that it brings us pleasure.

The story of Philip's men reminds us that the underground not only brings men into a relationship with their forebears, but also inspires in them a fear of their own deaths.

The two are not unrelated: in attempting to outdo one's ancestors, one attempts to distinguish oneself from them, to avoid becoming part of the nameless dead. What was ironic in the previous anecdote was that it was precisely the attempt to better their ancestors that made Philip's men become like their worst imaginings of them. And like Oedipus, in uncovering new knowledge the men seem to become creatures between or beyond life and death.

But as Seneca describes in Book 6, earthquakes can cause a less specific fear of death.

After describing the devastation wreaked by the Campanian earthquake at the start of Book 6, Seneca briefly mentions some of its stranger effects: *Adiciuntur his illa:*

sexcentarum ovium gregem exanimatum et divisas statuas, motae post hoc mentis

¹⁸² Williams 2005 420: "The satisfaction that Seneca derives from the story ("I read this story with great pleasure," 5.15.2) lies partly in the canceling of one *fabula* by another: the myth that "those ancestors of ours whom we heap with praises" (*illi maiores nostri quos celebramus laudibus*) were morally impeccable is exploded in his exaggerated surprise that "our age suffers not from new vices but from vices handed down all the way from antiquity.""

¹⁸³ E.g. at N.Q. 6.4.2, *quod, inquis, erit pretium operae?*

aliquos atque impotentes sui errasse (N.Q. 6.1.3, “Those things are added to these; a dead flock of six hundred sheep, and split statues, and some moved out of their minds after this, wandering, not in control of themselves”).

Aside from the incongruity of Seneca’s deigning to mention the fate of some sheep after he had castigated Ovid for doing the same in his description of the great flood,¹⁸⁴ these strange goings-on are reminiscent of prodigies or portents. It seems that, as in the *Thyestes*, a shaking of the ground can bring up weird things from underneath. It was the stated task of the book to *shake out* the causes of earthquakes (*quorum ut causas excutiamus*, N.Q. 6.1.3) and in fact, at the end of the book, these strange phenomena are given scientific explanations. Insanity is easily explained – it is not easy to stay calm in a disaster, and terror is actually a loss of sanity (N.Q. 6.29.3). As for the statue weirdly split into halves, Seneca dismisses this, given the power of earthquakes to split apart lands (N.Q. 6.30.2-3), as hardly surprising – the material of a statue is hollow and thin (N.Q. 6.30.4-5). In the case of the sheep, they did not die from fear (N.Q. 6.27.1), but being susceptible to plague in general, they also consume much water which might be affected by plague, and when pestilence escapes from the bowels of the earth, they are more affected than we because their heads are so much closer to the ground than ours (N.Q. 6.27.4). Williams points out that the sheep with their heads to the ground metaphorically represent those *people* who look to the earth, *i.e.* material things, rather than to the stars: “If the sheep are so vulnerable to the plague at N.Q. 6.27.4 because their heads are so close to the ground, those most terrorized by panic at N.Q. 6.29.2 are people of a blinkered, terrestrial mind-set, their lack of perspective and higher insight

¹⁸⁴ N.Q. 3.27.13, commenting on *Met.* 1.304, Ovid’s description of a wolf, lion, and sheep swimming together after the deluge, *tantum impetum ingenii et materiae ad pueriles ineptias reduxisset*, “he reduced his great inspiration and subject to childish silliness”.

(such as Seneca aims to promote) making them so vulnerable to every shudder at ground level.”¹⁸⁵

Thus, the scientific theories presented in the *N.Q.* are shown to have practical application in explaining occurrences which otherwise would give fuel to superstition. In this book, Seneca seems to have adopted the Lucretian aim of dispelling terror: if the people who gave themselves up to terror would just look away from the ground, and embrace the transcendent learning of philosophy, they would be released from fear.¹⁸⁶

But this reading, which is the one favoured by most critics, raises problems as well as solving them.¹⁸⁷ The underground has been identified precisely with the uncanny and unknowable side of nature, and no other parts of Seneca’s many descriptions of it have seemed conducive to its disenchantment. Furthermore, Seneca continues, the insanity which overcomes terrified people sometimes lingers: in wartime, Seneca claims, people wander around out of their senses, and you will never find more prophecies when fear and religion strike the mind (*N.Q.* 6.29.3). This last remark is interesting. The Stoics may dismiss superstition, but prophecy is a reality for them – because they believe that all action is fixed.¹⁸⁸ Does Seneca mean that people go mad in war (or after an earthquake) and believe that their babblings are prophecies – or is he suggesting that their terror might produce an ecstasy capable of true prophecy?¹⁸⁹ The latter

¹⁸⁵ 2012, 251. Sheep were known for their stupidity. See, eg, Aristotle HA 610b. The idea that man had been placed upright so that he might gaze at the stars was common: see Vottero 1989 *ad loc.* *N.Q.* 7.1.1 and Limburg 2007 353 for further references.

¹⁸⁶ Seneca’s depictions of the underground are in several places directly indebted to Lucretius’ descriptions of the same, in *De Rerum Natura* 6.535-607, as Williams points out. See Williams 2005 125ff. For Williams, Seneca’s aim is the same as Lucretius’: “he too moves to quell this stirring of religio in the face of natural disaster by offering a ‘scientific’ explanation of the event” (2005 125).

¹⁸⁷ Williams 2012 214-5 emphasises the Lucretian character of the book, following De Vivo 1992. Berno 2003a 256-8 sees the book as traversed by an opposition between great and small: *stulti* see the body and earthquakes as great, and the spirit as small, sages the reverse.

¹⁸⁸ See Cicero *De Div.* 1.3.6, with Denyer 1985.

¹⁸⁹ The Stoics believed that true prophecy was possible; see further my discussion in Chapter 5. Disrupting the surface of the earth might cause mental instability and vatic qualities: the Pythia was known to become

understanding would be appropriate to the locale of this particular earthquake: the *campi Phlegrei* were also where Virgil's Sibyl inhaled the vapours of the earth and spoke true things in ecstasy. The state of being out of one's mind in madness is not Stoic wisdom – but it is not the normal state of *stulti* either. And Seneca's confident predictions about unseen things, under the ground, have a vatic quality to them.

Seneca is careful to say that actually going underground is not necessary for studying it. In a strange passage, Seneca addresses the objection that there is no proof that the underground is how he describes it. Even if there is no light by which to see a change in the air, nevertheless there are still clouds and fog in the darkness. These things above ground exist not because they are seen, but because they exist (*N.Q.* 5.14.2). On the same reasoning, rivers exist no less underground because they are not seen.

Seneca follows a similar line at *N.Q.* 6.7.5, where he argues that hidden passages into the earth from the bottom of the sea do not exist because one cannot see them, but rather that because one cannot see them, they might.¹⁹⁰ These arguments seem designed to infuriate readers with any philosophical training, or common sense. Clearly the fact that something *may* exist unseen is no good reason to conclude that it in fact *does*. The incongruity of this line of argument with even the lax philosophical standards which Seneca's harshest critics impute to him suggests that there is something more at play here. Seneca had hoped to go within the earth and reveal what was hidden there –

ecstatic from divine vapours emanating from within the earth. Holmes 2011 68 n. 116 notes that she is described by Longinus as being pregnant with these (*De Subl.* 13).

¹⁹⁰ Argument by analogy was a common and respected practice of ancient physicists (and doctors). See Lloyd 1966, Holmes 2011. Seneca goes a step further, arguing not only that despite something being unseen it is knowable through analogy, but that it is knowable *because* it is unseen.

but now it seems that one must have faith in these hidden things without any revelation.¹⁹¹

As critics such as Degl’Innocenti Pierini, Limberg, Ker and Williams point out,¹⁹² Seneca treats the theme of earthquakes in Book 6 in the manner of a conventional *consolatio*. Earthquakes can represent death and destruction – and the fear which they therefore instill must be banished: *quaerenda sunt trepidis solacia et demendus ingens timor* (*N.Q.* 6.1.4, “solace for trembling must be sought and huge fear remedied”). Seneca moves from depicting earthquakes as a particularly inescapable bringer of death (*N.Q.* 6.1.6: an army can be fought off, a harbour gives shelter from the storm, a roof protects from the rain, fire does not pursue one, one can dig underground to escape thunderbolts, in times of plague one can move house – but one cannot run away from an earthquake) to casting them as a symbol of death itself. This seems appropriate in the light of what we have seen of Seneca’s association of the underground with death – earthquakes may bury men (*quid interest, ego illam [terram] mihi an ipsa se mihi imponat?* *N.Q.* 6.2.7, “what difference does it make if I place the earth on myself or it itself weighs itself down on me?”), and they open up the underground to the upper world – thus exposing a path to the underworld, the site of death (this aspect of earthquakes makes them particularly horrifying: *nec desunt qui hoc genus mortis magis timeant quo in abruptum cum sedibus suis eunt et e vivorum numero vivi auferuntur*, *N.Q.* 6.1.8, “there exist those who fear this type of death most of all, by which they go into the abyss with their homes and alive

¹⁹¹ Williams 2012 114 argues that the depiction the apocalypse, an event necessarily beyond human experience is “Seneca’s imaginative construction of a cosmic mind-set here, a form of consciousness that ranges unfettered over all ages and territories in the manner of the liberated *animus* portrayed at *Dial.* 12.11.7, for example: “its thought moves around the entire havens [*circa omne caelum it*] and is granted access to the whole of time, past and future”. At 239 and *passim* he suggests that the effect of Book 6 is to allow that the mind’s eye “to move easily between the visible and the invisible in Seneca’s text”.

¹⁹² 18, Limburg 2007 299-342, Ker 2009, 107, Williams 2012 212-257. See also Berno 2003a 277-9. Limburg 2007 339-342 and Berno 2003a 279 compare the passage to the end of Book 2, and my discussion of that at the end of Chapter 5 also acknowledges the similarity of theme and tone.

are carried off from the number of the living”). But Seneca notes that in this earthquakes are merely a symbol for death in general: *tamquam non omne fatum ad eundem terminum veniat* (N.Q. 6.1.8, “as if every fate did not come to the same end”).

In the theme of assuaging fear of death, as both Ker and Williams note, the book also echoes Lucretius – and we will see that Seneca, like Lucretius, dismisses portents and supernatural phenomena – though with rather different effect to the earlier writer.¹⁹³

Men facing death crave certainty and safety: *quid enim cuiquam satis tutum videri potest, si mundus ipse concutitur et partes eius solidissimae labant? Si quod unum immobile est in illo fixumque, ut cuncta in se intenta sustineat, fluctuatur; si quod proprium habet terra perdidit, stare, ubi tandem resident metus nostri?* (N.Q. 6.1.4, “for why does it seem sufficiently safe to anyone if the world itself is shook and its most solid parts collapse? If what is alone unmoveable and fixed on itself, so that it holds up everything resting on it, wavers; if the earth loses what it has for its own, to stand, where finally will our fears rest?”). But when the very ground beneath our feet is collapsing, neither is forthcoming. Seneca makes it clear that lack of these two things do indeed make death terrifying, and refuses to promise either.

Instead he emphasises death’s universality, and the great extent of the uncertainty– he insists that an earthquake might happen anywhere (*neque enim Campaniae istud aut Achaiae sed omnis soli vitium est, male cohaerere et ex causis pluribus solvi et summa manere, partibus ruere*, N.Q. 6.1.15, “for that flaw is not only in Campania and Achaia but in every soil, sticking together badly, and dissolving for many reasons, and remaining as a whole while falling apart in its parts”) and that besides, one has to die one way or

¹⁹³ For Williams, the Lucretian influence goes beyond the theme of consolation: Seneca’s Book 6 is Lucretian in its presentation of nature as sublime, and its suggestion that man might be able to gain mastery over it (Williams 2006 126-7, 2012 219-225; see also De Vivo 1992).

another: *hoc habet inter cetera iustitiae suae natura praecipuum quod, cum ad exitum ventum est, omnes in aequo sumus* (N.Q. 6.1.8, “nature has this chief among its other justices that, when we come to death, we are all on level ground;” the idea of everyone being on the flat punningly refers both to metaphorical equality and literal level ground).

Thus (pace Ker) Seneca does not minimise horror of death (at N.Q. 6.2.1 he apologizes – *solacium adversus pericula rara promiseram*, “I had promised comfort against rare dangers”) but he insists that the universality of the horror should make death more palatable – *ego vero hoc ipsum solacii loco pono, et quidem valentissimi, quando quidem sine remedio timor stultis est: ratio terrorem prudentibus excutit; imperitis magna fit ex desperatione securitas* (N.Q. 6.2.1, “I indeed place this itself in the place of a comfort, and a very strong one at that, since indeed fear without remedy is stupid: reason shakes fear from the wise; and for the unwise a great sense of security arises from desperation”).

Nullum maius solacium est mortis quam ipsa mortalitas; nullum autem omnium istorum quae extrinsecus terrent quam quod innumerabilia pericula in ipso sinu sunt.

N.Q. 6.2.6

There is no greater consolation for death than mortality itself; moreover there is none of all those external things which terrify greater than that the innumerable dangers are in our own breast.

For the wise, reason is the earthquake which shakes them from their terror as from their *terra*¹⁹⁴ (N.Q. 6.2.1, *ratio terrorem prudentibus excutit*), but for the unwise the greatest security comes not from reason, but from despair (*imperitis magna fit ex desperatione*

¹⁹⁴ The credit – or blame – for this pun must go to Seneca himself.

securitas, ibidem). We are not comforted, but if the earth has lost its defining property of solidity, there is nowhere that our fear might rest (*N.Q.* 6.1.4, *ubi tandem resident metus nostri?*). Why does Seneca not dispel the terror of death? He does elsewhere (eg, *Ep.* 4.3, *Profice modo: intelleges quaedam ideo minus timenda quia multum metus afferunt. Nullum malum magnum quod extremum est. Mors ad te venit: timenda erat si tecum esse posset: necesse est aut non perveniat aut transeat*. “All you need to do is to advance; you will thus understand that some things are less to be dreaded, precisely because they inspire us with great fear. No evil is great which is the last evil of all. Death arrives; it would be a thing to dread, if it could remain with you. But death must either not come at all, or else must come and pass away”).

The clue is that it is only reason which can dispel fear. For those of us without access to reason, we cannot know death without fear. The best we can hope for is to be scared out of our wits. This is in sharp contrast to the moderate acceptance of death familiar from Seneca’s consolations. But those consolations are themselves a compromise. They comfort the bereaved while allowing for a modicum of grief; they convince the bereaved that death is not such a bad thing, rather than having them embrace its enormity. Evading this truth does not get one closer to wisdom: rather than fleeing an earthquake zone we ought to flee those who flee an earthquake zone – for their hope in better *fundamenta*, more solid principles, would lead us away from a faith in the basic uncertainty of all things (*desinamusque audire istos qui Campaniae reuntiaverunt quique post hunc casum emigraverunt negantque ipsos umquam in illam regionem accessuros. Quis enim illis promittit melioribus fundamentis hoc aut illud solum stare?* *N.Q.* 6.1.10, “and let us stop listening to those who have renounced Campania and who after this disaster have emigrated and say that they will never come back to that region. For who promises them better foundations, to stand on this or that soil?”).

One must face up to the fact of death: Fearing great natural disasters is to make an error in evaluating oneself (*magni se aestimat qui fulmina et motus terrarum hiatusque formidat*, N.Q. 6.2.4, “he thinks highly of himself who fears thunderbolts and earthquakes and chasms”). We do not need a cataclysm to destroy our frail bodies (N.Q. 6.2.4-5).

Seneca concludes Book 6 with the proclamation, *quos magis refert nostra fortiores fieri quam doctiores* (N.Q. 6.32.1, “it is more important to us that they should be stronger than more learned”). At some point the learning that goes into consoling us against the fear of death is counter-productive. Rather than attempting to reduce the fear by argument, one must face up to it: become strong rather than learned. This itself will further our learning: *sed alterum sine altero non fit: non enim aliunde animo uenit robur quam a bonis artibus, quam a contemplatione naturae* (N.Q. 6.32.1, “but one is not possible without the other: for strength does not come to the spirit from anywhere but from strong limbs, from the contemplation of nature”).

For those who have not yet attained reason, facing up to death will always involve compromise. Either one can rehearse the kinds of arguments familiar from consolatory literature, which will blandly demonstrate that death is not to be feared. But these arguments blunt the absolute destructive force of death: it is precisely this which must be acknowledged and embraced by the wise. Until one is able wisely to accept it, one will be terrified by it, even sent mad by it. This terror and madness are symptoms of a lack of reason – but no more so than the comforts afforded by consolations to those still learning about wisdom.

Throughout his works, Seneca veers between gruesome portrayals of the horrors of death and serious advice about how to remain unperturbed by the mortality of oneself and others. The two modes at first sight appear incongruous. In fact both represent

compromised attempts at the same goal: the acceptance and embracing of death. The compromise is far more visible in the violent images than the consolatory passages. But numbing oneself to the horrors of death is no less misguided than facing them in fear. The ideal would be a fusion of the two techniques we see alternated throughout the corpus: boldly to face death as it appears in the most florid passages with the same calmness recommended in the consolations, embracing rather than denying its horror.¹⁹⁵

Learning, for Seneca, is a *nekuia*. Tragedy thus is directly analogous to natural science: in it, man confronts the centrality of death to our lives. The truth about nature is terrifying, and it can disrupt the order of our lives, as an earthquake shatters the landscape and drives men mad. If one manages to accept and understand this incursion of death into life then one attains wisdom. One thereby becomes a living dead man, still breathing, but fully embracing death. Oedipus is the model of the sage: he confronts the terrifying and traumatic reality of his own existence, and emerges as a creature between the living and dead, less an individual (he has given up all his vanity) than a force of death in life.

Whereas for Lucretius knowledge was the shaking away of misplaced reverence and superstition, for Seneca the world is haunted and scientific investigation invokes ghosts rather than exorcising them. If we cannot reach the perfect wisdom and security of the

¹⁹⁵ Ker 2009 96 points out how consolation's ability to dull the horror of death also had political resonances for Seneca: "A darker side of consolation is repeatedly hinted at in Seneca's ambiguous language. He remarks how Julius Caesar, after his daughter Julia's death, "overcame/conquered grief as quickly as he used to [conquer] everything" (*tam cito dolorem vicit quam omnia solebat*, 14.3). Of the deified Augustus he says that he bore the deaths of his many heirs bravely to prevent popular lament/complaint (*queri*, 15.3). Tiberius, at the funeral of his own son Drusus, "allowed Sejanus, standing by his side, to discover how much endurance he could show when it came to losing/destroying his own" (*experiendum se dedit Seiano ad latus stanti quam patienter posset suos perdere*, 15.3). The series of examples is a Julio-Claudian history lesson: Julius Caesar's imperial conquests, Augustus' establishment of hegemony, and Tiberius' callous cruelty. It exposes an unsettling alliance between the expediencies of the autocrat and the ideals of the consoler. Senecan consolation is thus cognizant of its own acceptance of, even complicity in, the moral violence required for the social reintegration of the bereaved."

Stoic sage (and *of course* we cannot: sages are as rare as the phoenix¹⁹⁶) then the best we can hope is that the very foundations of our knowledge are shaken beneath us. Let us not believe in the wisdom of our elders: that is not true wisdom. Let us recognize that the *fundamental* premises by which we live are flawed. Let us be scared out of our minds: this glimpse of the sublime, which we experience as terror, is as close as we can get to the awesome reason that courses through and defines the universe, without ourselves becoming one with it.

Death is to be embraced because the achievement of wisdom is indifference to the set of peculiarities and attachments that make up the individual. Insofar as we understand life to be our own individual existence, wisdom itself is a kind of death. Acceptance of death along the lines suggested in consolations is necessary too, that we might function in our everyday lives. But this kind of acceptance within the framework of a life that is not yet virtuous is not a substitute for the true acceptance of death that comes with virtue. And so acceptance of death and terror of death exist in a dialectic for the *proficiens*, in the hope that ultimately his attitude will encompass both simultaneously, and both comprehend and embrace the horror of death, and with it, the cosmic perspective.

¹⁹⁶ *Ep.* 42.1; Seneca appropriately expresses the uncommonness of wise men through the metaphor of a bird which, like the Stoic universe itself, dies only to be reborn.

Chapter 3.

Travel is the dominant metaphor for philosophical education in Seneca: one must travel down a path to get to the happy life (e.g. *Ira* 2.13.2). Nowhere is the metaphor more prominent than in the *Epistles*, unsurprisingly, since the very epistolary genre depends on travel: letters moving back and forth between two friends, oceans apart. The philosophical content of the letters follows the letters themselves in presuming that there is a route to be taken: attaining wisdom is a journey (*Ep.* 6.5: *longum iter est per praecepta, breve et efficax per exempla*). Stoic adepts are *proficientes* or *progredientes*.¹⁹⁷

But despite the journey's centrality in Seneca's conception of Stoic education, procedure itself has a somewhat ambivalent valence. Life is a journey (*Ep.* 44.7, *iter vitae*) and, of course, not necessarily towards wisdom. It can be difficult to tell whether one's path is actually taking one in the right direction: Seneca tells Lucilius in Letter 16 that he understands that he has come far (*Ep.* 16.2, *intellego multum te profecisse*) – presumably in his philosophical advancement – but just a few lines later darkly warns that Lucilius must scrutinize himself to see whether he has proceeded in philosophy or in life itself (*Ep.* 16.3) – that is, whether he has merely got older and no wiser, after all.

Seneca actually counsels against travelling, both literally and metaphorically. In the second letter of the epistolary collection, Seneca tells Lucilius, *ex iis quae mihi scribis, et ex iis quae audio, bonam spem de te concipio; non discurreis nec locorum mutationibus inquietaris. Aegri animi ista iactatio est* (*Ep.* 2.1, “judging by what you write me, and by

¹⁹⁷ As Dodds 1985 1 points out, that there was a concept of progress in the ancient world was not always seen as self-evident. For the concept at its broadest, see Edelstein 1967 (especially 169-77 for Seneca's conception of the progress of human knowledge) and Dodds 1985 1-25.

what I hear, I am forming a good opinion regarding your future. You do not run hither and thither and distract yourself by changing your abode; for such restlessness is the sign of a disordered spirit.”). And he warns Lucilius to keep to the same practice in his books: *vitam in peregrinatione exigentibus hoc evenit, ut multa hospitia habeant, nullas amicitias. Idem accidat necesse est iis, qui nullius se ingenio familiariter applicant, sed omnia cursim et properantes transmittunt.* (Ep. 2.2, “when a person spends all his time in foreign travel, he ends by having many acquaintances, but no friends. And the same thing must hold true of men who seek intimate acquaintance with no single author, but visit them all in a hasty and hurried manner.”)

In *De Tranquillitate* he is even more forthright. Although it is human nature to be active and move around (*Tranq.* 2.11, *Natura enim humanus animus agilis est et pronus ad motus*), travelling is like the tossing and turning in bed of a sick man, the urge to travel is the foul desire to worry at a sore: *sunt enim quaedam, quae corpus quoque nostrum cum quodam dolore delectent* (*Tranq.* 2.12-13, “for there are certain things that delight the our body while also causing it a sort of pain”).

In fact, progress towards sagehood may be best achieved by standing strong: in Letter 32 Seneca expresses a fear that the influence of non-philosophers may hinder Lucilius’ progress (*Ep.* 32.2) – and offers this advice:

Opto tibi tui facultatem, ut vagis cogitationibus agitata mens tandem resistat et certa sit, ut placeat sibi et intellectis veris bonis, quae, simul intellecta sunt, possidentur, aetatis adiectione non egeat.

Ep. 32.5

I pray that you may get such control over yourself that your mind, now shaken by wandering thoughts, may at last come to rest and be steadfast, that it may be

content with itself, and, having attained an understanding of what things are truly good – and they are in our possession as soon as we have this knowledge – that it may have no need of added years.

The suspicion of travel is motivated ultimately by the Stoic ideal of homology. Davies notes that the concept of *homologia* is translated into Latin by Seneca as *constantia*, and that the attendant characteristic of one who possesses it is *gravitas*: virtue involves staying still and weighing down upon the earth.¹⁹⁸ The Supreme Good alone is always identical to itself, and thus provides a fixed point in a world of otherwise shifting ends. Without this end point, one is apt to head off in the wrong direction indefinitely:

Naturalia desideria finita sunt; ex falsa opinione nascentia ubi desinant, non habent. Nullus enim terminus falso est. Viam eunti aliquid extremum est; error immensus est. Retrahe ergo te a vanis, et cum voles scire, quod petes, utrum naturalem habeat an caecum cupiditatem, considera, num possit alicubi consistere. Si longe progresso semper aliquid longius restat, scito id naturale non esse.

Ep. 16.9

Natural desires are limited; but those which spring from false opinion can have no stopping-point. The false has no limits. When you are travelling on a road, there must be an end; but when astray, your wanderings are limitless. Recall your steps, therefore, from idle things, and when you would know whether that which you seek is based upon a natural or upon a misleading desire, consider whether it can stop at any definite point. If you find, after having travelled far,

¹⁹⁸ 2010 15-18.

that there is a more distant goal always in view, you may be sure that this condition is contrary to nature.

The alternative movement offered instead of progression is a sort of dynamic staying still, a burrowing into the self and firming of one's own foundations whose characteristic action is introspection. Montiglio describes the journey to wisdom as "centripetal." The man who does achieve the Supreme Good will find himself equal always to himself: *Maximum hoc est et officium sapientiae et indicium, ut verbis opera concordant, ut ipse ubique par sibi idemque sit* (Ep. 20.2 "This, I say, is the highest duty and the highest proof of wisdom, that deed and word should be in accord, that a man should be equal to himself under all conditions, and always the same"). And wisdom may be defined as *semper idem velle atque idem nolle* ("always desiring the same things, and always refusing the same things"). Seneca adds, *licet illam exceptiunculam non adicias, ut rectum sit, quod velis; non potest enim cuiquam idem semper placere nisi rectum*, Ep. 20.5, "you may be excused from adding the little proviso – that what you wish, should be right; since no man can always be satisfied with the same thing, unless it is right"). Moving forward in one's philosophical education is inevitably a sign that one is not there yet.

Seneca's use of the imagery of the journey has been documented and discussed in Armisen-Marchetti's monumental study of Seneca's images,¹⁹⁹ Chambert's study of travel in the literature and thought of the early empire²⁰⁰ and Montiglio's essay on travel as "a conflict in Seneca's thought."²⁰¹ These studies recognise and document a variety of valences behind Seneca's travel metaphors, at which I have hinted in my introduction.

¹⁹⁹ Armisen-Marchetti 1989.

²⁰⁰ Chambert 2005.

²⁰¹ Montiglio 2006. See also Hachmann 1995 124-219, Hengelbrock 2000 and Henderson 2006 and for more discussions of progress as a philosophical metaphor in Seneca.

Montiglio tackles the problems and conflicts which these various valences, taken together, produce. For Montiglio, Seneca appears to recommend travel as a tool in philosophical progress, while at the same time insisting that where one is in the world is an indifferent, and that true progress is to be achieved by minimising attachment to indifferents and outside influence in general – and that introspection is an effective way of achieving this.

Montiglio is responding in particular to the analysis of Garbarino, who argues that Seneca has a largely negative attitude to travel.²⁰² Montiglio points out that this is not the whole story: at times “Seneca explicitly connects traveling and philosophy.” She observes that in *De Otio* 5, “Traveling for the sake of knowledge is one of the activities that do justice to nature because her beauty and greatness need spectators,” and the ““spectatores of so many great spectacles” (*De Otio* 5.3) eventually turn their heads upwards and concentrate their movement in their eyes and heads (*De Otio* 5.4).”²⁰³ And yet passages such as this must, she observes, be read in the context of Seneca’s explicit rejection of a philosophical (and, indeed, Stoic) tradition of wandering wise men (to which Socrates and Seneca himself are notable exceptions).²⁰⁴

But it is not clear what we are to make of the contradiction Montiglio uncovers. At times she seeks to resolve it: whereas the journey of discovery risks being endless, “the philosophical journey is a *tutum iter* (*Ep.* 31.9) along one road.”²⁰⁵ This may be true, but does not explain why the journey image has been chosen at all for both the path to virtue and the aimless wandering of the *stulti*. And finally she is content to let the contradiction rest, uninterrogated: “resorting to a doctrinal debate is perhaps not the most satisfactory

²⁰² Garbarino 1996.

²⁰³ Montiglio 2006 554.

²⁰⁴ Montiglio 2006 553-58.

²⁰⁵ Montiglio 2006 562.

way to explain Seneca's contradictory pronouncements about travel because Seneca does not always speak as a Stoic. Edwards' concept of Seneca's polyphonic self may be more helpful. Seneca is playing different roles when he says different things about travel, and none of these roles is more authoritative or authentic than another. The voice that praises travel belongs to the Seneca involved in worldly projects and particularly fond of natural wonders, whereas the one which stigmatizes the activity belongs to the inward-looking searcher for happiness. This does not mean that there is not conflict, which would be tantamount to privileging one voice over the others as more truthful. Rather, Seneca's manifold view of travel are one expression of his tormented versatility."²⁰⁶

In this conclusion, Montiglio is responding explicitly to Nussbaum's discussion of the same issue in the second choral ode of the *Medea* (which I will discuss at length in the next chapter). For her, Nussbaum argues that, "Seneca seems to be at odds with his own philosophical convictions, implicitly questioning Stoic morality because if rigorously interpreted, it entails inactivity."

Chambert's discussion roams through the immense variety of associations which Seneca calls upon when writing about travel. While she recognizes the irony of the fact that he denounces habitual travelers while developing what she calls "une véritable «diététique» du voyage" based on a tradition of medical writing, she does not see this as a conflict, as does Montiglio. For Chambert, "[l]e philosophe trouve dans le voyage, tel que le pratiquent les hommes de son époque et de sa condition, une sorte de compromise entre le mouvement et la sédentarité, une activité modérée qui présente pour lui un avantage exceptionnel: celui de satisfaire en même temps aux exigences de l'étude – et de l'écriture – et à celles de la santé. Voyage, santé, étude; tel est le

²⁰⁶ Edwards 1997 582.

«triptyque» qui prend forme dans les *Lettres* et autour duquel s'organise le mode de vie idéal pour un érudit et un philosophe tel que Sénèque.²⁰⁷ But she recognizes as well that the journeys Seneca depicts often have emotional and philosophical resonances. She also emphasises a fundamental Stoic sympathy to travel, as a way of learning about the world, as opposed to the Epicureans' promotion of withdrawal.²⁰⁸

I have no desire to reduce the complexity of Seneca's writings to a single (or univocal) dogma, but I do contend that the very contradictoriness and undecidability of Seneca's attitude towards travel itself has philosophical implications. Contra Montiglio, I see the identification of polyphony as a question, rather than an answer: precisely what is the nature of the torment which governs Seneca's versatility on this point? With Nussbaum, I argue that Seneca's travel metaphors are a site for questioning the implications of Stoic doctrine, though unlike her, I contend that Seneca's problematisation of travel is concerned with the difficulties, anxieties, and paradoxes implicated in the journey towards wisdom. Most of all I follow Henderson, who recognises that the Letters' emphasis on the materiality of travel (both as a theme, and as a process inherent to the epistolary genre) is a way of confronting the embodiment of life itself.²⁰⁹ In this chapter, as in my dissertation as a whole, I am concerned to interrogate the meaning of the apparent discrepancies or contradictions in Seneca's writing, without either dismissing them as unimportant (as, ultimately, does Montiglio) or insisting that they are expressions of doubt about Stoicism or certain Stoic tenets (as does Nussbaum). Rather I argue that contradiction expresses tension within Seneca's Stoicism.

²⁰⁷ Chambert 2005 175.

²⁰⁸ Chambert 2005 189 refers to Andre 1987a, who looks at the development of the encyclopediac tradition under the Julio-Claudians as understood as piety, and to *De Otio* 5.2-3, which describes how nature has laid herself out for the contemplation of man; I examine the section from which this passage is drawn in depth in my introductory chapter). See Chambert 2005 188-94 for travel as a way of learning about nature, and 17-60 for discussion of the Stoic, Epicurean and other philosophical positions on travel.

²⁰⁹ Henderson 2006.

My discussion over the following two chapters look at a special case of travel which, I will argue, bears particular philosophical burden in Seneca's writings: sea travel. Sea travel fits into this dissertation on nature because, as we will see, it is conceived of as a mode by which man engages with nature. In this chapter, I will look at shipwreck and its implications in the Letters. I will argue that shipwreck is an image where the hopes and frustrations of the Stoic adept meet, and that Seneca's preoccupation with the image in the Letters in particular has specific generic motivations.

Letter 53.

Letter 53 begins a run of letters which adopt a more conversational and representational style than previous letters. It is also, and not coincidentally, as I will argue, one of Seneca's first attempts in the letters to treat the problem of philosophical progress, and he does so through a story about sailing.²¹⁰

Seneca recounts a recent short trip he made by boat, despite the fact he is a nervous sailor (*Quid non potest mihi persuaderi, cui persuasum est ut navigarem?* Ep. 53.1,

²¹⁰ The letter is the first of five consecutive letters which treat travel. Together these letters are first half of Book 6 (ep. 53-62). On the book, see Henderson 2004 32-35, on Letter 53, see Motto and Clark 1971, Summers 1983 *ad loc*, Motto 1973 117-24, Wenskus 1994, Ronnick 1995, Motto 2001 and Buffa Giolito 2009-2010. Berno 2006, the best commentary on any part of Seneca's letters, treats Letters 53 to 57.

That Seneca's anecdote in the letter has allegorical overtones, critics agree. Wenskus 1994 and Buffa Giolito 2009-10 make the case for more a direct allegorical relationship than I would like: Buffa Giolito sees every element in the story as concealing a metaphorical counterpart, so that the steersman is philosophy, and so on, and Wenskus 1994 argues that this is the rationalisation of myth in a Heraclitean tradition.

But critics agree on the broader meaning of the letter: Seneca's mistaken belief that he is an authority in sailing is an allegory for how students of philosophy do not recognise their own failings. My discussion builds especially on Henderson 2006 who discusses this group of letters with an emphasis on Letter 57.

“You can persuade me into almost anything now, for I was recently persuaded to travel by water”). Aboard ship, the sky which had been so clear when the boat set off quickly clouded over, Seneca recalls, and a storm begins to brew (*Ep.* 53.2). Seneca recounts, *coepi gubernatorem rogare, ut me in aliquo litore exponeret. Aiebat ille aspere esse et inportuosa nec quicquam e aeque in tempestate timere quam terram* (*Ep.* 53.2, “I began to ask the pilot to put me ashore somewhere; he replied that the coast was rough and a bad place to land, and that in a storm he feared a lee shore more than anything else”).

Seneca’s sea-sickness and fear are undignified and intentionally comic, an effect heightened by the mock-grandiosity of his insistence that, despite the captain’s better judgment, they put into land:

Cuius [sc. liti] ut viciniam attigimus, non expecto, ut quicquam ex praeceptis Vergilii fiat, “obvertunt pelago proras,” aut, “ancora de prora iacitur,” memor artificii mei vetus frigidae cultor mitto me in mare, quomodo psychrolutam decet, gausapatus.

Ep. 53.3

When we drew near [sc. to the shore], I did not wait for things to be done in accordance with Vergil’s orders, until, “prow faced seawards,” [*Aen.* 6.3] or, “anchor plunged from bow,” [*Aen.* 3.277] I remembered my profession as a veteran devotee of cold water, and, clad as I was in my cloak, let myself down in the sea, just as a cold water bather should.²¹¹

²¹¹ Virgilian citation in Seneca has been the subject of much fruitful scholarly discussion: Setaioli 1965, André 1982 and Auvray 1987.

Seneca's implication that in having overridden the instructions of an experienced seaman he based his course of action on some lines of poetry and his experience taking baths is a nice instance of self-satire (the type of the 'foolish professor,' whose rarefied formal learning is combined with a total lack of common sense, is a familiar figure in Hellenistic joke-books).²¹² The bathos of his story is underscored all the more by the recollection of epic sea-journeys, first from the *Aeneid* (Berno notes that the lines he quotes recount voyages in the very seas where he himself is sailing²¹³), and then the *Odyssey*, as Seneca empathizes with Ulysses as he scrambles over rocks (*Ep.* 53.4). Like Ulysses, he writes, he has born unbelievable things (*incredibilia sunt, quae tulerim*), and he suggests that perhaps Ulysses' frequent shipwrecks were also caused by seasickness. If he had to travel by sea, Seneca muses, it would take him 20 years to get anywhere too. Ulysses was in fact a Stoic exemplar, and Seneca's mention of him is a parody of that tradition, fitting the persona of the out-of-touch philosopher.²¹⁴

²¹²On Philogelos and his jokes see Baldwin 1983. For jokes about philosophers more generally, see Zanker 1995 and Keulen 2003. Motto and Clark 1971 291 write that Seneca is setting himself up as a "ludicrous fool." Wenskus 1994 questions their judgement, which he claims "klingt erstens schadenfroh, zweitens reichlich viktorianisch" (*ad* 481). He considers the discussion of sea-sickness to be an attempt to emphasise the distance between the philosopher's bodily suffering, and the point of view of Stoicism. I find this argument convincing - and my own discussion supports it - but do not think that humorous and serious philosophical intent are mutually exclusive. Nor do Motto and Clark, who conclude, "[t]he imagined philosophic hero in such a piece must first 'pass through' the imbecilities of manhood, before he can awaken, and rise up to the quiescence and freedom of the gods." (1971, 225). For "autoironia" in Seneca, see Armisen-Marchetti 2004 (which argues that such instances are an attempt by Seneca to put himself on same plane as Lucilius). Henderson 2004 34 makes a similar point regarding *Ep.* 53: "here again is that engaging trick of first-person narrative, by which swelling animus against the preacher's cumulative ascendancy is 'talked into' empathy, the instant that mockery capsises into self-mockery."

²¹³ Berno 2006 *ad loc.*

²¹⁴ Ulysses was a frequent Stoic exemplar: Seneca's mention of him here is a comic parody of this tradition. Wenskus 1994 483-4 discusses his appearances in Seneca. See Berno 2006 *ad loc* for bibliography on Ulysses in Stoicism and Latin literature.

In addition to the comic value of this epic mis-reading, the comment that Seneca could bear '*incredibilia*' when he could not bear himself marks out the anecdote as a parable.²¹⁵ And indeed, the adventure teaches him learn a lesson:

Ut primum stomachum, quem scis non cum mari nausiam effugere, collegi, ut corpus unctione recreavi, hoc coepi meum cogitare, quanta nos vitiorum nostrorum sequeretur oblivio, etiam corporalium, quae subinde admonent sui, nedum illorum, quae eo magis latent, quo maiora sunt. Dubio et incipiente morbo quaeritur nomen, qui ubi etiam talaria coepit intendere et utrosque dextros pedes fecit, necesse est podagram fateri.

Ep. 53.5-6

When I finally calmed my stomach (for you know that one does not escape seasickness by escaping from the sea) and refreshed my body with a rubdown, I began to reflect how completely we forget or ignore our failings, even those that affect the body, which are continually reminding us of their existence not to mention those which are more serious in proportion as they are more hidden.

In other words, what the experience has given him is an awareness of his own failings, his own ignorance. He is, he reflects, like a sick man who, although not cured, at least knows the name of his disease.²¹⁶ It is when things get really bad that we are required to name them: when an ailment, uncertain at first, begins to swell the ankles also, and has made both our feet 'right' feet, it must be named as gout; plunging into the sea rather than listening to the captain's instructions force one to acknowledge the fact (say it,

²¹⁵ Berno 2006 *ad loc.*

²¹⁶ One is not always forced to notice one's flaws, as Seneca has Serenus remark at *Tranq.* 1.16, *puto multos potuisse ad sapientiam pervenire, nisi putassent se pervenisse, nisi quaedam in se dissimulassent, quaedam opertis oculis transiluissent.* ("I fancy that many men would have arrived at wisdom, if they had not dissembled about certain traits in their character and passed by others with their eyes shut.")

name it) that one is ignorant of sailing. But that pitch of disease is actually a move towards recovery: the disease cannot be treated until it has been identified, one cannot learn anything about sailing until one accepts that one's memory of a few lines of poetry and some cold baths are not a good basis for judgment about it. And it might take a disastrous disembarking for one to accept that. So pursuing folly can, paradoxically, be a learning experience.

The experience aboard (and overboard) ship in Letter 53 has been an education for Seneca because he has found out just how ignorant he is. He knows it is a move forward: having previously incorrectly assumed he knew something about sailing, he now correctly knows, at least, that he does not. But it feels like a move back, because he previously assumed he knew something about sailing, and now has found out that he knows nothing at all!

Philosophical progress must be a disheartening experience: it might seem that one is moving backwards rather than forwards – one is worse off than one ever realized. But one has to have faith that this is what moving forward looks like: Ulysses got home in the end. In the case of diseases of the soul, the worse one is the less one perceives it (*Ep.* 53.7, *quo quis peius se habet, minus sentit*). Perceiving oneself to be free of vice may be evidence of one's viciousness (*quare vitia sua nemo confitetur? Quia etiam nunc in illis est, Ep.* 53.8, "why will no man confess his faults? Because he is in their grasp"). The shock which will come about with such a confession will be all the greater given that moral faults tend to hide themselves from the view of the agent. But with philosophy it is possible to rouse ourselves from the sleep of ignorance and vice (*expergiscamur ergo, ut errores nostros coarguere possimus. Sola autem nos philosophia excitabit, sola*

somnum excutiet gravem, *Ep.* 53.8, “Let us, therefore, rouse ourselves, that we may be able to correct our mistakes. Philosophy, however, is the only power that can stir us, the only power that can shake off our deep slumber”), and the letter finishes with a rousing exhortation to philosophy.²¹⁷

This philosophy has been defined as self-accusation under difficult circumstances, self-exposure of one’s own ignorance of things about which one thought one knew. The knowledge to which Seneca exhorts Lucilius is knowledge of his own ignorance. In this, philosophy gives one voice: it names the disease for which one previously had no name. At the same time, it takes away one’s voice: it exposes all one thought one could say with authority as mistaken.

This light-hearted anecdote with its simple moral actually introduces a point which, we will see, is crucial to Seneca’s thought. The inextricability of vice from learning has important and wide-reaching implications. In the following chapter we will see later that philosophy itself only arises out of ignorance and worsening morals (and that this again is explicated by Seneca through a series of nautical metaphors). In this chapter we will see that disaster has perpetually a double valence for the Stoic *proficiens*: it is both the end and the start of a philosophical voyage. And this philosophical voyage for a Stoic will be between his own state, and the philosophical ideal which he propounds. Taking up Stoicism will alienate a man from his own discourse, since he will begin to espouse a worldview which he cannot understand – and the journey of Stoicism will in large part to be to return a man to himself, to restore harmony between his understanding and his speech. And when Seneca finds that he can finally *name* his disease, this is a moment

²¹⁷The analogy between philosophy and Alexander, at *Ep.* 53.10, confirms the association between sea travel and imperial expansion in Seneca’s writings, which I will explore at length in the next chapter.

when he is able to enunciate for himself his own philosophical short-comings in terms which are also true to the Stoic discourse which he has taken up.

It is not only that now he has learned of his short-comings he is in a position to repair them, and hence go forward on his philosophical journey, though that is the case. But it is also that the very moment of disaster has given forth a moment when he can speak in harmony with Stoicism – if only in denouncing his own vice. The pompousness of his self-characterisation in the first part of the letter was set up precisely to demonstrate how deluded and far from the truth of Stoicism one is when one enumerates one's own successes. But the enunciation of his own shortcomings brings Seneca briefly but authentically close to the discourse of nature.

Epistolography and shipwreck.

Seneca has long been victim of accusations of hypocrisy: discrepancy between his writing and his lifestyle.²¹⁸ But I argue that the more important discrepancy for Seneca, and one which he explores in his writings, is the distance between his own voice and the discourse of nature. It is in the Letters in particular where Seneca examines this problem, and one image through which he does this is that of shipwreck.

²¹⁸ Beck 2010 takes the accusations seriously and evaluates the historical evidence for Seneca's double standards. See Jones [forthcoming] on the trope of Seneca's hypocrisy.

The moment in his writings where Seneca most explicitly raises the issue of the distance between his life and his philosophy is a passage of *De Vita Beata* (18.1-3) which contains no reference to sea travel, or any kind of journeying. Responding, so he claims, to criticisms leveled at him by detractors who claim he holds ‘double standards’ for propounding the indifference of wealth while pursuing it in his life, Seneca has recourse to two lines of defense. Firstly, he insists that the distance between his philosophy and his lifestyle is not only excusable, but inevitable, since no one but the sage acts morally. In this insistence, Seneca is entirely orthodox. As we have seen, or the Stoics virtue and reason (which are intimately linked) are available only to the sage (attainment of virtue and reason being the defining feature of sagehood). Assuming that the Stoic writer is not a sage, then there will be elements of the philosophy he expounds which he has not taken fully on board, and thus even if he acts rightly, he will not be doing so for the right reason.²¹⁹

His second argument is as follows,

Hoc... Platoni obiectum est, obiectum Epicuro, obiectum Zenoni; omnes enim isti dicebant non quemadmodum ipsi viverent, sed quemadmodum esse ipsi vivendum.

Vit. Beat. 18.1²²⁰

The same reproach... has been made against Plato, Epicurus, Zeno; for all these told, not how they themselves were living, but how they ought to live.

²¹⁹ Brennan 2005 282, “there are a number of Stoic texts that spell out in a fairly straightforward way the claim that the sage deliberates only about indifferents”: it is the sage’s exercise of reason in the choosing of indifferents which makes him virtuous, not what is chosen.

²²⁰ *Cit.* Fuhrer 2000, 216.

This is effectively an appeal to genre. The generic requirements of philosophy do not include reference to oneself as example. One can write perfectly good philosophy while leading a perfectly bad life, since one is not obliged to mention the latter when one is expounding the former.

For Fuhrer, who has analyzed this passage, Seneca successfully refutes charges of his having “double standards”, not by denying his wealth, nor by suggesting that his lavish lifestyle is philosophically desirable, but by reminding the reader, “forcefully with his refrain-like repetition of the Stoic formula of happiness in the first half of the work that there is only *one* standard for the Stoic, which only the sage attains, namely, moral perfection; thus the normal person who has not attained this ideal does *not* live according to another standard”.²²¹ While I concur with Fuhrer’s judgment of this passage as logically coherent, it does not put to bed Seneca’s *own* preoccupation in his writings with inconsistency. Rather, this becomes a major theme, years later, in the *Epistles*. As Seneca argues in *Vit. Beat.*, that the Stoic writer does not live up to his teachings need not be a problem. The philosopher can write an impersonal tract whose truth is not in the least affected by the character of its writer. But Seneca’s longest work of moral philosophy is not an impersonal tract. The generic requirements of *letters* are somewhat different.

The *Epistles* have variously been regarded as philosophical tracts with epistolary formulae attached to beginning and end,²²² as the published record of a genuine

²²¹ Fuhrer 2000, 207. Fuhrer makes a similar judgement regarding the charge of double standards in the *De Vita Beata*; her interpretation differs from mine in that she offers the optimistic defense that Seneca’s status as *proficiens* excuses him from the charge of double standards, or hypocrisy, whereas I pessimistically conclude that it commits him to it.

²²² See Wilson 2001 165-169 for bibliography for and criticism of ‘essayistic’ readings of the *Epistles*.

correspondence,²²³ and as a carefully crafted fictional document whose epistolary form is crucial to its meaning.²²⁴ The influence of various other genres has been detected in the letters.²²⁵ I leave aside the question of whether or not the letters are ‘genuine’ but I do contend that the choice of the epistolary form is implicated in the content of the letters, and that it ought to be taken into account in their interpretation.²²⁶

Demetrius’ *De Elocutione*, which includes the only surviving ancient theoretical treatment of letters, suggests that the personal voice is a generic requirement of the epistolary form: “The letter, like the dialogue, should abound in glimpses of character. It may be said that everybody reveals his own soul in his letters. In every other form of composition it is possible to discern the writer’s character, but in none so clearly as in the epistolary” (*De Eloc.* 227).²²⁷

As Griffin points out, the example of Cicero’s letters was unavoidable for any Roman epistolographer: I follow her in seeing the Ciceronian influence as compelling Seneca to adopt a personal manner and drop in reality effects to give the collection the impression of being a ‘genuine correspondence’ (she deems it not one), stylistic features absent from Seneca’s other important model, Epicurus’ letters.²²⁸ By staging the letters as a

²²³ Berno 2011: “several stylistic features, such as the obscurity of the style, repetitions, the apostrophes to Lucilius, and even the internal differences in structure between separate groups of epistles, characterise them as real letters, even if collected and re-elaborated by the author himself;” see Berno 2011 for bibliographic references for this position.

²²⁴ Wilson 2001.

²²⁵ Wilson’s 2001 polemic gives a critical overview of the critical history of “reclassifying” (sic) the *Epistles*, examining “three prominent strategies that have been used to dethrone the ‘epistolary’ as the defining mode of Seneca’s texts, by reconceptualising it as ‘essayistic’, ‘hortatory’, or ‘pedagogical’ with focus on studies of the letters as essays, as hortatory, and as pedagogical literature” (164).

²²⁶ Berno 2006 14 n.10 gives references for the debate over whether the letters are part of a real-life or fictional correspondence, or something in between.

²²⁷ Trans. Roberts 1995.

²²⁸ Griffin 1992 418. Unlike Cicero’s letters, the *Epistles* are pointedly silent on contemporary political matters. Berno 2011: “The *EM* have nevertheless an ‘ambiguous character,’ because they are halfway

personal correspondence, albeit one focused around philosophical questions, Seneca brings himself – or rather the self of the “I” of the letters – into it. Clearly this in no way implies that the “I” of a letter must be in any naïve or unproblematic sense the “I” of the author, though equally clearly, by offering the letters as from the desk of L. Annaeus, Seneca asks the reader to identify the authorial persona with him. It scarcely matters whether Seneca thought, felt, and experienced in his everyday life what the Seneca of the letters is described as thinking, feeling, or experiencing – but the letters’ inclusion of some personal account of thoughts, feelings and experiences is a requirement of their being plausible as a personal correspondence.

In short, though a philosophical tract does not require any personal confession, a letter, on Seneca’s own model, does. Thus the defense Seneca mounts in the *Vita Beata*, that philosophers need not talk about their own lives, cannot hold in the case of his letters. Seneca chooses to write in a genre which demands reference to daily life, fictionalized or otherwise.²²⁹

This makes travel towards virtue a particularly live issue in the letters. The distance between the philosopher and virtue can never be forgotten, since the writer is obliged *both* to describe the virtue and reason which he has not attained, and to give the example of his own life. It is no coincidence that Seneca chooses both to begin writing

between the intimate correspondence of Cicero (e.g. in the *Letters to Atticus*, which Seneca explicitly criticises for their improvisation: *EM* 118.1) and the literary letters of Pliny the younger ... Seneca’s model is rather to be found in the *Letters* of Epicurus.” For Seneca’s models in the letters see Maurach 1970 182, and Berno 2011 for further bibliography.

²²⁹ The relationship of the anecdotal and the theoretical is of course debatable. Berno 2006 notes that the letters often have a tripartite structure: ‘aneddoto/ considerazioni filosofiche da esso suggerite/ parenesi finale’ (19). This is the structure of *Ep.* 87, discussed below. Wildberger 2010 draws a distinction between formal argumentation, and what she calls ‘Big Talk’- the ‘contemplation of great things’, in ‘a style that appeals to the senses and the emotions’ (208), and proceeds to demonstrate how meaning is created by both contrast and blending of the two.

about his life in a charmingly veristic manner *and* to raise the issue of the distance between his personal voice and Stoicism. His discourse will always be caught in between the two poles of Stoicism as an abstract ideal and Stoicism as a daily practice, attempting to shuttle towards the former, but anchored always in the latter. These two exigencies inherent in Stoic letter-writing commit the author to a sort of continual self-accusation of hypocrisy. The unrealistically high expectations of Stoicism mean that Seneca will always fall short of virtue; the genre of the philosophical letter obliges Seneca, as he expounds doctrine, to point out the discrepancy between his theory and his practice. If the philosopher is drawn continually to the metaphor of travel to virtue, the difficulty of actually attaining virtue means that he will be obliged to show that this journey towards it will most often end in disaster, in shipwreck.

However, as I suggested in my reading of *Letter 53*, a disastrous ending can have some good in it. At least it can inspire self-knowledge. And the journey to wisdom is, as I have argued, in one sense, a transformation of the philosopher so that he is consistent with himself, with the philosophy which he propounds, and with Nature. The Stoic *proficiens*, having not yet attained virtue, is mostly inconsistent with all three of these things. But at the moment when he points out his short-comings, his philosophical failings, the philosopher's own voice is aligned with the discourse of nature.

These admissions of hypocrisy also have a more instrumental role in the letters. As well as containing and illustrating Stoic theory, the letters also present themselves as manifestations of Stoic practice. Seneca's avowed intention in the letters is both to instruct Lucilius, a less advanced *proficiens* than he, and to aid his own philosophical

progress. The coaching of a friend less far along the road than oneself was itself an established Stoic practice.²³⁰

Furthermore, the letters also treat and exemplify another important Stoic learning tool: the *meditatio*.²³¹ The daily *meditatio* was an important therapeutic tool in imperial Stoicism, which Seneca describes at *De Ira* 3.36, where he recommends asking oneself every night, “what bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respect are you better?”, on the grounds that, “anger will cease and become more controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge everyday”.²³² For Seneca, honest self-reflection gave one the opportunity to take stock of one’s philosophical progress, and provided oneself with an incentive to adhere to one’s philosophical principles. In the letters, Seneca explicitly connects his acknowledgement of his own short-comings with this practice of honest self-appraisal.²³³

Self-scrutiny, for Seneca, opens the way for, as Edwards puts it, self-transformation.²³⁴ And one important manner in which this happened was self-accusation. Self-scrutiny will also force us to be honest about our true position, a vital step towards transforming this. Early in the letters, Seneca finds that he is in need of total transformation – and is not discouraged, but heartened by this:

²³⁰ See Pire 1958 for the importance of a personal relationship between teacher and pupil throughout the Stoic tradition. For the sage, friendship was an opportunity for the exercise of virtue (see *Ep.* 9.10-12) – and Seneca seems to have felt that it could also aid those attempting to approach virtue: at *Ep.* 6.5-7 it seems that even friendship between non-sage philosophical adepts can be beneficial.

²³¹ See Armisen-Marchetti 1986 for the *praemeditatio* in Seneca, Hijmans 1959 and Newman 1989 for its place in Imperial Stoicism.

²³² Cooper and Procopé 1995 110: the memory exercise has its roots in Pythagoreanism. On the passage, see Foucault 1986 60-2, Ker 2009, Inwood 2009 55-57.

²³³ Seneca suggests that his confessional letter-writing to Lucilius is equivalent to self-scrutiny in other places (e.g. at *Ep.* 83.1-2). Edwards 1997 and Bartsch 2006 191-208 explore the consequences of reading the letters as a textual representation of the *meditatio*.

²³⁴ Edwards 1997.

Intellego, Lucili, non emendari me tantum sed transfiguari. Nec hoc promitto iam aut spero, nihil in me superesse, quod mutandum sit. Quidni multa habeam, quae debeant colligi, quae extenuari, quae attolli? Et hoc ipsum argumentum est in melius translati animi, quod vitia sua, quae adhuc ignorabat, videt. Quibusdam aegris gratulatio fit, cum ipsi aegros se esse senserunt.

Ep. 6.1

I feel, my dear Lucilius, that I am being not only reformed, but transformed. I do not yet, however, assure myself, or indulge the hope, that there are no elements left in me which need to be changed. Of course there are many that should be made more compact, or made thinner, or be brought into greater prominence. And indeed this very fact is proof that my spirit is altered into something better – that it can see its own faults, of which it was previously ignorant. In certain cases sick men are congratulated because they themselves have perceived that they are sick.²³⁵

The transformation of himself which Seneca claims to have observed is not the final change that brings him into line with virtue but the first change, which allows him to see how much needs to be changed. It is to be celebrated, since it is the first step towards making the alterations necessary for perfection. So in Seneca's philosophical letters he is obliged continually to acknowledge short-comings, discrepancy between theory and practice. But at the same time, this self-accusation is a necessary first step towards

²³⁵ *Intellego, Lucili, non emendari me tantum sed transfiguari. Nec hoc promitto iam aut spero, nihil in me superesse, quod mutandum sit. Quidni multa habeam, quae debeant colligi, quae extenuari, quae attolli? Et hoc ipsum argumentum est in melius translate animi, quod vitia sua, quae adhuc ignorabat, videt. Quibusdam aegris gratulatio fit, cum ipsi aegros se esse senserunt.*

virtue. Vices, by being acknowledged, are transformed from failure to live up to one's own standards, into a first step on the road to being able to do so.

Thus, the self-knowledge which Seneca insists goes along with philosophy in Letter 53 is an important part of the *meditatio*, the philosophical practice which the letters purport to enact. From this overview, it should be clear that contradictions between his Stoic convictions and his lifestyle, which foreclose the advance to virtue, but at the same time initiate a new, better, advance are a phenomenon integral to his *Epistles* and inseparable from its literary identity.

Letter 79: Aetna.²³⁶

Letter 79 treats a similar theme to Letter 54, but raises some further problems. It treats the problem of how one cannot understand one's ignorance until one has gained further knowledge, but uses it to ask how one can ever know one is moving in the right direction, learning the right things, until one has learned.²³⁷ In the letter, Seneca asks Lucilius a favour to investigate firsthand the truth about Aetna.²³⁸ Some authorities infer that it is wasting away – because of the testimony of sailors looking at the mountain from the sea: *quam consumi et sensim subsidere ex hoc colligunt quidam, quod aliquando longius navigantibus solebat ostendi*. ("Certain naturalists have inferred that the

²³⁶ On Letter 79 see Maurach 1970 167-173, Summers 1983 *ad loc*, Costa 1989 *ad loc*.

²³⁷ Long 2001 150-1 points out that in Stoicism non-sages are not privy to true understanding of Nature, and therefore Stoic adherents are following tenets which may be internally coherent, but which they have no way of independently verifying.

²³⁸ According to the chronology worked out by Griffin, Lucilius "finally reached one of the lower procuratorships, in Sicily, probably about 62" (Griffin 1992 91).

mountain is wasting away and gradually settling because sailors used to be able to see it at a greater distance.”) The image of the possibly shrinking Mount Aetna will be picked up later in the collection, at *Ep.* 111.3 – when Seneca observes that wisdom is like a mountain, which looks bigger the closer you get.²³⁹ Perhaps that is a clue to how we are to understand this image: from the sea it looks diminutive, even as if it is shrinking – but will this observation hold when one reaches it? The mountain may well look different to someone sailing towards it and to someone who has finally reached it and climbed it to the top.

But when Seneca casually requests that Lucilius climb Aetna in his honour it becomes clear that what he really wants is that Lucilius write a whole poem about the volcano – a project for which Seneca thinks he needs no encouragement. For even though Virgil, and Ovid and Cornelius Severus have touched on it in their works, there is still enough material there for a poem that takes Aetna as its main topic: *Omnibus praeterea feliciter hic locus se dedit, et qui praecesserant non praeripuisse mihi videntur quae dici poterant, sed aperuisse* (*Ep.* 79.5, “Besides, the topic has served them all with happy results, and those who have gone before seem to me not to have forestalled all what could be said, but merely to have opened the way”).²⁴⁰ Thus the beginning of the letter

²³⁹ *Ep.* 111.3 *Quod in magnis evenit montibus, quorum proceritas minus apparet longe intuentibus: cum accesseris, tunc manifestum fit quam in arduo summa sint. Talis est, mi Lucili, verus et rebus, non artificii philosophus. In edito stat, admirabilis, celsus, magnitudinis verae; non exsurgit in plantas nec summis ambulat digitis eorum more qui mendacio staturam adiuvant longioresque quam sunt videri volunt; contentus est magnitudine sua.* “This phenomenon is seen in the case of high mountains, which appear less lofty when beheld from afar, but which prove clearly how high the peaks are when you come near them; such, my dear Lucilius, is our true philosopher, true by his acts and not by his tricks. He stands in a high place, worthy of admiration, lofty, and really great. He does not stretch himself or walk on tiptoe like those who seek to improve their height by deceit, wishing to seem taller than they really are; he is content with his own greatness.”

²⁴⁰ Seneca is presumably referring to *Metam.* 15.340 ff and *Aeneid*, 3.570ff. See Goodyear 1984 350-1. A 644 line on *Aetna*, giving a scientific account of the origin of volcanic activity, is ascribed to Virgil in the manuscript tradition, but as the Oxford Classical Dictionary (*sub verbum*) comments, “Few, if any, would now maintain this ascription, or any of the other attributions that have been suggested. The poem predates

contrasts the mountain's possible physical shrinkage with its endurance as a poetic topos.

*Multum interest, utrum ad consumptam materiam an ad subactam accedas;
crescit in dies et inventuris inventa non obstant. Praeterea condicio optima est
ultimi; parata verba invenit, quae aliter instructa novam faciem habent. Nec illis
manus inicit tamquam alienis. Sunt enim publica.*

Ep. 79.6

It makes a great deal of difference whether you approach a subject that has been exhausted, or one where the ground has merely been broken; in the latter case, the topic grows day by day, and what is already discovered does not hinder new discoveries. Besides, he who writes last has the best of the bargain; he finds already at hand words which, when marshalled in a different way, show a new face. And he is not pilfering them, as if they belonged to someone else, when he uses them, for they are common property.

Though Seneca insists that in the case of Aetna, previous writers have merely opened up a path, he does acknowledge the possibility that topics can be used up. How one is supposed to know whether or not one is, is not clarified, nor does Seneca ever explain how he is so sure that Aetna is not a used-up topic. He merely emphasises that it is a mountain that makes Lucilius' mouth water (*Ep. 79.7, Aut ego te non novi aut Aetna tibi salivam movet*), which he has long wanted to write something big about (*iam cupis*

the eruption of Vesuvius in C.E. 79, for it describes the volcanic activity of the Naples region as extinct. It is generally agreed to postdate Lucretius, and allusion to Virgil and M. Manilius is likely. Because of resemblances to Seneca's *Natural Questions*, and because Seneca shows no knowledge of the poem, a late-Neronian or Vespasianic date is perhaps probable, but an earlier date cannot be ruled out." The poem could be by Lucilius.

grande aliquid et par prioribus scribere). Lucilius will write something big about a shrinking mountain.

Seneca insists that poetic greatness is like virtue and mountain climbing in that all are equal when they get to the top:

Inter cetera hoc habet boni sapientia: nemo ab altero potest vinci, nisi dum ascenditur. Cum ad summum perveneris, paria sunt, non est incremento locus, statur. Numquid sol magnitudini suae adicit? Numquid ultra quam solet, luna procedit? Maria non rescunt. Mundus eundem haitum ac modum servat.

Ep. 79.8

Wisdom has this advantage, among others – that no man can be outdone by another, except during the climb. But when you have arrived at the top, it is a draw; there is no room for further ascent, the game is over. Can the sun add to his size? Can the moon advance beyond her usual fullness? The seas do not increase in bulk. The universe keeps the same character, the same limits.

The mountain-climbing metaphor is a clear and elegant illustration of the counter-intuitive, and much criticized in the ancient world, Stoic insistence that there are no degrees of wisdom and virtue. By approaching the topic through a discussion of poets treating the same topic, Seneca has seemed to suggest that it is the same for great poetry. Except that Seneca himself has brought up the suggestion that Aetna is shrinking, and that a poetic topic might not be just well-worn, but actually used up.²⁴¹

The glibness and brevity of Seneca's opening request to Lucilius that he look into

²⁴¹ Schoenegg 1999 184 refuses the possibility that the fact that topics *do* get used up might worry Seneca: he insists that an artist can simply look back at the tradition on which he draws and assuage any self-doubt by seeing that his topic is fertile.

matters of natural science for him make them seem tongue-in-cheek. Is there any real use in climbing a mountain? What can one know when one gets there, when there seem to be things one can tell about it only from looking at it from a distance? And is it the same thing to have got to the top if the mountain is *shrinking*?

Seneca saves his argument by insisting that though it may be possible that Aetna can fall – this cannot be like virtue:

An Aetna tua possit sublabi et in se ruere, an hoc excelsum cacumen et conspicuum per vasti maris spatia detrahat adsidua vis ignium, nescio; virtutem non flamma, non ruina inferius adducet. Haec una maiestas deprimi nescit. Nec proferri ultra nec referri potest. Sic huius, ut caelestium, stata magnitudo est. Ad hanc nos conemur educere.

Ep. 79.10

I do not know whether this Aetna of yours can collapse and fall in ruins, whether this lofty summit, visible for many miles over the deep sea, is wasted by the incessant power of the flames; to a lower plane either by flames or by ruins. Hers is the only greatness that knows no lowering; there can be for her no further rising or sinking. Her stature, like that of the stars in heaven, is fixed. Let us therefore strive to raise ourselves to this altitude.

Again, the problem is that we have no way of knowing what to think in any case. How can a poet tell if his *topos* is well-worn or worn-out? One cannot tell whether a mountain has shrunk or not by getting to the top of it: this is something one can only notice from a

distance (from the sea). But this distance means that one can hardly claim authority: how much credence can one give to sailors' tales?

Seneca insists, conversely, that one cannot know anything until one has climbed the mountain. Getting nearer to it or closer to the summit do not mean that one is any better placed to make judgements. Thus they are both great accomplishments, and not so much:

Iam multum operis effecti est; immo, si verum fateri volo, non multum. Nec enim bonitas est pessimis esse meliorem. Quis oculis gloriatur, qui suspicetur diem? Cui sol per caligiem splendet, licet contentus interim sit effugisse tenebras, adhuc non fruitur bono lucis.

Ep. 79.11

Already much of the task is accomplished; nay, rather, if I can bring myself to confess the truth, not much. For goodness does not mean merely being better than the lowest. Who that could catch but a mere glimpse of the daylight would boast his powers of vision? One who sees the sun shining through a mist may be contented meanwhile that he has attained darkness, but he does not yet enjoy the blessing of light.

This sense that one has accomplished both much and little of virtue – that however much one has accomplished it is nonetheless comparatively little is one that I argue is important in Seneca's thought. Progress is not the same as achieving virtue. And one has no access to the achievement of virtue, just as one cannot know whether a topic is still worthy without achieving poetic greatness. We can keep the ideal in mind, but we

know that few achieve it. We cannot even know it – only a shadow of it. Fame is the shadow of greatness, Seneca says, but it is not a lesser degree of it. (*Gloria umbra virtutis est; etiam invitam comitabitur*, *Ep.* 79.13, “Fame is the shadow of virtue; it will attend virtue even against her will.”)

This is a consequence of the all-or-nothing logic of Stoic virtue – it has no degrees. One has either attained it, at the top of the mountain with the other sages – or one has not. It is not that progress towards virtue is not possible: Seneca lays out in *Ep.* 75.8-14 the three stages in the progress towards sagehood.²⁴² It is just that the journey towards sagehood is not achieved gradually, nor does one does not necessarily reach it after having travelled so far. Sagehood is the instantaneous transformation from ignorance to wisdom, both of which are absolute states.²⁴³ One can approach it, but its achievement is not the final step in one’s approach – it comes as a total transformation at any point along the way, and if it does not come in this manner then the approach will be infinite with the destination never reached. Again, it must be emphasised that Seneca is in no way suggesting that virtue is not the immovable pinnacle upon which orthodox Stoicism insists. That he believes this firmly is in no doubt. The question is whether the mountain one happens to be climbing is the right one, whether it is the true mountain, or whether it is shrinking, one that might be used up (and of course virtue is the *only* constant: if one scales *any* mount other than virtue one will find that it is not as high as one thought it to be, or that it does not stay up). And we cannot know.

²⁴² On the stages in progress to sagehood see also *Ep.* 71.26-30 and 72. 6. In *De Tranquillitate* (1.16, 2.10, 10.6), the metaphor of *fluctuatio* is used to express Serenus’ intellectual but not emotional commitment to Stoicism: see Lotito 2001 15-20 and 28-9 who points out that Seneca depicts Serenus as experiencing a “*nausea spiritalis*,” and for other instances of the image in Seneca.

²⁴³ For the all or nothing character of wisdom see, eg, *Ep.* 17.1: *liquere hoc tibi, Lucili, scio, neminem posse beate vivere, ne tolerabiliter quidem sine sapientiae studio et beatam vitam perfecta sapientia effici ceterum tolerabilem etiam inchoate*. “It is clear to you, I am sure, Lucilius, that no man can live a happy life, or even a supportable life without the study of wisdom; you know also that a happy life is reached when our wisdom is brought to completion, but that life is at least endurable even when our wisdom is only begun.”

Letter 87.

Letter 87 deals with the difficulty of truly abandoning the worldly values which one knows to be flawed.²⁴⁴ It is a treatment of a famous Stoic paradox: that only the wise man is rich.²⁴⁵ In it, Seneca confronts his pride in his material wealth, which lingers even as he attempts to practice frugality. This instance of acting one way and feeling another is a prime example of the hypocrisy we have been discussing – and in the letter Seneca anatomizes that phenomenon. The letter begins with a dramatic and perplexing declaration:

Naufragium, antequam navem adscenderem, feci. Quomodo acciderit, non adicio, ne et hoc putes inter Stoica paradoxa ponendum, quorum nullum esse falsum nec tam mirabile quam prima facie videtur, cum volueris, adprobabo, immo etiam si nolueris: interim hoc me iter docuit, quam multa haberemus supervacua et quam facile iudicio possemus deponere, quae, si quando necessitas abstulit, non sentimus ablata.

Ep. 87.1

I was shipwrecked before I embarked. I shall not add how that happened, lest

²⁴⁴ The letter has been treated by commentators as falling into two parts: the anecdotal introduction, and the dialectical proofs. Summers 1983 prints only the former. Cancik affirms a clear distinction between the two parts (1967 38). See further Cancik 1967 35-45, Allegri 1981 1997 1999 and 2004 (a monograph on the letter), Garbarino 1997 and Inwood 2007a, *ad loc.*

²⁴⁵ This is the final Stoic paradox which Cicero treats in his *Paradoxa Stoicorum*. At Ep. 17.10 Seneca makes the same point ('wisdom offers wealth in ready money, and pays it over to those in whose eyes she has made it superfluous,' *repraesentat opes sapientia, quas cuicumque fecit supervacuas, dedit*), and at Ep. 81.11 refers to certain Stoic dogma as paradoxes. On logical paradoxes in Stoicism see Mignucci 1999.

you may reckon this also another of the Stoic paradoxes; and yet I shall, whenever you are willing to listen, or even if you are unwilling, prove to you that these words are by no means untrue, nor so surprising as one at first sight would think. Meanwhile, the journey showed me this: how much we possess is superfluous; and how easily we can make up our minds to do away with things whose loss, whenever it is necessary to part with them, we do not feel.

The meaning of the opening phrase, “I was shipwrecked before I embarked,” is debated in the scholarship on this letter.²⁴⁶ Garbarino sees the ‘shipwreck’ as a figure for material deprivation,²⁴⁷ Allegri as moral failure.²⁴⁸ In the following discussion, I will argue that *both* of these senses are present simultaneously, and emphasise the polyvalence of the phrase. After this opening, the letter barely mentions sea travel again. And Seneca himself explicitly writes that he will not explain what he means by it, nor expand upon how his “shipwreck” came about, in case Lucilius place it among the Stoic paradoxes.²⁴⁹ This assertion is again open to interpretation. One explanation is that the shipwreck is indeed a Stoic paradox, but that the paradoxes only *seem* contrary to what one might expect when one does not fully understand Stoic tenets about the world. After all, Seneca promises, “I will prove that nothing of these is false nor so surprising as it seems

²⁴⁶ *C.f. Brev. 7.10*, on how, just because someone is old, he should not necessarily be thought of as long-lived (since if he have not studied philosophy he is nonetheless inexperienced): *Quid enim si illum multum putes navigasse, quem saeva tempestas a portu exceptum huc et illuc tulit ac vicibus ventorum ex diverso furentium per eadem spatia in orbem egit? Non ille multum navigavit, sed multum iactatus est.* “For what if you should think that that man had had a long voyage who had been caught by a fierce storm as soon as he left harbor, and, swept hither and thither by a succession of winds that raged from different quarters, had been driven in a circle around the same course? Not much voyaging did he have, but much tossing about.”

²⁴⁷ Garbarino 1997.

²⁴⁸ Allegri 1999.

²⁴⁹ As Wright 1991 16-17 notes of Cicero’s *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, our fullest record of the memorable saws which the Stoics promoted, these sayings, “are not paradoxes in the strictly logical sense in which apparently sound argument leads to an outright contradiction... The Stoics also knew about the so-called paradoxes of material implication, and used them extensively in their propositional logic, but Cicero’s essays are in the original sense of paradox – that which runs counter to generally accepted opinion (*doxa*).”

at first sight.” So on that reading, Seneca declines to expand on the point because Lucilius will dismiss it as paradoxical before understanding why it is true. Another possibility is that the shipwreck is not one of the Stoic paradoxes at all, and Seneca does not want Lucilius to misclassify it as such.

But if the shipwreck that happens before one embarks were not to be placed among the Stoic paradoxes, what might it be instead? This question and the complex implications of the strange opening gambit are, I argue, key to understanding this letter, and I will continually return to them in my discussion.²⁵⁰

After this cryptic introduction, Seneca launches into an anecdote. When Seneca first mentioned the *iter* which taught him the superfluity of possessions, at the start of this letter (*Ep.* 87.1), it was by no means obvious that he is talking about a particular trip as opposed to a metaphorical journey: as we have seen, in the letters progress appears as a metaphor for both philosophical learning and passage through life. Here we see that in fact, Seneca does mean to describe a specific journey, though one taken by land rather than by sea, a trip in a cart with a friend, Maximus.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ The meaning of the opening sentence has been the subject of some scholarly debate. See most recently, Garbarino 1997 and, in response, Allegri 1999. The former argues that the *naufragium* ought to be understood as a metaphor for deprivation at the start of a trip (following Summers and Gummere’s note in his Loeb edition) and not as a symbol of moral failing. Allegri reasserts the sense of *naufragium* as a disaster in the journey towards sagacity. See Allegri 1999 85, n. 2 for a comprehensive bibliography of the scholarly debate over this phrase. As will be seen, I argue that there are many valences at play in the phrase simultaneously.

²⁵¹ If Lucilius is a little Lucius (‘Una sorta di Seneca in piccolo: a cominciare del nome, quasi un diminutivo del prenome del maestro, Lucio, e dal *cognomen* che lo qualifica come più giovane, *Iunior*, come infatti pare che fosse (di circa dieci anni)’; Berno 2006 14), then this man seems greater than the teacher himself. Martial 7.44 refers to the deep friendship to Seneca of Maximus Caesonius and seems to suggest that the latter accompanied the former in his exile. The following epigram refers to the many charming letters sent by Seneca to Maximus, suggesting a lost epistolary collection.

However, the sea-faring metaphor is particularly relevant to the theme which the carting holiday introduces: the superfluity of possessions. Merchant shipping was synonymous with the sort of trade with which the senatorial class ought not concern itself: the legal ban on senators owning merchant ships, dating from the third century B.C.E., remained in force till late antiquity.²⁵² Maritime trade and money-making are made synonymous at *Ep.* 4.10-11 and *Ep.* 119.5.²⁵³ The shipwrecked man, by contrast, was proverbially bereft.²⁵⁴

Seneca's story, we learn, is about a theme weekend of pretend penury. (This is an instance of an *exercitatio*, the procedure by which Stoics put into practice what they had learned in their meditations.)²⁵⁵ Here, Seneca is at pains to emphasise the frugality of his trip: as he has said, the trip taught him how much we possess is superfluous and how much of what we have we can do away with.

Seneca describes the supposed ascetic simplicity of the trip in terms which are surely meant to amusingly reveal how un-ascetic it actually was. He and Maximus took with them very few slaves – those which one carriage could hold (*Ep.* 87.2, *Quos unum capere vehiculum potuit*). Not quite reaching the extreme of making the ground his bed,

²⁵² Livy 21.63.3-4, *Digest* 50.5.3, *Pauli Sententiae*, 7-11.

²⁵³ *Ep.* 119.5.

²⁵⁴ The shipwrecked man was proverbially bereft: Huxley 1965 124 cites Prop 2.1.43, Juv. 12.81-2, Martial 12.57.12, and even Virg. Aen. 1.203 (*forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*) as instances of shipwrecked sailors telling their stories. Also Cic. *N.D.* 3.89, "Diagoras – when a friend naïvely sought to prove the beneficent interest of gods in human affairs by the great number of votive paintings of shipwreck executed for those who reached the safety of the harbor he replied, 'precisely, but when men get drowned, the pictures are never painted.' Huxley writes, "It was common practice of those who, spared by Neptune, could not or would not turn an honest penny to seek a livelihood by begging. The tools of their trade were a vivid if crude painting of the storm they had survived (sometimes executed on what purported to be a spar of the lost ship) and a lusty singing voice. Persius 1.88-90, Juvenal 12.28, and Phaedrus 4.22.24-5 each have a word on this subject."

²⁵⁵ The *exercitatio* or, in Greek, *askēsis*. At *Ep.* 18.5-6 Seneca recommends an exercise in poverty. Allegri recognises the importance of this practice for the letter, and opens her discussion with consideration of it (2004, 13). See her note 1, 13, for bibliography on the topic.

he points out that he at least put his mattress on the ground, and himself on top of that (*Ep.* 87.2, *Culcita in terra iacet, ego in culcita*). The lunch from which “nothing could have been subtracted” took “not more than an hour” to prepare (*Ep.* 87.3, *De prandio nihil detrahi potuit; paratum fuit non magis hora*). Seneca remarks high-mindedly that, “the soul is never greater than when it has laid aside all extraneous things, and has secured peace for itself by fearing nothing, and riches by craving no riches” (*Ep.* 87.3, *Animi magnitudine, quo numquam maior est, quam ubi aliena seposuit et fecit sibi pacem nihil timendo, fecit sibi divitias nihil concupiscendo*), but of course the sentiment is amusingly undercut by the deeply compromised nature of his reported attempts at frugality. The description is a satirical depiction of a man unwilling to give up his comfortable life but attracted by the idea of self-deprivation, and settling on a comically cosmetic version of it. It recalls passages like *Ep.* 5.1, where Seneca denounces those who hypocritically indulge their vanity with the shallow appearance of austere living.²⁵⁶

Seneca connects the anecdote to the letter’s opening gambit. He claims that he went out on his trip as stripped-down as a ship-wrecked man who has lost everything at sea. The shipwreck of the opening line seems then to be a metaphor for the abandonment of attachment to material things that is necessary for an approach to wisdom. In the case of Stoicism, shipwreck is a particularly potent metaphor. As Garbarino notes, shipwreck is a *topos* in the biographical tradition of several philosophers:²⁵⁷ Aristippus the Cyrenaic,

²⁵⁶ *Quod pertinaciter studes et omnibus omissis hoc unum agis, ut te meliorem cotidie facias, et probo et gaudeo, nec tantum hortor ut perseveres sed etiam rogo. Illud autem te admoneo, ne eorum more qui non proficere sed conspici cupiunt facias aliqua quae in habitu tuo aut genere vitae notabilia sint; asperum cultum et intonsum caput et neglegentiorum barbam et indictum argento odium et cubile humi positum et quidquid aliud ambitionem perversa via sequitur evita.* (*Ep.* 5.1-2: “I warn you, however, not to act after the fashion of those who desire to be conspicuous rather than to improve, by doing things which will rouse comment as regards your dress or general way of living. Repellent attire, unkempt hair, slovenly beard, open scorn of silver dishes, a couch on the bare earth, and any other perverted forms of self-display, are to be avoided.”)

²⁵⁷ Garbarino 1997 156. See also Blumenberg 1997.

Zeno's teacher Stilpo of Megara, and the founder of Stoicism, Zeno himself, are all supposed to have had their philosophical visions on being shipwrecked.²⁵⁸ In the tradition, losing one's possessions in such a dramatic fashion was a catalyst for the discovery of true wealth.

But here of course, the comparison underscores the irony of the passage: Seneca, with his entourage and camping equipment, is in stark contrast to the proverbial *naufragus*. This self-satire sets up the real point of the letter: that something is missing from the trip. Describing the farmer's cart, led by knackered mules and a barefoot driver, Seneca breaks down and admits: I can scarcely force myself to wish that others shall think this cart mine (*Ep.* 87.4: *Vix a me obtineo, ut hoc vehiculum velim videri meum*). He explains,

*Durat adhuc perversa recti verecundia, et quotiens in aliquem comitatum
lautiorem incidimus, invitus erubesco, quod argumentum est ista, quae probo,
quae laudo, nondum habere certam sedem et immobilem. Qui sordido vehiculo
erubescit, pretioso gloriabitur.*

Ep. 87.4

My false embarrassment about the truth still holds out, you see; and whenever we meet a more sumptuous party I blush in spite of myself – proof that this

²⁵⁸ Diogenes Laertius 7.2-5 gives three versions of the story of Zeno's shipwreck; "Hence he is reported to have said, 'I made a prosperous voyage when I suffered shipwreck.' ... A different version of the story is that he was staying at Athens when he heard his ship was wrecked and said, 'It is well done of thee, Fortune, thus to drive me to philosophy'" (*DL* 7.4-5). Seneca reports a different version of the story at *Tranq.* 14.3: *Nuntiato naufragio Zenon noster, cum omnia sua audiret submersa: "iubet," inquit, "me fortuna expeditius philosophari* (Zeno, our master, when he received news of a shipwreck and heard that all his property had been sunk, said: "Fortune bids me to follow philosophy with fewer encumbrances). Similarly, in the consolation addressed to his mother Helvia on his own exile, Seneca uses the conduct of his aunt, his mother's sister, on her husband's death in a shipwreck, as an exemplum of unselfishness and disregard for material things (*Helv.* 19.4 -19.7).

conduct which I approve and applaud has not yet gained a firm and steadfast dwelling-place within me. He who blushes at riding in a rattle-trap will boast when he rides in style.

Seneca reveals that he has not been able fully to commit to the view that what we own is regarded as superfluous. His language makes it clear that he is torn between two value sets, which contradict one another, but which he nonetheless holds simultaneously: the carriage at whose passage he blushes is more splendid (*lautiorem*), but at the same time he is frustrated that he is unable fully to commit to those things which he praises (*quae laudo*), that is the indifference to wealth he is attempting to cultivate – and the echo of *lautior* in *laudo* underscores the discrepancy. That his lingering attachment to material things and reputation is part of a fully developed value system, albeit one that is perverse, is signaled by Seneca's use of the word *verecundia* to describe his embarrassment: the word designates a traditional Roman virtue.²⁵⁹

Seneca holds double standards. This doubleness is emphasised in the language in which the trip is described, full of doubles: two men (*Ep. 87.2, Ego et Maximus meus*), two happy days (*Ep. 87.2, Biduum... beatissimum*), two blankets (*Ep. 87.2, Duabus penulis*). And the disastrous end of Seneca's trip is doubly embarrassing: he is embarrassed at being seen by the chic in such a humble vehicle, *and* embarrassingly finds that his ostentatious attempts at austerity amount to nothing, rather than to the virtue which he takes pride in seeming to display (and they come to nothing *because of this pride*).²⁶⁰

²⁵⁹ Graver 2007, 56-59: the Stoics distinguished two types of shame: *aischyne* (a passion) and *aidos* (a virtue). See further 206-210.

²⁶⁰ Inwood 2007, *ad loc. Ep. 71.7* – "Seneca seems to be claiming here that being held in contempt is a necessary condition for being a genuinely good man".

Allegri notes that ‘to be shipwrecked in port’ (*in portu naufragium facere*) was a proverbial phrase for the failure of an enterprise at the moment of its inception.²⁶¹ This is a second sense in which Seneca was ‘shipwrecked before he set out.’ Seneca’s chances of progress in this particular leg of that journey to wisdom were sabotaged from the beginning because he had not yet fully excised the attachment to material values which would hold him back. His attempts at practicing virtue were scuppered because he did not jettison enough in the putative shipwreck that occurred before he set out on his voyage: he had not abandoned his perverse embarrassment at the truth (*perversa recti verecundia*). He set out, doomed to failure, and in that sense already shipwrecked.²⁶²

This second sense of the opening phrase allows us too to have a secondary understanding of Seneca’s claim that the shipwreck should not be placed among the Stoic paradoxes. The Stoic paradoxes are truths which seem strange to the uninitiated. But the disastrous end of Seneca’s journey, the shipwreck which prevented him from getting to his destination, was caused by a continued commitment to values outside Stoicism. The shipwreck is thus not a truth to be expressed within the terms of Stoicism, but the problem which arises when Stoicism confronts a false set of values in the mind of a *stultus*.

²⁶¹ Allegri 1999 85ff.

²⁶² Inwood 2007 point out *ad loc. Ep. 87.1* that Seneca the Elder “includes, in his *Controversiae* 7.1.4, a sentence crafted by Quintus Haterius describing someone doomed to failure from before the beginning of his voyage: *naufragus a litore emittitur*, “he left shore shipwrecked already.” In that case the claim was literal, not figurative.” Summers 1910, *ad loc. Ep. 87.1* makes the same observation.

As the trip comes to an end, he notes, *parum adhuc profeci*: he has not come far enough.²⁶³ The echo of the opening line, *naufragiam feci*, reminds us that this is the point to which he is brought back. The problem is not merely a conflict between his theory and his practise, or his writings and his real life. Rather, the opposition is within Seneca's own declarations. Seneca laments that he *ought* to voice Stoic paradoxes (*Ep.* 87.5, *Contra totius generis humani opinions mittenda vox erat*. "I should really have uttered an opinion counter to that in which mankind believe"). He ought to say, "you are mad, you are misled, your admiration devotes itself to superfluous things! You estimate no man at his real worth!" (*Ep.* 87.5, "*Insanitis, erratis, stepetis ad supervacua, neminem aestimatis suo*") – that is, he ought to be able to voice the Stoic paradox that only the wise man is rich. Shipwreck amounts to the fact that he *cannot* express Stoic truths in his own voice. His voyage ends at the moment when it is no longer possible for him to propound Stoicism, because the facts of his own life make it impossible to ignore that he has not in fact taken it to heart. And given that he started out not having fully internalized Stoic dogma, this moment was always going to come: he was shipwrecked before he started. This can be understood as a more general commentary on Stoic progress, for the fact is that most – if not all – *progredientes* will not become sages. Sages are as rare the phoenix, and perhaps not one has ever existed.²⁶⁴ Those *proficientes* who do not attain sagehood will have been as devoid of virtue as the most ignorant of the *stulti*.

Seneca moves on to illustrate the superfluity of wealth. He no longer emphasises that he is presenting a view that is not fully his own – but having read *Ep.* 87.5 the reader knows that that is the case. He offers another anecdote, this time about Cato, drawing a

²⁶³ Allegri 2004, 90 argues, *contra* Garbarino 1997, 150, that the phrase is 'una ripresa stilisticamente marcata dell'incipit... in una sorta di 'Ringkomposition'.

²⁶⁴ *Ep.* 42.1.

contrast between Cato's manner of travelling light, with contemporary travellers who carry superfluous items with them and thus reveal their depraved luxury. Seneca delightedly imagines an encounter between Cato on a loaded-up donkey, and someone of 'these dandies'²⁶⁵ (*Ep.* 87.9) of his own day, travelling amidst Numidian slaves and a cloud of dust. The latter would doubtless appear 'more refined and better attended'²⁶⁶ (*Ep.* 87.9), with his 'luxurious paraphernalia'²⁶⁷ (*Ep.* 87.9). Seneca exclaims his yearning for the good old days and the time of Cato, who was content with his clapped-out old nag, which has been *defrictum*, worn down (as if stripped down to basics), by Cato himself (*Ep.* 87.10).

However, details in Seneca's description of Cato and the dandies seem to undercut the overt point of the comparison. Emphasis is placed upon the amount of baggage with Cato loaded his nag: "Cato used to ride a donkey, and a donkey, at that, which carried saddle-bags containing the master's necessities" (*Ep.* 87.9);²⁶⁸ "O what a glory to the times in which he lived... to be content with a single nag, and with less than a whole nag at that! For part of the animal was pre-empted by the baggage that hung down on either flank" (*Ep.* 87.10). In each instance the great weight of Cato's luggage beneath which his single horse strains is stressed as evidence of virtuous parsimony in itself.²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, the so-called dandy has his retinue rather than what they carry emphasised, and though he is amidst *apparatus delicatos*, his mind is on the sword and the hunting-knife. Noble engagement in gladiatorial games is here an emblem of society's perversion – but nonetheless the machismo of gladiatorial combat is dangerously close

²⁶⁵ *Ex his trossulis.*

²⁶⁶ *Cultior comitatioque.*

²⁶⁷ *Apparatus delicatos.*

²⁶⁸ *Cantherio vehebatur et hippoperis quidem inpositis, ut secum utilia portaret.*

²⁶⁹ *O quantum erat saeculi decus ... uno caballo esse contentum et ne toto quidem! partem enim sarcinae ab utroque latere dependentes occupabant.*

to the ideal of the Roman man who takes pride in physical activity and spurns effeminate luxuries.²⁷⁰

The passage as a whole is characterised by a worrying affinity between the two items Seneca purports to contrast: Cato has less than modern-day dandies, but greater emphasis is laid on what he carries about. After jettisoning his excess baggage, what he is left with what looks alarmingly like what he started out with. On the one hand this could be taken as an illustration of the Stoic paradox: the wise man, who has abandoned his attachment to material wealth, discovers that he has thereby become truly wealthy. But on the other hand it poses a problem: how to tell the difference between the wealth, attachment to which must be abandoned, and the wealth of Stoic wisdom that is the ultimate goal? One might find that the wealth one is left with is not the true wealth of Stoic wisdom after all – and then one will find oneself where one started.

The dangerous similarity of vice and virtue was a preoccupation of Seneca's.²⁷¹ Perhaps the distinction between Cato and the dandies is illusory. At *Ep.* 87.6 Seneca had encouraged Lucilius to think about how examining a man's wealth may show that a portion of it is borrowed. But in the next section it is revealed that this examination is an example of how one can go some distance in *seeming* to strip away illusory measures: in fact, *all* wealth is borrowed – from fortune (*Ep.* 87.7). Two rich men may appear identical – but investigation may prove that one is in the black, one in the red. This investigation seems to have got further to the truth – but in fact, it obscures the truth of the matter: there is no distinction between the men after all, no distinction between what

²⁷⁰ See Edwards 2007 46-77, Barton 1993 47 on this double-edged status. At *Ep.* 30.8 Seneca advises the philosopher to die willingly, like a gladiator.

²⁷¹ Inwood 2007 ad loc. 120.8-9: "The similarity of vice to virtue helps us to learn what true virtue is like, if only because the close but ultimately disappointing resemblance to virtue forces the reflective observer to concentrate and analyse." See my Introduction.

is borrowed from man and what is owned but still borrowed from fortune. Similarly, the difference between Cato and the dandies might turn out to be cosmetic.

Seneca changes the subject with an ambiguous statement: *video non futurum finem in ista materia ullum, nisi quem ipse mihi fecero* (*Ep.* 87.11), which Gummere translates as “I see that there will be no end in dealing with such a theme unless I make an end myself.” But *ista materia*, could just as well mean ‘material possessions’, a continuum of materialism between Cato and the dandies, upon which he himself is also situated, and to which an end can only be made if he takes action himself and renounces his own *materia*. Seneca notes that whoever named luggage *impedimenta* was prescient in doing so (*Ep.* 87.10), for it is only baggage, to which he is irrationally, emotionally attached, which stands in his way to sagehood. This baggage must be abandoned: that abandonment is not a process, a journey – but a single act of will.²⁷² Since virtue is an absolute state, not one which can be crept up on by degrees, whatever improvements one makes on oneself, one has not thereby got closer to wisdom. If one fails to reach virtue one might as well have not set out. This is not to say there is no progress at all. There clearly is. Seneca at *Ep.* 75.8-15 describes the stages through which a *progrediens* (learner Stoic) can hope to pass, and throughout the corpus there is a real sense of improvement.²⁷³ But as the Stoics liked to say, it makes no difference whether one drowns a cubit below the surface or at the bottom of the sea.²⁷⁴ That is, however far

²⁷² See also *Ep.* 71.29-31 for the importance of wanting to learn. Chapter Five of Inwood 2005a, “The will in Seneca” is the fullest treatment of this issue. For further scholarly treatment of the theme, see Inwood 2005a 134-139. Inwood argues that for Seneca the will is affected by cognitive causation.

²⁷³ For example, *Ep.* 16.1.

²⁷⁴ Plut. *De Comm.* 10: “‘Tis so,’ say they; ‘but as he who is not above a cubit under the superficies of the sea is no less drowned than he who is five hundred fathom deep, so they that are coming towards virtue are no less in vice than those that are farther off. And as blind men are still blind, though they shall perhaps a little after recover their sight; so these that have proceeded towards virtue, till such time as they have attained to it, continue foolish and wicked.’ But that they who are in the way towards virtue resemble not the blind, but such as see less clearly, nor are like to those who are drowned, but—those which swim, and that near the harbor,—they themselves testify by their actions.”

one gets on one's voyage towards wisdom, if one does not make it to that distant shore then one might as well have been wrecked in port.

At that Seneca abruptly ends the anecdotal opening section of the letter, and turns his attention to "the syllogisms, as yet very few, belonging to our school and bearing upon the question of virtue, which, in our opinion, is sufficient for the happy life" (*Ep.* 87.11).

In fact, the rest of the letter is taken up with syllogistic discussion. Seneca's moving on to the arguments of the schools at this point is a literary staging of his own refusal to take the step he knows he must in order to proceed, and renounce his attachment to wealth. He has it within his power to make an end to *ista materia* – but he will not.

Furthermore, the anecdotes Seneca has offered do not bring him any closer to renouncing wealth, and in fact, he cycles through syllogism after syllogism proving the indifference of wealth only to reject the validity of each in turn. After disdaining or ridiculing these formal arguments for about 25 sections, Seneca finally he asks the reader to imagine an act dealing with the abolition of riches being brought before the Roman people. Would these syllogisms convince us he asks? The answer, he caustically spells out, is clearly no (*Ep.* 87.41).

We see that the opening, "I was shipwrecked before I embarked," functions as a comment on the shape of the letter as a whole as well. Arguments that bring Seneca to the point of accepting the single, simple Stoic truth that virtue is the only good, and wealth and the opinion of others are thus indifferent are continually staged – but none manages to get him to acceptance. If he was wrecked before he set out, then the jettisoning of baggage when the inevitable wreck is reached (even if this wreck does represent philosophical enlightenment) can only bring him back to where he was and

what he had at the start of his journey, the primal scene of shipwreck, from where he can do nothing but start all over again this time with arguments from the schools.

The strategy is adopted not for the sake of literary cleverness, but because in a Stoic tract the internal struggle of the Stoic cannot be expressed another way. Being still a *proficiens*, Seneca has, by definition, not yet truly accepted virtue and reason as the sole good. He is, necessarily, still attached to *ista materia*. And the letters, since they position themselves as a documentation of his own experience in Stoicism, are bound to mention this. But since the letters are also documents of Stoic teaching, he cannot conclude that wealth is in fact better than the true good – even if it is implicit in the fact that he has not yet embraced sagehood that this is the case. Seneca lets slip at *Ep.* 87.7 that he is speaking in a borrowed voice: he cannot *really*, for himself, denounce wealth as indifferent. This is not only a comment about his level of commitment, but also about the restrictions on his own expression which his incomplete commitment to Stoicism places upon him.

As we have seen, he is generically bound both to preach Stoic doctrine, and generically to speak in his own personal voice. With the staging of advancement and dismissal of dialectical argument, and the metaphor of voyage and shipwreck, Seneca illustrates the attempt and failure to subscribe to Stoic doctrine which he cannot explicitly address. It is not merely an example of Seneca's supposed inability to engage with dialectic, but a strategy which hints at the great unsayable gulf in Stoic experience, the gulf between being aware of Stoic precepts and fully believing them. He cannot, in what is avowedly a Stoic tract, offer counter-arguments against Stoicism in a philosophical letter, even though we must assume some occur to him (otherwise he would embrace Stoicism).

The only thing he can sincerely do is point out his shortcomings, his own hypocrisy.

Failure, shipwreck, is the only moment at which a man can speak for himself *and* speak as an orthodox Stoic. Thus Seneca finishes the letter by telling Lucilius, “if we can, let us speak more boldly; if not, let us speak more frankly” (*Ep.* 87.41 *Si possumus, fortius loquamur; si minus, apertius*).²⁷⁵ The poor substitute for bravely committing to virtue in deed is openly telling of one’s failure to do so.

The non-acceptance of the letter’s supposed point, that only the wise man is rich, is half the lesson. Seneca is confronted with the simple, salvatory truth (essentially the Stoic catechism, virtue is necessary and sufficient for happiness) over and over again, and each time he can or will not accept it: his ship goes down in sight of port; it might as well not have left harbor. Each anecdote, each argument, enacts this lesson over again, as if it has not been learned, necessarily, because the lesson of this letter is that even though it is true, the lesson will not be learned: we are sunk before we start.²⁷⁶ But paradoxically, this self-knowledge is, as Allegri points out in this context,²⁷⁷ a step towards virtue. Honestly to appraise one’s own failings is the necessary first step in the journey towards wisdom: vanity is the *impedimentum* that must be abandoned. Once one emerges like a *naufragus* stripped of this, only then is one ready to embark on the voyage.

²⁷⁵ C.f.. Ahl 1984 on the distinction between the loaded terms *palam* and *aperte*.

²⁷⁶ Schofield 2003 cites another Stoic exemplum which uses the analogy of shipwreck to show that life can be a lose-lose situation: “the instance of the shipwrecked traveler in the water who gets the opportunity to dislodge someone else from a plank that floats past: if he pushes him off, he behaves unjustly (committing an act of violence against another); if he does not, he is a fool (sparing another’s life at the expense of his own).” (Schofield 2003, 252, citing Cicero (as reported in Lactantius *Div. inst.* 5.16) and the anonymous commentary on the *Theaetetus* (col. 5.18–6.31)).

²⁷⁷ 2004, 91-2.

Chapter 4.

In the previous chapter we saw that Seneca uses the metaphor of sea travel and its attendant disasters to illustrate the peculiar nature of Stoic philosophical development. Because self-knowledge and acknowledgement of one's own flaws are prerequisites for moving towards wisdom, the realisation that the philosophical developments that one thought one had made were in fact undermined by a continued attachment to ignorance and vice is to be embraced as a new beginning of one's philosophical journey, even though it is also a disastrous shipwreck in the voyage to enlightenment one thought one was on. Shipwreck then is perceived by the Stoic *proficiens* as *both* disastrous end (from the flawed human perspective) *and* new beginning (from the cosmic perspective which the failure allows him momentarily and in a limited fashion to adopt).

Whereas the previous chapter looked at sailing as a metaphor for forward movement in a man's personal journey towards wisdom, this chapter will look at Seneca's depiction of the introduction or invention of philosophy in human history. As we will see, Seneca again uses sailing as a means to explore this idea. The association suggested itself easily: sailing is a technology whose invention was conventionally regarded as a watershed moment in classical conceptions of prehistory.²⁷⁸ In a mythical prehistoric "Golden Age," men no more sailed the seas than they did till the fields or commit any crime. Sailing was an act of vicious encroachment against nature, an incursion into a

²⁷⁸ See Costa 1973 *ad* 301-79, and *ad loc.* 329, and Hine 2000 *ad* 301-307 for ancient accounts of the first ship (as both a positive and negative development), the Golden Age, and sailing as a sign of the end of it. On the Golden Age, see Baldry 1952, Reckford 1958, Lovejoy and Boas 1997, Nisbet and Hubbard 1989 *ad* Hor. C. 1.3.9ff and Smith 1979 *ad* Tib. 1.3.37 for detailed references to ancient accounts of the first sailor and condemnations of sailing. Rosen 1990 sees Hesiod's remarks on sailing as functioning also as comments on the nature of his poetry; I will argue for a similar connection between the two in the *Medea*.

domain naturally cut off from men, and as such it not only marked but even constituted the end of the Golden Age.²⁷⁹

The myth of the sailing of the first ship had long been fused with ideas about a lost Golden Age. Hesiod, the author usually credited with establishing the Golden Age tradition, identifies it as a time before ships (*Op.* 225-37) and this element was passed on in the tradition. The idea that before men took to the oceans things were better took on a particular resonance for the Romans. Whereas the Greeks saw themselves as having been a maritime people from the earliest times, the Romans flattered themselves that early in their history they had been a simple pastoral folk, with no truck with foreign exploration or trade.²⁸⁰ In fact, the early Romans seem to have been no less reliant on the sea than any other Mediterranean people.²⁸¹ Since its earliest incarnation Rome had been a maritime society. Even the Romans themselves recognised that their city's site on the mouth of the Tiber was the precondition for its pre-eminence in trade and political power in the Mediterranean.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ For a discussion of the folly of navigation in Seneca in the context of general social decline see Limburg 2007 243-264; Limburg's discussion centres on the beginning of *N.Q.* 5, but she draws in a variety other Senecan passages, including *Ep.* 90 (2007 260-1, discussed below), and includes detailed discussion of Roman and secondary literature on the trope. Citroni-Marchetti 1991 remains the main discussion of Roman morals, see especially 116-174 for Seneca's moral language.

²⁸⁰ Sallust *Cat.* 1-2 considers human ingenuity noble, and sailing and agriculture as early products of that noble ingenuity (for Reckford 1958 81, Sallust was influenced by the Stoic Posidonius in his conception of the "really good age of noble Old Romans").

²⁸¹ Brill's *New Pauly* s.v. *Navigation: "During the 6th and 5th cents. BC, the Etruscans, Carthaginians and Greeks ruled navigation and long-distance trade in the western Mediterranean. The Etruscans and Carthaginians even joined forces to tackle piracy (*Hdt.* 1,166). In the 3rd cent. BC, Italian traders became active in the long distance trade. After the 1st Punic War (264-241 BC), ships from Italy supplied Carthage's opponents with food. A presence of Italian ships in the Adriatic sea is also attested from this period (*Pol.* 1,83; 2,8)." The ancient names for the sea – the Romans' *Mare Nostrum* and the Greeks' μεγάλη θάλασσα – hint at its importance. Braudel 1996 (first ed. 1949) established a scholarly purview of the region as a whole; see also Horden and Purcell 2000.

²⁸² *Rep.* 2.5-10: in placing Rome at the mouth of a river, Romulus got the best of both worlds, protecting the city from the vulnerability to attack and vices to which coastal towns are prone, but retaining the advantages of a passage to the sea.

Maritime expansion did mark a watershed in Roman society, and it did bring in wealth. But the Romans remained coy about their maritime success (by way of emphasis of those hardy old Romans' traditional values and reluctance to resort to such an undignified means of transport, the story went that the fleet had been built in a hurry, on the model of a Carthaginian wreck that had washed up on the shore).²⁸³ The most powerful men insisted on the posture that their wealth was based firmly in the land (the *Lex Claudia* prohibiting the senatorial class from engaging in sea trade remained in place well into the empire),²⁸⁴ even when the reality was clearly otherwise (Plutarch insists that Cato *Censor* was an enthusiastic speculator on sea voyages, getting around laws preventing large-scale investment in any one enterprise by spreading his risk). The hypocrisy inherent in the social prestige of farming was parodied in the *Satyricon*, with Trimalchio's horizonless estates demonstrating that old-fashioned values were also social tags and as such just as vulgar as any other. But though farming too had no place in Hesiod's Golden Age, the Romans elided their imagined land-working forebears with the inhabitants of mythological time. In fact, the primitivising moves of the Cynics and the Stoics went a long way to facilitating this identification.²⁸⁵

Philosophy is like sailing then because it is a system of such sophistication that it could not have been found in the simple Golden Age. But the similarity is more than this:

²⁸³ Polybius 1.20-1.

²⁸⁴ The *lex Claudia de nave senatorum* prohibited senators from owning seagoing ships with a capacity of more than 300 amphoras (218 BC; Liv. 21.63.3). See D'Arms and Kopff 1980 77-78 for a brief survey of the major ancient evidence for the law, and of the scholarly debate over how normative it was.

²⁸⁵ Reckford 1958 80: "it was the Stoa, through the influence of Posidonius, that determined the way in which the Romans would use the Golden Age. The Old Stoa held a number of views to which the myth of the Golden Age was excellently adapted, provided one accepted the allegorical explanations of myths as presenting philosophical truths in popular form." (Reckford notes, 1958 81 n. 16, that "Posidonius' idealising of the early Romans seems to have been influenced by the primitivism of the Cynics". Lovejoy and Boas 1997 263ff discuss Sen. *Med.* 301-381 in terms of 'Stoic primitivism'.

Polybius *Hist.* 6.4 describes a cycle of political constitutions from monarchy through oligarchy and democracy to the chaos of mob rule (other thinkers had described a progression of constitutions); see Walbank 1972 139-40, who argues that the cyclic concept was already present in Aristotle.

sailing was a transgressive act which ushered humanity out of their happy prehistory and into their vicious present, but also a technology upon which Rome's major source of pride, the Empire, was seen ultimately to depend. Philosophy can be seen as similarly double edged. Seneca depicts it as a technology which at once entails alienation from the natural order and the sole vessel by which men may hope to attain harmony with that natural order in virtue. As we will see, the introduction of philosophy, and the introduction of sailing are simultaneous with the introduction of law into the world, and there are passages in which both are discussed in terms of laws. This chapter thus goes back to that primordial moment of law-giving, an act which must always be paradoxical, since it establishes the grounds upon which it itself operates.²⁸⁶

Letter 90.²⁸⁷

The passage where Seneca addresses most directly the introduction of sailing in course of human history and its relationship with philosophy is in letter 90.

The letter begins with a discussion of philosophy:

Quis dubitare, mi Lucili, potest quin deorum immortalium munus sit quod vivimus, philosophiae quod bene vivimus? Itaque tanto plus huic nos debere quam dis

²⁸⁶ For an overview of "Natural Law in Seneca," see Inwood's essay of the same name: Inwood 2005 Chapter 8.

²⁸⁷ For letter 90 see Blankert 1941, Pfligersdorffer 1982, Summers 1983, Costa 1989, Lana 1990 142-8, Pani 1985, Citti 1998, Degl'Innocenti Pierini 2004, Bees 2005.

quanto maius beneficium est bona vita quam vita pro certo haberetur, nisi ipsam philosophiam di tribuissent; cuius scientiam nulli dederunt, facultatem omnibus.

Nam si hanc quoque bonum vulgare fecissent et prudentes nasceremur, sapientia quod in se optimum habet perdidisset, inter fortuita non esse. Nunc enim hoc in illa pretiosum atque magnificum est, quod non obvenit, quod illam sibi quisque debet, quod non ab alio petitur. Quid haberes quod in philosophia suspiceret si beneficiaria res esset?

Ep. 90.1-2

Who can doubt, my dear Lucilius, that life is the gift of the immortal gods, but that living well is the gift of philosophy? Hence the idea that our debt to philosophy is greater than our debt to the gods, in proportion as a good life is more of a benefit than mere life, would be regarded as correct, were not philosophy itself a boon which the gods have bestowed upon us. They have given the knowledge thereof to none, but the faculty of acquiring it they have given to all.

For if they had made philosophy also a general good, and if we were gifted with understanding at our birth, wisdom would have lost her best attribute – that she is not one of the gifts of fortune. For as it is, the precious and noble characteristic of wisdom is that she does not advance to meet us, that each man is indebted to himself for her, and that we do not seek her at the hands of others. What would there be in philosophy worthy of your respect, if she were a thing that came by bounty?

Philosophy is to live well, and to seek the truth about divinity and humanity (*Ep.* 90.3). Crucially, it is not given by the gods, although the means to acquire it is given. Its special value is that we acquire it ourselves. To illustrate this, Seneca gives a potted summary of Posidonius' view of human history which shows that laws are not innate among men, but were formulated by wise men in response to a specific set of circumstances. In the Golden Age, men "followed nature" by unthinkingly obeying the strongest man in the community, just as do bulls and elephants (*Ep.* 90.4).

*Illo ergo saeculo quod aureum perhibent penes sapientes fuisse regnum
Posidonius iudicat. Hi continebant manus et infirmiore a validioribus tuebantur,
suadebant dissuadebantque et utilia atque inutilia monstrabant; horum prudentia
ne quid deesset suis providebat, fortitudo pericula arcebat, beneficentia augebat
ornabatque subiectos. Officium erat imperare, non regnum. Nemo quantum
posset adversus eos experiebatur per quos coeperat posse, nec erat cuiquam
aut animus in iniuriam aut causa, cum bene imperanti bene pareretur, nihilque
rex maius minari male parentibus posset quam ut abiret e regno.*

*Sed postquam subrepentibus vitiis in tyrannidem regna conversa sunt, opus esse
legibus coepit, quas et ipsas inter initia tulere sapientes. Solon, qui Athenas
aequo iure fundavit, inter septem fuit sapientia notos; Lycurgum si eadem aetas
tulisset, sacro illi numero accessisset octavus. Zaleuci leges Charondaeque
laudantur; hi non in foro nec in consultorum atrio, sed in Pythagorae tacito illo
sanctoque secessu didicerunt iura quae florenti tunc Siciliae et per Italiam
Graeciae ponerent.*

Accordingly, in that age which is maintained to be the Golden Age, Posidonius holds that the government was under the jurisdiction of the wise. They kept their hands under control, and protected the weaker from the stronger. They gave advice, both to do and not to do; they showed what was useful and what was useless. Their forethought provided that their subjects should lack nothing; their bravery warded off dangers; their kindness enriched and adorned their subjects. For them ruling was a service, not an exercise of royalty. No ruler tried his power against those to whom he owed the beginnings of his power; and no one had the inclination, or the excuse, to do wrong, since the ruler ruled well and the subject obeyed well, and the king could utter no greater threat against disobedient subjects than that they should depart from the kingdom.

But when once vice stole in and kingdoms were transformed into tyrannies, a need arose for laws and these very laws were in turn framed by the wise. Solon, who established Athens upon a firm basis by just laws, was one of the seven men renowned for their wisdom. Had Lycurgus lived in the same period, an eighth would have been added to that hallowed number seven. The laws of Zaleucus and Charondas are praised; it was not in the forum or in the offices of skilled counsellors, but in the silent and holy retreat of Pythagoras, that these two men learned the principles of justice which they were to establish in Sicily (which at that time was prosperous) and throughout Grecian Italy.

Thus Seneca's account illustrates the point he made at the opening of the letter, that wisdom is not merely handed down from nature but must be acquired, be showing that society has not always had laws, but even these had to be invented by wise men. The idea that laws were introduced as a response to vice can be found elsewhere in classical

thought. Seneca's brief account here is revealing of the qualities he feels define laws. Before the introduction of vice into the world and the consequent invention of laws, there had been government and jurisdiction. Both Golden Age governance and the laws which became necessary as the Golden Age came to an end were provided by the wise. In the Golden Age, it is true, no one had the inclination to do wrong. But even resistance to the established order cannot be the true differentiator between the Golden Age and the age of laws which followed, since the Golden Age rulers also had available to them the sanction of exile for disobedience. The major difference between the Golden Age rulers and the later lawgivers was not authority or enforcement, but the nature of their injunctions. The Golden Age rulers gave advice – “both to do and not to do; they showed what was useful and what was useless” (*suadebant dissuadebantque et utilia atque inutilia monstrabant*) – pertaining to specific situations, whereas the laws were abstract – formulated “not in the forum or in the offices of skilled counsellors” (*non in foro nec in consultorum atrio*) but in Pythagoras' retreat. What is inherent to the concept of law on this account is not authority or sanctions (both of these can exist without laws) but abstraction.

Up until that point, Seneca says, he agrees with Posidonius (*Ep.* 90.7). But although the laws were unquestionably formulated by the wise, the main argument of the letter takes issue with Posidonius' further insistence that human technologies were also invented by wise men. According to the Posidonian narrative, which Seneca accepts, not only vice but also technology was absent from the Golden Age, but later both were introduced into the world. For Posidonius, philosophy is responsible for all human developments: “Posidonius says: “When men were scattered over the earth, protected by eaves or by the dug-out shelter of a cliff or by the trunk of a hollow tree, it was philosophy that taught

them to build houses” (Ep. 90.7). Likewise, Posidonius claims a wise man invented tools (Ep. 90.11), mining (Ep. 90.12), smelting (Ep. 90.13), weaving (Ep. 90.20), farming (Ep. 90.21), bread-making (Ep. 90.22-23) and even, Seneca contemptuously suggests, shoe-making (Ep. 90.23).

Seneca just cannot accept this: so many technologies pander to human vice, and these cannot have been invented by philosophy (90.7-9). *Ista nata sunt iam nascente luxuria* (Ep. 90.9, “All this sort of thing was born when luxury was being born – this matter of cutting timbers square and cleaving a beam with unerring hand as the saw made its way over the marked-out line”). For Seneca, the propensity of all technologies to become prey to human vice is enough to demonstrate that they could not have been made by philosophers or philosophy. Furthermore, the fact that men could exist without these technologies, as they did in the Golden Age, before vice entered the world, is proof that they are superfluous. As he says at Ep. 90.9, technologies only entered the world when luxury did, that is, at the end of the Golden Age. Men in the Golden Age, on the other hand, simply followed Nature and had no need for such indulgences as the arts of fish farming and house-building afford.

Illi sapientes fuerunt aut certe sapientibus similes quibus expedita erat tutela corporis. Simplici cura constant necessaria: in delicias laboratur. Non desiderabis artifices: sequere naturam. Illa noluit esse districtos; ad quaecumque nos cogebat instruxit.

Ep. 90.16

Those were wise men, or at any rate like the wise, who found the care of the body a problem easy to solve. The things that are indispensable require no elaborate pains for their acquisition; it is only the luxuries that call for labour. Follow nature, and you will need no skilled craftsmen.

However, the qualification, “at any rate like the wise” is important, because Seneca goes on later in the letter to spell out the implications of the letter’s opening assertion, that wisdom must be earned: those men living in the Golden Age were not yet truly wise because they had not discovered wisdom for themselves. But first, Seneca summarises his view of technology’s relationship with reason:

Omnia ista ratio quidem, sed non recta ratio commenta est. Hominis enim, non spaiensis inventa sunt, tam mehercules quam navigia, quibus amnes quibusque maria transimus aptatis ad excipiendum ventorum impetum velis et additis a tergo gubernaculis, quae huc atque illuc cursum navigii torqueant. Exemplum a piscibus tractum est, qui cauda reguntur et levi eius in utrumque momento velocitatem suam flectunt.

Ep. 90.24

Reason did indeed devise all these things, but it was not right reason. It was man, but not the wise man, that discovered them; just as they invented ships, in which we cross rivers and seas – ships fitted with sails for the purpose of catching the force of the winds, ships with rudders added at the stern in order to turn the vessel’s course in one direction or another. The model followed was the

fish, which steers itself by its tail, and by its slightest motion on this side or on that bends its swift course.

As we will see, sailing elsewhere is a privileged example of the technologies whose invention marked the end of the Golden Age (as it was too an instance freighted with importance in Greek and Roman thought). Here Seneca's claim that such technologies were created by reason – just not by right reason – acknowledges their development out of that spark of ingenuity which marks out humans out of all creatures as sharing in the nature of the divine – but denies that they were created out of the full realisation of that spark. Seneca argues that wisdom does not involve herself in the minutiae of everyday things, which are beneath her dignity (*Quid illi tam parvula adsignas?* “Why do you assign to her such petty things?” *Ep.* 90.27).

This sparks a brief meditation on the nature of Wisdom. Wisdom is the artisan of nothing other than life itself (*Ep.* 90.27). She guides us toward happiness (*ceterum ad beatum statum tendit, illo ducit, illo vias aperit*. “But wisdom's course is toward the state of happiness; thither she guides us, thither she opens the way for us.” *Ep.* 90.27).

Reason shows us what is evil, and the difference between the great and the merely inflated. She gives us knowledge of all nature and the gods, a vision of the entire universe, the beginning of things, the eternal reason which animates the universe, the soul, and incorporeal truth (*Ep.* 90.28-29). “Finally, she has turned her attention from the corporeal to the incorporeal, and has closely examined truth and the marks whereby truth is known, inquiring next how that which is equivocal can be distinguished from the truth, whether in life or in language; for in both are elements of the false mingled with the true” (*Ep.* 90.29 *Deinde a corporibus se ad incorporalia transtulit veritatemque et*

argumenta eius excussit; post haec quemadmodum discernerentur vitae aut vocis ambigua; in utraque enim falsa veris inmixta sunt). Reason does not concern herself with such matters as shoemaking or sailing, because these do not deal with the truth. In fact, reason is so abstracted it does not deal with either life or language, but rather with pure essences: wisdom, happiness, the true nature of things. Furthermore, any skills a given wise man may have had in practices and technologies which are not governed by wisdom did not involve him *qua* wise man: “just as there are a great many things which wise men do as men, not as wise men” (*Ep.* 90.31, *sicut multa sapientes faciunt qua homines sunt, non qua sapientes*).

This brings Seneca back to the letter’s first point: that wisdom is not innate, but must be learned. He has already indicated that the invention of law is an instance of this process of attaining wisdom. Philosophy, Seneca insists, could not have existed “when the arts and crafts were still unknown and when useful things could only be learned by use” (*Ep.* 90.35, *illo rudi saeculo quo adhuc artificia deerant et ipso usu discebantur utilia*). In this phrase Seneca reveals that the absence of technology in the Golden Age is directly related to the absence of law: just as governance in the Golden Age consisted of instructions and advice about specific cases rather than general rules or laws, so technical skill in the Golden Age could only be learned by use – with no possibility for the extrapolation of more general “arts and crafts,” which utilise more general principles in a manner analogous to laws. The invention of technology and the invention of law both come down to the extraction of general rules that can be applied to different situations. Viewed like this, it is easy to see why Seneca feels philosophy could not have existed in the Golden Age: philosophical understanding consists precisely of application of general

principles to life: Stoicism is not a set of arbitrary injunctions to be memorised, but the reasoned application of the single true standard of wisdom to all things.

Though men of the Second Age (distinct from a primitive early time, “a fortune-favoured period when the bounties of nature lay open to all, for men's indiscriminate use, before avarice and luxury had broken the bonds which held mortals together, and they, abandoning their communal existence, had separated and turned to plunder,” *Ep.* 90.36, *fortunata tempora, cum in medio iacerent beneficia naturae promiscue utenda, antequam avaritia atque luxuria dissociavere mortales et ad rapinam ex consortio <docuere> discurrere*. This time apparently corresponds to the Golden Age; Dodds observes that Posidonius’ studies of the various tribes meant that he “knew too much about the ways of contemporary ‘primitives’ to treat man’s earliest days as a Golden Age”),²⁸⁸ lived in such a manner that God himself would approve as a system of governance (*Ep.* 90.37). Seneca describes the enviable lives of these men, and how the introduction of vice meant an end to these high and poverty for them (*Ep.* 90.38-43). But though non-vicious they were not yet wise precisely because they had not formulated divine laws, but in ignorance of the standard of wisdom has no laws at all:

Sed quamvis egregia illis vita fuerit et carens fraude, non fuere sapientes, quando hoc iam in opere maximo nomen est. Non tamen negaverim fuisse alti spiritus viros et, ut ita dicam, a dis recentes. Neque enim dubium est, quin meliora mundus nondum effetus ediderit. Quemadmodum autem omnibus indoles fortior fuit et ad labores paratior, ita non erant ingenia omnibus consummata. Non enim dat natura virtutem; ars est bonum fieri.

²⁸⁸ Dodds 1985 19, referring to Reinhardt 1921 397-9.

Ep. 90.44.

But no matter how excellent and guileless was the life of the men of that age, they were not wise men; for that title is reserved for the highest achievement. Still, I would not deny that they were men of lofty spirit and – I may use the phrase – fresh from the gods. For there is no doubt that the world produced a better progeny before it was yet worn out. However, not all were endowed with mental faculties of highest perfection, though in all cases their native powers were more sturdy than ours and more fitted for toil. For nature does not bestow virtue; it is an art to become good.

Ignorance of vice meant these men of old had no opportunity to exercise any of the virtues of restraint: *deerat illis iustitia, deerat prudentia, deerat temperantia ac fortitudo. Omnibus his virtutibus habebat similia quaedam rudis vita* (Ep. 90.46, “justice was unknown to them, unknown prudence, unknown also self-control and bravery; but their rude life possessed certain qualities akin to all these virtues”). It is only when vice is present in the world that it is possible to be good, since in order truly to be good one must consciously reject vice. A correlate of this is that it is only in response to vice that laws are given, and that philosophy itself is created. This demonstrates men’s facility for wisdom and goodness after the introduction of vice: it allows them to apprehend laws and formulate philosophical dogma, both exercises of reason, and philosophy, whereas before they acted on instinct, or relied on their leaders to do so. Thus men after the Golden Age have two things which enable them truly to approach wisdom and virtue: firstly, since vice exists in the world, they are able consciously to choose virtue, and secondly, also as a consequence of this vice they are enable to formulate their moral sense in the form of a philosophical system. Thus, philosophy, virtue and vice are

intimately entwined. Philosophy must attempt to transcend vice and aspire fully to virtue, but really the three things are born alongside one another. Seneca concludes,

*Virtus non contingit animo nisi instituto et edocto et ad summum adsidua
exercitatione perducto. Ad hoc quidem, sed sine hoc nascimur, et in optimis
quoque, antequam erudias, virtutis materia, non virtus est. Vale.*

Ep. 90.46

Virtue is not vouchsafed to a soul unless that soul has been trained and taught, and by unremitting practice brought to perfection. For the attainment of this boon, but not in the possession of it, were we born; and even in the best of men, before you refine them by instruction, there is but the stuff of virtue, not virtue itself. Farewell.

Before, Seneca had insisted that the wise man could not have invented technologies because of their propensity for vice. But here we see that he has invented the technology of philosophy. which was born alongside vice. Furthermore, Seneca has said that wisdom will not concern itself for things in life or language, because these things are riddled with errors. It is above dealing with anything but abstraction. But what is philosophy apart from a discourse intended to achieve wisdom?

To prove his point against Posidonius, Seneca need only really demonstrate that wise men did not *invent* these technologies. But he goes on to make the stronger argument that wise men have never used these technologies at all:

Non abduxit, inquam, se, ut Posidonio videtur, ab istis artibus sapiens, sed ad illas omnino non venit. Nihil enim dignum inventu iudicasset, quod non erat dignum perpetuo usu iudicaturus. Ponenda non sumeret.

Ep. 90.30.

It is my opinion that the wise man has not withdrawn himself, as Posidonius thinks, from those arts which we were discussing, but that he never took them up at all. For he would have judged that nothing was worth discovering that he would not afterwards judge to be worth using always. He would not take up things which would have to be laid aside.

In denying that the wise man has ever used technology Seneca also suggests that he has never known but rejected vice, has not made the transition from vice to virtue. It would be easier to understand if Seneca had more explicitly made the weaker assertion that the wise men never used the technologies *when they were wise*. Perhaps one ought to supply that sense to the passage. But this produces a contorted reading: one would have to hold that Seneca is saying that *before they were wise*, future wise men did use those arts, but in withdrawing from them became wise, and from that point on never touched them again. This meaning is a perverse one to attach to the assertion that “the wise man has not withdrawn himself from those arts.” The passage seems to suggest rather that the wise men were always wise, and thus never used technologies which were below reason. The idea of wise men who have never not been wise seems to fly in the face of all Seneca’s ideas about philosophical progress. It also appears to undermine Seneca’s previous assertion that one must understand and reject vice to be considered virtuous (can one understand and reject vice without having been vicious?). But the implications are more than metaphorical: if wise men have never indulged in

sailing, a technology partaking in reason, but not right reason, then why should they ever have involved themselves in that other skill ushered in by the end of the Golden Age, philosophy? But if they have not partaken in it, then they cannot be truly wise: wisdom is a skill which must be acquired, it is not given by nature. The letter thus poses a problem: those who have not known vice cannot be truly virtuous. But the wise have never partaken of things which are vicious or even non-virtuous: given that it is explicitly identified as an art which arose *after* vice entered the world, and continually analogised with sailing, might not philosophical training itself be included among these activities which are beneath the *sapiens*?

Philosophy must be practised at least at first by someone alienated from true, divine reason. The whole point of philosophy is that it brings man to reason. For the Stoics, one cannot be slightly reasoning: reason is an absolute which one either has or does not.

Medea.²⁸⁹

Seneca's *Medea* is, among other things, a dramatic rendering of the primal moment of law-giving. As in Letter 90, the first giving of laws is represented as simultaneous with the invention of sailing. In this play that moment is in this case represented by the sailing of the very first boat.²⁹⁰ The play takes place after the voyage of the Argo, and in

²⁸⁹ On *Medea*: Bishop 1965, Henry and Walker 1967, Kullmann 1970, Rambaux 1972, Maurach 1972, Lawall 1979, Ahl 1986, Fyfe 1983, Henderson 1983.

²⁹⁰ The *Medea* of Euripides remained popular long after its first performance. In fact, it did not win the prize at the City Dionysia in 431 BC. But the transmitted text has one of the largest number of actors' interpolations

both the Euripidean original and the Senecan version the aftermath of that first voyage is a haunting presence. My reading will explore the implications for law-giving that that first sailing entailed, inasmuch as it represented both the discovery by man of the laws of nature through the transgression of those laws, and the subjection of the waves to a set of humanly imposed laws. Euripides' *Medea* opens with Medea's Nurse expressing the wish that the Argo had never sailed: if the voyage had never taken place, Medea would never have come to Corinth and married Jason. In Seneca's *Medea*, the title character opens the action with a long prayer to the gods of marriage, sea travel, and revenge. Costa, in his commentary on the Senecan play, insists that, "Seneca's opening owes nothing to Euripides' nurse".²⁹¹ I disagree with this judgement, and will argue that Seneca's play takes the imprecation against sea travel to its heart, from its opening

(Mossman 2011 54) and its impact is evident from its clear influence on surviving later literature and art. For performance history and literary influence, see Hall, Macintosh and Taplin 2000, and Mastronarde 2002. For *Medea* in art, see Sourvinou Inwood 1997a 279-81, Taplin 2007 114-25, LIMP s.v. *Medeia. See also Mossman 2011 4-70 for the myth, earlier and later literary treatments, and comprehensive bibliography.

Euripides' *Medea* launched a raft of successors. See Mossman 2011 53-58 and Costa 1973 7-11. As Costa 1973 7 writes, "About six Greek and about six Latin *Medea* plays are known, but only fragments survive apart from Euripides' (431 BC) and Seneca's plays. The Latin playwrights include Ennius, Accius (a fair number of fragments each), and Ovid (two lines only). Ovid also treated the legend in at length in his *Metamorphoses* vii. 1-424, and in the twelfth of the *Heroides*, and imagined letter to Jason from the deserted Medea. The only other version of much interest to the study of Seneca's play is the epic *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius (third century BC), particularly the third and fourth books, where Medea plays a part in the story." For the *Argo* in Roman literature, see Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1999 221-242.

The most famous and only fully surviving post-Euripidean *Medea*-play is Seneca's. As with all Seneca's tragedies, attaching a secure date to the *Medea* is impossible. Tarrant 1976 dismisses the viability of internal references for dating, though by 1985 he is at least convinced they are Neronian (Tarrant 1985 10). Fitch 1981, after metrical analysis, divides "the plays tentatively into three groups: an early group, composed of *Ag.*, *Pha.* and *Oed.*; a middle group, made up of *Med.*, *Tro.*, and *HF*; and a late group, consisting of *Thy.* and *Phoen.*" (292). Nisbet 1990 finds echoes of lines of *Tro.* and *HF* in *Apocolyntosis*, thus placing their composition before 54. He also detects references to contemporary events scattered throughout the plays (including *Med.* 35f, about cutting through the Isthmus of Corinth, and 375ff, which he reads as a reference to the Claudian expedition to Britain; both passages are discussed below): his arguments are ingenious, but impossible to prove.

²⁹¹ *Ad loc.* Biondi 1984, 17-18, argues that Seneca's decision to change the beginning of Euripides' play was a conscious effort to situate it in the achronic and atopic realm of the Psyche, an indication that that would be his subject. See my discussion of Biondi, below.

lines. It is, in fact, far more preoccupied with sea travel, and develops a much more complex picture of it than the Greek play.²⁹²

In her opening lines, Medea addresses the marriage gods, principally Juno in her role as presiding goddess of marriage (*Med.* 1-2), Pallas Athene, who taught Tiphys, helmsman of the Argo, to bridle that first ship (*quaeque domituram freta | Tiphyn novam frenare docuisti ratem*, *Med.* 2-3), the savage tamer of the deep sea (*Med.* 4; Neptune, or perhaps Tiphys himself), the sun, Titan (*Med.* 5), and sinister Hecate, here understood to be the Moon (*Med.* 6-7). The mixture of gods imprecated is interesting. Medea slides easily between address to the gods responsible for marriage, and those responsible for the crossing of the sea. The connection between these two areas of human experience is further underlined by the description of the sea as 'needing to be tamed' (*domituram freta*, *Med.* 2) and the address to the sea god, or perhaps the first sailor as a culture hero, as *dominator*. This language of domination is familiar from nuptial contexts. Sea-faring and marriage seem to be made analogous, both acts of taming. Finally, Medea directs her prayer to the underworld: the "chaos of eternal night," the ghosts of the dead, and Persephone (*Med.* 9-11), and the Erinyes (*Med.* 13-17) who, she says, were her own marriage gods (*Med.* 16-17). This assimilation of the Erinyes with the gods of marriage makes marriage a bloody crime to be expiated; by association sea-going too seems to take on this status.

Thus, the play's opening words bring together the gods of marriage, the sea and the underworld. The association of these spheres suggests that the irreversibility of

²⁹² Biondi 1984 recognises the importance of the voyage of the Argo to the play in the title of his commentary on it: "Il nefas Argonautico: *mythos e logos* nella *Medea* di Seneca". Braden observes, "On one level, the *Medea* is about a society that does something new and then tries to avoid even knowing the consequences" (1970 35).

marriage and death applies also to sailing. Sailing is thus depicted as the broaching of a frontier beyond which the subject is irreversibly altered (as in marriage or death). In fact, the association of marriage (of a woman) with death was already a familiar trope in literature, and particularly tragedy, so the only novelty is adding the sinister overtones of the underworld to sailing as well. The first choral ode (*Med.* 54-115), whose parallelism to Medea's opening speech is brilliantly demonstrated by Biondi, is a marriage hymn, as if the audience were itself present at that rite of passage. Medea declares that she will herself carry the bridesmaid's torch and commit vengeance (*Med.* 37ff), as if the avenging fury present at her marriage (*Med.* 13-17) were perpetuating a cycle in which her own marriage participated. Her torch is a "nuptial pine" (*pronubam pinum*, *Med.* 40): marriage torches were traditionally made of pine – but so were boats, and the word far more often appears in poetry as metonymy for a ship than a marriage torch. Marriage is the frontier which must be crossed in order to graduate to greater evil: a little later, Medea declares that she now will commit greater crimes – after having given birth (the marker, like marriage, of another stage in a woman's life, *Med.* 50). This sense of sailing as marking an irreversible crossing is crucial to the play.

The second choral ode of the *Medea* is one of the most famous passages in all Senecan drama.²⁹³ The Chorus meditates on the sailing of the *Argo*, characterising it as a transgression against the laws of nature, describing the terrors of the voyage, but ending on a note of hope: the world has been opened up. The ode has drawn a good deal of critical attention, and it has rightly been observed that it draws upon the language of both a mythical Golden Age, and of Roman imperialism.²⁹⁴ The Chorus expands upon the idea which has, as we have seen, been hinted at so far: that sailing on the sea was a

²⁹³ Biondi's description of it as "una sorta di tragedia nella tragedia," 1984 *ad* 301, is apt.

²⁹⁴ Costa 1973 *ad loc.*, 107.

transgressive and impious act (later, they will compare it to Phaedrus' driving of the chariot of the sun, forgetful of the bounds set by his father, *Med.* 599-602):

*Audax nimium qui freta primus
rate tam fragili perfida rupit
terrasque suas posterga uidens
animam leuibus credidit auris,
dubioque secans aequora cursu
potuit **tenui** fidere **ligno**
inter uitae mortisque uices
nimium **gracili** limite **ducto**.*

Med. 301-308

Daring, too daring, the man who first broke into
the treacherous seas with a boat so fragile;
who, seeing his own land left behind him,
committed his life to the fickle breezes,
and cutting the seas on an unsure course
could put his trust in thin wooden planks;
slender, too slender the margin drawn
between the paths of life and death.

As Costa notes, *audax* recalls C.1.3, Horace's prayer for the safe passage of Virgil to Greece (Horace uses the word twice at C. 3.25 and C. 3.27, at the starts of lines, describing mankind, and Jason, for committing the *vetitum nefas* of sailing the sea), and thus inscribes the ode into a tradition of recollections of the pre-nautical Golden Age.

The passage also contains some unmistakable and deliberately placed meta-poetic markers. Aside from the clear echoes of Horace's poem about the poet Virgil, *ducto* (*Med.* 308) recalls *deductus* which, along with *tenuis* (*Med.* 306) and *gracilis* (*Med.* 308), was a watchword of the Alexandrian Neoteric movement, as translated into Latin. *Lignus* (*Med.* 306), which is used here with its literal sense of 'wood', can also refer to a wooden writing tablet (and its synonym *silva*, like the Greek *hulē*, can mean 'matter' or 'subject'). These words alert the reader to a meta-literary sense, which is explored as the ode progresses, and the Chorus begins to characterize seafaring as a form of knowledge – and even of language. These meta-literary pointers are not merely mannered cleverness, but introduce a major theme of the ode, which associates sailing with human language, and human knowledge and association which is extremely important for our purposes.

At *Med.* 309 the Chorus declare that at that time of the Argo's sailing no one yet knew the stars (*nondum quisquam sidera norat*), and there was not yet *usus* of them (*Med.* 310-311). In itself this is an unremarkable roundabout way of asserting that sailing was a new technology, which made use of the natural world in a previously unheard of manner. But as the Chorus continues, it seems that they are making a stronger claim: sailing is not merely a new technology, but a new mode of knowledge, even a new way of enunciating the world. When the Argo sailed, Boreas and Zephyrus did not yet have names (*nondum Boreas, nondum Zephyrus | nomen habebant*, *Med.* 316-317): it is as if sailing is the act which named them. Tiphys, the Argo's helmsman, wrote laws for these newly named winds.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁵ Perhaps Horace was making a similar connection between poetry and sailing, as assertions of man's rational mastery, in his prayer for Virgil's safe sea passage, C.1.3, which turns into a condemnation of the audacity of the first sailor but, as Commager 1962 118-119 notes, a strangely admiring one.

Ausus Tiphys

pandere uasto carbasa ponto

legesque nouas scribere uentis:

Med. 320-322

Tiphys dared

to spread his canvas on the vast sea

and write new laws for the winds.

Though meta-poetic markers identify seafaring with language, by allying it also with the peculiar speech-acts of naming and law-making, Seneca makes it clear that it is not a descriptive enunciation but a performative one, which brings into existence what it describes. Poetry itself, by association, seems to take on this power.²⁹⁶ Man did not just discover the winds and learn how to use them – but himself laid down the laws for how they should behave for his use. As it is sailed, the sea changes: it becomes obedient (*iussitque pati uerbera pontum*). Before the advent of sailing, and all that went along with it, men also did not know wealth (*Med.* 334, *non norat ope*). But again, it was not that wealth was out there to be discovered, but sailing was the act which created wealth, through imperial expansion. Hardie notes that in the *Aeneid* the sea can be a symbol of the coming universal Roman rule.²⁹⁷

Williams 2005b 445-8 observes that Seneca's systematisation of the winds in *N.Q.* 5 is an imposition on human rationality upon nature and the turbulent passions (for which untamed winds metaphorically stand) akin to imperial rule and which also shares in the potential for hubris of imperial rule. See also Limburg 2007 245-8 for the folly of navigation in Book 5.

²⁹⁶ For Stoic attitudes to poetry, see Nussbaum 1993.

²⁹⁷ 1986 304, with reference to *Aen.* 1.235f. Hardie 1986 302-310 treats the sea in the *Aeneid*. For sea power in the ancient world see Thiel 1946 and Starr 1989.

But even as the first sailors enunciate its laws, the sea also seems to silence those who sail her, including poets:

*Orpheus tacuit torpente lyra
ipsaque uocem perdidit Argo.*

Med. 348-349

Orpheus fell silent, his lyre dumbfounded,
and the *Argo* herself lost her voice.

Lawall notes that at in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius of Rhodes, at this point the Argonauts stilled the clashing rocks. But terror at the rocks in Seneca's version of the myth makes Orpheus dumb – he who was famous for charming rocks.²⁹⁸ The Chorus also evoke the image of Scylla – a horrifying and unnatural monster – one who is depicted as both noisy and unable to speak.

*Quid cum Siculi uirgo Pelori,
rabidos utero succincta canes,*

²⁹⁸ Lawall 1979. For Montiglio 2006, 571-2, "two episodes in particular announce the apocalyptic effects of that expedition [the sailing of the *Argo* in Seneca's *Medea*]: the failure of the Argonauts to immobilise the Symplegades and the sudden silence of Orpheus. ... Orpheus' exceptional silence conveys his equally exceptional failure to control the cosmos and to elicit universal sympathy by his art. Orpheus is uncharacteristically unable to charm the rocks just as the *Argo* is unable to fix them. The paralysis of his voice signifies the threat that looms over the cosmos as the *Argo* is crossing through the Symplegades. The loss of harmony between man and nature initiated by this passage soon silences Orpheus forever: his severed head has no voice as it runs down the Hebrus (631), again, contrary to mainstream tradition." Though see contra, Lawall 1979 422 "The first example of the Argonauts' fear is the passage through the Clashing Rocks, which was so terrifying that Tiphys' hand slipped from the tiller and Orpheus' lyre fell silent, thus reducing these two symbols of man's abilities to control nature through human technology and art to impotence. Yet, despite the debilitating terror, the *Argo* did pass through the Clashing Rocks. Next, Scylla's barking terrified the Argonauts, yet apparently constituted no serious physical threat. Finally, there are the Sirens, but Orpheus not only checked their threat but nearly forced them to follow the *Argo*, instead of allowing the *Argo* to be lured by the Sirens to shipwreck on the rocks. Here man through his art clearly triumphs over nature."

omnis pariter soluit hiatus?

quis non totos horruit artus

totiens uno latrante malo?

Med. 350-354

What of the time when the maid of Sicilian Pelorus,

her womb girt round with rabid dogs,

opened all her gaping throats at once?

Who did not shudder in every limb

at the multiple barking of a single monster?

The ode has thus depicted sea-going as a strange mixture of speech and silence, but one that seems sinister and wrong. And yet the ode ends on a note of optimism which has perplexed critics:

uenient annis saecula seris,

quibus Oceanus uincula rerum

laxet et ingens pateat tellus

Tethysque nouos detegat orbis

nec sit terris ultima Thule.

Med. 375-381

There will come an epoch late in time

when Ocean will loosen the bonds of the world

and the earth lie open in its vastness,

when Tethys will disclose new worlds

and Thule not be the farthest of lands.

The loosening of the bonds of the world seems a triumphalist declaration of Rome's mastery over the seas. Several critics have noted that this final stanza calls to mind the attitude to sailing of Seneca's own day – a self-confident empire ready to expand Roman civilisation to the furthest reaches. It has even been read as a prediction of the discovery of America.²⁹⁹ Many critics have preferred to read it as a misplaced optimism on the part of the Chorus, which is made pathetically ironic by the audience's knowledge of the horrors to come.³⁰⁰ Or else, the expansion predicted is itself a bad thing.³⁰¹ But the talk of loosening the bonds of the world inevitably also recalls Stoic descriptions of the end of the world – including Seneca's own.³⁰²

Roman imperialism and Stoic physics seem to collide, as sailing forcibly collapses what had been separate:

Bene dissaepi foedera mundi

²⁹⁹See Romm 1994. Christopher Columbus read Medea before arriving in Portugal, or immediately after (*cit.* Bajoni 1996 82 n.26): see Gauly 2004 176-181.

³⁰⁰ Lawall 1979 419-420: "The Argonautic voyage was an attempt by man to control nature and to impose human rule and laws upon the sea (second choral ode), yet at the same time it was an act of violence against nature that inevitably brought retribution in its wake (third choral ode). Similarly, Creon's responsible and statesmanlike attempt to create a new political order in Corinth by accepting Jason as his son-in-law and banishing the baleful Medea beyond the borders of his realm in order to prevent war with Acastus is an attempt to manipulate and control this passionate and dangerous woman in the interests of the safety and security of the kingdom. Yet, at the same time, it brings retribution in its wake, too. Tiphys' attempt to civilise and pacify the seas thus parallels Creon's attempt to establish political order and security in Corinth. Neither the sea nor Medea is tractable to man's civilising forces... at the end of the play Medea both avenges the wrongs done to her and serves (unwittingly) as the agent of the sea in avenging itself upon Jason for his part in the Argonautic expedition... The triumph of civilisation envisaged by the Chorus at the end of the second choral ode remains an elusive dream."

³⁰¹ Seneca certainly denounces imperial expansion elsewhere, e.g. *N.Q.* 5.18 (discussed below). See Montiglio 2006 569 for other examples and discussion: she reads this passage as a foreboding bad imperial expansion, 572.

³⁰² See my discussion in Chapter 1 of Seneca's depiction of the end of the world in *N.Q.* 3.

*traxit in unum Thessala pinus
iussitque pati uerbera pontum
partemque metus fieri nostri
mare sepositum.*

Med. 335-339

The lands, well separated before by nature's laws, the Thessalian ship made one, bade the deep suffer blows, and the sequestered sea become a part of our human fear.

And as Costa points out, the 'well-separated' world recalls philosophical accounts of the separation of the elements. Thus a bringing together of these separated things appears unnatural, or the destruction of the natural order.³⁰³ With this move, the sailing which creates wealth, the turn to the sea which brought about the enrichment but also – according the traditional narrative – the decline of Roman society, is made to recall descriptions of the destruction of the universe. The connection is logical: the world will decline in morals until it is destroyed. With this, it is made clear that the decline of Roman society is itself the disintegration of the cosmos. And glorious imperial expansion in the final verse seems to be part of a grand narrative of cosmic decline.³⁰⁴ This does not necessarily have to mean that imperial expansion is conceived of as negative. A double standard in the attitude towards sailing is inevitable given its characterisation earlier in the ode. And an ambivalence towards imperial power was inherent in Roman society: the empire was what made Rome great, what made it *Rome*,

³⁰³ Costa 1973 *ad loc.* According to early Greek cosmologists original chaos was succeeded by an orderly separation of the natural elements: the Chorus means that the Argo violated this natural division. See Hahm 1971 57-90.

³⁰⁴ This is Bajoni's reading, 1996, 78. For cosmic dissolution as a figure in Lucan see Lapidge 1979.

but the historic turn towards imperialism (the decision to set sail, and the consequent influx of wealth) was deprecated. Here we see how that idea is applied to history on a more cosmic scale. Although it is without doubt portrayed as a transgression, as I have argued, sailing in the ode is also shown to be an articulation of the laws which it transgresses. The laws of nature are only discovered by their transgression. We become better for this knowledge only by becoming worse.

The analogy between sailing and lawgiving is established by a series of metapoetic pointers and extended into a metaphor wherein sailing gives the sea itself the power of voice. This power of voice exhibits only in its being silenced: the sea produces monsters that speak unintelligably – throats gaping (as if silent), barking simultaneously (an incomprehensible cacophony), though somehow also unified (*uno malo*). This is the curious logic of laws produced by their own transgression. As soon as they are articulated, they are suppressed. This silence of the sea is not tranquility, but a strangling of meaning – or rather in this world there can be no tranquility which does not also seem repressive, because obedience to such a law must always stifle the transgressive circumstances of its creation.

Before sailing the laws regarding man's relationship to the sea were unknown to mankind. But these laws are immediately broken. This is an altered version of the shipwreck scenario explored in the previous chapter, expanded to describe human history rather than a single man's personal development. Just as there, the *proficiens'* realisation of his own shortcomings is the prerequisite for philosophical development, here mankind comes to understand nature by its transgression. The difference is that the individual does not begin from a state of nature but becomes aware of the

attachments and beliefs which have already been alienating him from nature. In the vision of sailing's place in human history presented here, awareness of the laws of nature is achieved at the same moment as, and by, becoming alienated from those laws, which one had never before violated, but also never obeyed: the laws exist always-already broken, *sous rature*.

The paradoxical situation which obedience to laws which are formulated through transgression gives rise to is explored in the third and fourth choral odes (*Med.* 579-699), in which the Chorus discuss the calmed sea. They pray for mercy for those who tamed it, the Argonauts (*Med.* 595-8). In their fourth ode, the Chorus catalogue the deaths exacted by the sea for their daring (*exigit poenas mare provocatum*, *Med.* 616). The death of all the Argonauts is reminiscent of another common Roman, and especially Senecan, use of the image of sailing which we have already seen: voyage as a metaphor for life, with death as a safe harbour. But here the image is turned on its head: it is setting out in the first place which brings death. This is the same logic we have seen when Tiphys 'wrote the laws' of the sea (*Med.* 322) – the laws for which the sailors later had to atone (*Med.* 613-614).

The punishment of the Argonauts leaves no doubt that that sailing was a transgression: it is better to go where was safe for people before, and not break with profane violence the sacred pacts of the world (*Med.* 604-606). But the manner of punishment and what follows that is perplexing. Tiphys, who gave names to the winds (*Med.* 316-317), having left (*liquit*, *Med.* 618: in the action which causes his death he becomes like the sea itself) died unknown in a foreign land (*Med.* 617-619). After his death, Tiphys' kingdom Aulis, remembering its lost king, holds back ships (*Aulis amissi memor inde regis | portibus*

lentis retinet carinas, *Med.* 622-623). The action of *Aulis memor* is ambiguous.

Although staged as an act of defiance against the raging sea which killed its king, a denying of this power by remaining steadfastly calm, it also is famously an act which almost thwarts that greatest of nautical endeavors, the launching of the Greek fleet for Troy. The Greek sailors have to commit a terrible act (itself both demanded by the gods and offensive to them) in order to set sail, even though their being prevented from doing so is supposedly an act of solidarity with the first sailor.

The problem is not that the sea does not obey laws – it does, as we see at *Med.* 365, *nunc iam cessit pontus et omnes patitur leges* ('these days the sea has yielded, and endures all laws') – but rather that nature's obedience to law calls into question the very concept of law: the first sailor transgressed natural law by setting sail – but that first act of transgression's strange constitutive status means that later, the calm winds at Aulis which prevent others setting sail are violations of the law of nature which the sea now obeys. The sailors are punished – for bringing order and peace. And they are punished by a calm sea. The other deaths of the Argonauts described in the ode also emphasise the calming, peace-bringing actions of the heroes – which are in themselves worthy of punishment. Orpheus, who calmed torrents and winds with his song (*Med.* 627), floats down the Hebrus (*Med.* 625-633). Hercules killed Neptune's son, brought peace to land and sea, and passed to the kingdom of death (*Med.* 634-638): his actions are both violent and transgressive – and pacifying. An apparent anomaly on the list is Hylas – described as undeserving of death, and also as drowning in 'safe waters' (*morte quod crimen tener expiavit | Herculi magno puer inreptus, | raptus, heu, tutas puer inter undas?* 'but what crime was atoned by the death of the tender boy that great Hercules never recovered, poor boy, dragged down amidst safe waters?' *Med.* 647-649). The

death of Hylas is the natural end of the punishment of those who bring peace: the punishment of the wholly peaceable. By creating the laws through transgression, sea-going has made peace itself transgressive. Conversely, sailors must now not fear the sea for its storms – but precisely for its calm, the calm they have brought by taming it: *ite nunc fortes, perarate pontum fonte timendo* (*Med.* 650, “go now brave men, plough the sea, while fearing a spring”). The exhortation to ‘plough’ the sea is a reminder that sailing is the act which (like agriculture) performs the end of the Golden Age. Idmon, though he knows the fates of others, fails to see his own fate at precisely the moment when the sea is made knowable (*Med.* 652-654).

In Euripides’ play, Medea was closely identified with the sea itself.³⁰⁵ Pratt has argued that Medea is characterised in the play by the metaphors of fire and the sea-storm, which are grandiose markers of her turbulent and destructive emotions.³⁰⁶ For Pratt, “[t]his is Seneca’s Medea: a flaming storm of passion.”³⁰⁷ Medea is also like the sea insofar as she was changeable: the image of the mercurial woman who is like the sea goes back as far as Semonides.³⁰⁸ Her Nurse describes Medea’s anguished indecision as like the sea (*ubi ponet minas? | ubi se iste fluctus franget? exundat furor*, *Med.* 391-

³⁰⁵ See Blaiklock 1955, Mossman 2011 33-36.

³⁰⁶ Pratt 1963 214: “Medea’s rage is pictured very graphically through a mixture of the metaphors fire and sea-storm.” Pratt cites *aestuo*, *exundo*, *procellosus* and *ventus* as the key words: see his n. 22 for complete line references. 215: “Physically, her flaming face struggles for air (387), she seethes like an ocean wave about to break (391-2). Her mind is glowing hot (558), the fire of love is fanned by anger (591), her pain ignites itself (671-2), hatred boils (952). Quite clearly the mixing of the metaphors is a conscious effect [illustrated by 408-14].”

³⁰⁷ Pratt 1963 215

³⁰⁸ Semonides (fr. 7.27-42, tr Lloyd-Jones): “another he [god] made from the sea: she has two characters. One day she smiles and is happy; a stranger who sees her in the house will praise her and say, ‘there is no woman better than this among all mankind, nor more beautiful.’ But on another day she is unbearable to look at or come near to; then she raves so that you can’t approach her, like a bitch over her pups, and she shows herself ungente and contrary to friends and enemies alike. Just so the sea often stands without a tremor, harmless, a great delight to sailors, in the summer season; but often it raves, tossed about by thundering waves. It is the sea that such a woman most resembles in her temper; like the ocean, she has a changeful nature.” *Cit.* Mossman 2011 35.

392, “Where will she implement her threats? Where will that wave break? Her rage is cresting”). And at the climax of her passion, Medea describes herself as caught on the waves of her emotions,”

*ora quid lacrimae rigant
 variamque nunc huc ira, nunc illus amor
 diducit? anceps aestus incertam rapit;
 ut saeva rapidi vella cum venti gerunt,
 utrimque flucus maria discordes agunt
 dubiumque fervet pelagus, haud aliter meum
 cor fluctuatur; ira pietatem fugat
 iramque pietas. cede pietati, dolor.*

Med. 937-44

Why do you vacillate my spirit? Why are tears wetting my face, and anger leading me to shift in one direction, love in another? Conflicting currents whirl me from side to side. Just as, when the whirling winds wage savage warfare the contending waves drive the sea both ways, and the waters seethe in confusion, so my heart wavers; anger puts mother love to flight, then mother love, anger. Give way to love my pain.

Seneca was fond of the image of one undergoing turbulent emotion as sea-tossed³⁰⁹ and it was particularly well suited to Stoic usage, since the Stoics held that to experience

³⁰⁹He uses it at *Thy.* 438-9, *Ag.* 138-43, *Phaed.* 179-83, *Herc. Oet.* 710-12; Hippolytus is praised as a steady helmsman who successfully navigates a stormy sea, *Phaed.* 1072-75. On the image throughout Seneca's prose and tragedies, and for other Stoic uses of it, see Larson Tietze 1987 138-140, Littlewood 2004 61-66.

emotion was to let oneself out of one's control.³¹⁰ (Medea was a popular figure in Stoic thought precisely for her incontinence, her *akrasis*. Chrysippus is supposed to have quoted Euripides' *Medea* so much to illustrate that vice that a reader of his work could quip that he was reading 'Chrysippus' *Medea*').³¹¹ But Seneca's use of the image here has a particular point: Medea's attempt to calm herself thus becomes like a second taming of the waves. This brings us to an important strand in the discussion of the play. Medea's rage has been interpreted as the agent of the rage of the sea in response to the cosmic crime of the Argonauts. This interpretation poses, though, an interpretative problem, for the idea that Medea's crimes could be seen as a *natural* force seems to fly against the Stoic conception of a provident and good nature. Pratt comments on the Chorus' apparent judgement that Medea seems herself to have been the instrument of vengeance of the sea,

"... one aspect of sea-storm is interesting as an idea that might have changed the drama substantially if Seneca's premises had allowed him to use it more functionally. The first and second stasimon express the idea that the Argo has broken the natural bounds set by the sea; in return the sea exacts punishment from the Argonauts for their violation of nature. With this conception, clearly of Stoic orientation, Medea is closely linked, for she was the prize of the expedition and 'a greater evil than the sea' (*Med.* 362); and the Chorus, having described her rage, prays that Jason may be spared the fate of the other Argonauts. The implication is that Medea's revenge symbolizes the vengeance of the sea. Seneca is headed toward intellectual difficulty, for Medea is thus aligned with

³¹⁰ For the Stoics, emotions, *pathē*, were assents to impulses based on incorrect judgements that indifferent things were good or bad. The sage did not experience emotions, but only *eupatheiai*, literally 'good emotions', virtuous impulses based on correct judgements about virtue and vice. See SVF 3.391, 393, 394 3.414 for a lucid ancient exposition of the species of emotion and *eupatheiai*, with discussion by Brennan 2005 269-270. Graver 2007 is the fullest recent account of Stoic emotion.

³¹¹ For Chrysippus on Medea, see Gill 1983 and 2005, Graver 2007 70-72.

natural order and stability, as well as against them through her destructive passion.

Grandiosity seems to cause confusion here. However, the Chorus' interpretation is not carried over into the action, and the prevailing meaning is Seneca's usual one, that the catastrophe is caused by irrationality as wild and primitive as fire and the sea."³¹²

For Pratt then, Seneca has strayed into illogicality for the sake of poetic justice. I submit that there is no need to interpret the play's end so rigidly: it is quite possible to see Medea's actions as arising as a response by the cosmic order to the sailing of the Argo, without seeing them as a restoration of what went before. For if Medea's crimes appease the sea, they also calm it. The calming of the sea is what the Chorus have been hoping for,

iam satis, divi, mare vindicastis:

parcite iusso.

Med. 668-669

Enough reparations, you gods, for the sea:

spare one under orders.

This exhortation overlooks the fact that it is the giving of orders which has caused the upset. Even the ordering of the gods to stop exacting punishment from sailors is another step in the taming of the sea. The prayer for the safety of the one who subdued the sea is strange when taken to its logical conclusion: the *dominus profundus* may be angry, but he is so because he has been beaten. The master of the sea cannot respond with the traditionally attributed rage of the sea – because the sea has been tamed. The Chorus

³¹² Pratt 1963 215-16

fear the anger of a woman as the raging of nature – they do not realise that nature calmed is equally to be feared. The calming of nature by violence recalls the characterisation of Roman imperial rule as a forcible bringing of peace.

After committing the murder, Medea she seems for a moment to have conquered her passions – a grotesque parody of the Stoic ideal. She declares that she has, as proper to one who has conquered the waves, regal or imperial power:

*iam iam recepi sceptrum germanum patrem,
spoliumque Colchi pecudis auratae tenent;*

Med. 982-983

Now, now have I regained my regal state, my brother, my sire; and the Colchians have once more the spoil of the golden fleece; restored is my kingdom, my ravished virginity is restored.

But immediately it becomes clear that her triumph is deluded: she claims to have regained a lost kingdom and a lost virginity (*Med. 984*), but she has done neither. The act of calming the waves of her emotion has not solved the problem of her having set out into them, just as learning to tame the sea does not solve the problem of having set off on a voyage. In both cases a boundary has been breached, which cannot be recrossed. Like a lost virginity, the time before impassioned frenzy, the time before sea travel, cannot be regained. Calm is not a sign that all is well, but the signifier of the uneasy, mutually implicated relationship between the self and other (nature, the sea, emotion) – a sign that the self has been breached. It is ambiguous – to the extent that no positive

judgement can or should be reached – when precisely in the play we are to suppose that Medea kills her children. The point is that the boundary has already been broached – has always-already been broached – and that what is beyond it will always be double – between life and death (*cf Med.* 308).

The deep implication of the sailing of the Argo with Medea's crimes do not have to mean that the latter was a cosmic redress of the former. Rather, both are transgressions by which law is discovered, and which thus performatively enact the introduction of law into the world. The crimes of the Argonauts changed the nature of the world which they dominated: they themselves drew the lines of the order which they transgressed. Medea's crimes appeased the sea's anger at the transgression of the Argonauts: their transgressive status is contained in both the moral outrageousness of the murders, and the fact that they tamed the waves. As a reaction to crime, they perpetuated the same crime. From the cosmic perspective, which Seneca suggests is atemporal, cause and effect, crime and the reaction to crime are not opposite, but identical.

Letters 94 and 95.³¹³

In both Letter 90 and *Medea*, though in very different ways, the nature of law and technology as a species of law is considered. In both cases, the introduction of technology and the introduction of laws into the world are represented as historically

³¹³ For Letters 94 and 95 see Bellincioni 1979, Ioppolo 2000, Schafer 2009.

locatable moments, and the texts consider how these introductions came about, and the impacts they had on the world.

In the most extended technical philosophical discussion of the nature of philosophical injunctions to be found in Seneca, Letters 94 and 95, similar issues are treated. Here though, Seneca does not focus on any primordial moment of lawgiving, but discusses philosophy as it is today. In these letters, Seneca discusses and contrasts the respective merits of *decreta* (abstract philosophical truths) and *praecepta* (“that department of philosophy which supplies precepts appropriate to the individual case, instead of framing them for mankind at large,” *Eam partem philosophiae quae dat propria cuique personae praecepta nec in universum componit hominem*, Ep. 94.1).

Letter 94 deals with *praecepta*:

*quidam solam receperunt, ceteras quasi extra utilitatem nostram vagantis
reliquerunt, tamquam quis posset de parte suadere nisi qui summam prius totius
vitae complexus esset.*

Ep. 94.1

This department of philosophy is accepted by some as the only significant part, while the other departments are rejected on the ground that they stray beyond the sphere of practical needs – as if any man could give advice concerning a portion of life without having first gained a knowledge of the sum of life as a whole!

It is a particularly Stoic view to dismiss *praecepta* as useless:

Ariston Stoicus e contrario hanc partem levem existimat et quae non descendat in pectus usque, anilia habentem praecepta; plurimum ait proficere ipsa decreta philosophiae constitutionemque summi boni; 'quam qui bene intellexit ac didicit quid in quaque re faciendum sit sibi ipse praecipit.'

Ep. 94.2

But Aristo the Stoic, on the contrary, believes the above-mentioned department to be of slight import – he holds that it does not sink into the mind, having in it nothing but old wives' precepts, and that the greatest benefit is derived from the actual dogmas of philosophy and from the definition of the Supreme Good. When a man has gained a complete understanding of this definition and has thoroughly learned it, he can frame for himself a precept directing what is to be done in a given

According to this view, *praecepta* are meaningless to someone who does not understand why, dogmatically speaking, he ought to behave in the recommended fashion (because wisdom is the exercise of reason, not the recital of memorised rules), and superfluous to one who does (since that person will be able to use his understanding of doctrine to work out what to do in any given situation, and so has no need of specific advice): *praecepta dare scienti supervacuum est, nescienti parum* (*Ep. 94.11* cf *Ep. 94.4-5*). To teach precepts is to show a sick man how he would be if he were well, but not to make him well (*Ep. 94.5*). As the summary of the views of Aristo quoted above suggests, it is *decreta* which are the core of philosophy.

Seneca spends several paragraphs detailing the idea of postponing *praecepta* until *decreta* are understood, or rather by rendering *praeceta* superfluous by this means, in

the person of a fictional interlocutor: *His decretis cum illum in conspectum suae condicionis adduxeris et cognoverit beatam esse vitam non quae secundum voluptatem est sed secundum naturam, cum virtutem unicum bonum hominis adamaverit, turpitudinem solum malum fugerit, reliqua omnia — divitias, honores, bonam valetudinem, vires, imperia — scierit esse mediam partem nec bonis adnumerandam nec malis, monitorem non desiderabit ad singula qui dicat 'sic incede, sic cena; hoc viro, hoc feminae, hoc marito, hoc caelibis convenit'* (Ep. 94.8, "When by means of such doctrines you have brought the erring man to a sense of his own condition, when he has learned that the happy life is not that which conforms to pleasure, but that which conforms to Nature, when he has fallen deeply in love with virtue as man's sole good and has avoided baseness as man's sole evil, and when he knows that all other things – riches, office, health, strength, dominion – fall in between and are not to be reckoned either among goods or among evils, then he will not need a monitor for every separate action, to say to him: 'Walk thus and so, eat thus and so. This is the conduct proper for a man and that for a woman; this for a married man and that for a bachelor'"). The interlocutor suggests that teaching precepts will lead to hypocrisy on the part of the teachers as well as the pupils: *Ista enim qui diligentissime monent ipsi facere non possunt; haec paedagogus puero, haec avia nepoti praecipit, et irascendum non esse magister iracundissimus disputat. Si ludum litterarium intraveris, scies ista quae ingenti supercilio philosophi iactant in puerili esse praescripto* (Ep. 94.9, "Indeed, the persons who take the greatest pains to proffer such advice are themselves unable to put it into practice. It is thus that the pedagogue advises the boy, and the grandmother her grandson; it is the hottest-tempered schoolmaster who contends that one should never lose one's temper. Go into an elementary school, and you will learn that just such pronouncements, emanating from high-browed philosophers, are to be found in the

lesson-book for boys!”). We saw in the previous chapter that Seneca considers this situation an inevitable consequence of Stoic advice-giving.

In the second part of Letter 94, Seneca argues against those who would dismiss the utility of *praecepta*. His arguments seem eminently sensible. While admitting “that precepts alone are not effective in overthrowing the mind's mistaken beliefs” (*Ep.* 94.21, *per se efficacia praecepta non esse ad evertendam pravam animi persuasionem*), he insists that they are a useful aid for the *proficiens*: *Primum memoriam renovant; deinde quae in universo confusius videbantur in partes divisa diligentius considerantur. Aut [in] isto modo licet et consolationes dicas supervacuas et exhortationes: atque non sunt supervacuae; ergo ne monitiones quidem*, (“In the first place, they refresh the memory; in the second place, when sorted into their proper classes, the matters which showed themselves in a jumbled mass when considered as a whole, can be considered in this with greater care. According to our opponents’ theory, you might even say that consolation, and exhortation were superfluous. Yet they are not superfluous; neither, therefore, is counsel,” *Ep.* 94.21). In short, the value of *praecepta* is to the person who is making the way towards wisdom but who has not quite made it yet. *Praecepta* pragmatically make use of the vestigial irrationality in the mind of the *proficiens*, and put it in the service of philosophical progress. Catchy mottoes, for example, appeal to us on a subrational level: “Such maxims need no special pleader; they go straight to our emotions, and help us simply because Nature is exercising her proper function (*Ep.* 94.28, *Advocatum ista non quaerunt: adfectus ipsos tangunt et natura vim suam exercente proficiunt*).

They are a practical acknowledgement that even though virtue and vice might be a binary opposition, the everyday experience of the Stoic is a gradual procedure towards

virtue, and even though aids to reason may not be needed by someone who is truly wise, most people have not achieved this state:

'Si quis' inquit 'recta habet et honesta decreta, hic ex supervacuo monetur.'

Minime; nam hic quoque doctus quidem est facere quae debet, sed haec non satis perspicit. Non enim tantum adfectibus impedimur quominus probanda faciamus sed inperitia inveniendi quid quaeque res exigat. Habemus interdum compositum animum, sed residem et inexercitatum ad inveniendam officiorum viam, quam admonitio demonstrat.

Ep. 94.32.

Some say: "If one is familiar with upright and honourable dogmas, it will be superfluous to advise him." By no means; for this person has indeed learned to do things which he ought to do; but he does not see with sufficient clearness what these things are. For we are hindered from accomplishing praiseworthy deeds not only by our emotions, but also by want of practice in discovering the demands of a particular situation. Our minds are often under good control, and yet at the same time are inactive and untrained in finding the path of duty, – and advice makes this clear.

This account of someone who has a general grasp of Stoic theory but finds it difficult to put into practice seems a much more realistic and familiar scene than the stark opposition between the *stulti* and the *sapiens* implied by the totalising nature of Stoic wisdom. *Praecepta* also seem realistically to account for the fact that everyone could benefit from philosophy, but some people have a greater intellectual aptitude for it (*Ep. 94.30*).

Seneca ends this letter, which defends the mode of philosophising which he himself employs throughout much of the letters, with a depiction of overweening imperial power, which goes mad with a lust for control and destruction in the absence of prudent counsel. Alexander (*Ep.* 94.62-3), Pompey (*Ep.* 94.64), Caesar (*Ep.* 94.65) and Marius (*Ep.* 90.66) could all have benefited from judicious *praecepta*. That precepts are useful to empire builders is a reminder of the historical narrative of Letter 90: vice was introduced into the world at the same times as such technologies as sailing, and in the Roman historical narrative, the introduction of sailing to Rome marked the moment when Rome turned away from her simple rustic past, to her glorious and wealthy but flawed imperial present. But in the historical narrative of Letter 90, the moment when vice was introduced was the time when precepts ceased to be good enough for governance, and laws were introduced. Here though, Seneca seems to suggest that precepts could have held back these conquerors. Extrapolating what we have learned from Letter 90, we can assume that precepts would not have made these men virtuous, but it might have given them an approximation of virtue, like that enjoyed by the men of the Golden Age who made their decisions solely according to precepts. Precepts could have led in virtue to the places they had seized (*Ep.* 94.68), as if another imperial power: the idea that imperialism could be countered imperialistic tactics nicely underscores the point that precepts counter irrationalism by irrational means.³¹⁴

³¹⁴ The conquerors are also said to have whirled around like cyclones: *Isti cum omnia concuterent, concutiebantur turbinum more, qui rapta convolvunt sed ipsi ante volvuntur et ob hoc maiore impetu incurrunt quia nullum illis sui regimen est, ideoque, cum multis fuerunt malo, pestiferam illam vim qua plerisque nocuerunt ipsi quoque sentiunt* (*Ep.* 94.67, “When such men as these were disturbing the world, they were themselves disturbed – like cyclones that whirl together what they have seized, but which are first whirled themselves and can for this reason rush on with all the greater force, having no control over themselves; hence, after causing such destruction to others, they feel in their own body the ruinous force which has enabled them to cause havoc to many”). The metaphor again also recalls the winds which made possible sailing but are also potentially destructive: see Williams 2005b.

The following Letter, 95, makes a counter-argument to the case put in Letter 94.

Whereas in the previous letter, *praecepta* were presented as a useful supplement to *decreta*, in Letter 95 *praecepta* are a dangerous subversion of proper philosophy. The idea that *praecepta* were a pragmatic compromise, strengthening the resolve of *proficientes* along their journey to wisdom, is here debunked. Advice can be interpreted differently by different people, and without a solid theoretical understanding of virtue, one is liable to misinterpret it wildly: *Non semper ad actiones rectas praecepta perducunt, sed cum obsequens ingenium est; aliquando frustra admoventur, si animum opiniones obsident pravae* (Ep. 95.4, “But they do not always guide us to upright conduct; this occurs only when the will is receptive; and sometimes they are applied in vain, when wrong opinions obsess the soul”).

Furthermore, whatever the interpretation one puts on a piece of advice, unless one is following it because one has arrived at it by reasoned decision, it is not the right action anyway: *Deinde etiam si recte faciunt, nesciunt facere se recte. Non potest enim quisquam nisi ab initio formatus et tota ratione compositus omnis exsequi numeros ut sciat quando oporteat et in quantum et cum quo et quemadmodum et quare* (Ep. 95.5, “Furthermore, a man may act rightly without knowing that he is acting rightly. For nobody, except he be trained from the start and equipped with complete reason, can develop to perfect proportions, understanding when he should do certain things, and to what extent, and in whose company, and how, and why”). For in Stoicism it is crucial that one does the right thing *for the right reasons*. Virtue lies not in particular acts but in the rational choosing of appropriate acts. This, Seneca argues, means that doctrines are central to Stoic philosophy:

*Nam tibi de summa caeli ratione deumque
 disserere incipiam et rerum primordia pandam,
 unde omnis natura creet res, auctet alatque,
 quoque eadem rursus natura perempta resolvat,*

*ut ait Lucretius. Sequitur ergo ut, cum contemplativa sit, habeat decreta sua.
 Quid quod facienda quoque nemo rite obibit nisi is cui ratio erit tradita qua in
 quaque re omnis officiorum numeros exsequi possit? quos non servabit qui in
 rem praecepta acceperit, non in omne. Inbecilla sunt per se et, ut ita dicam, sine
 radice quae partibus dantur. Decreta sunt quae muniant, quae securitatem
 nostram tranquillitatemque tueantur, quae totam vitam totamque rerum naturam
 simul contineant. Hoc interest inter decreta philosophiae et praecepta quod inter
 elementa et membra: haec ex illis dependent, illa et horum causae sunt et
 omnium.*

Ep. 95.11-12.

In the words of Lucretius,

To thee shall I reveal the ways of heaven
 And the gods, spreading before thine eyes
 The atoms, – whence all things are brought to birth,
 Increased, and fostered by creative power,
 And eke their end when Nature casts them off.

Philosophy, therefore, being theoretic, must have her doctrines. And why? Because no man can duly perform right actions except one who has been entrusted with reason, which will enable him, in all cases, to fulfil all the categories of duty. These categories he cannot observe unless he receives precepts for every occasion, and not for the present alone. Precepts by themselves are weak and, so to speak, rootless if they be assigned to the parts and not to the whole. It is the doctrines which will strengthen and support us in peace and calm, which will include simultaneously the whole of life and the universe in its completeness.

Whereas in Letter 94 *praecepta* had seemed a useful and pragmatic middle step in the journey towards wisdom, here it becomes clear that they are a dangerous perversion of and distraction from true philosophy, expressed in *decreta*. The incompatibility of the arguments of Letters 94 and 95 is underscored by the fact that neither refers to the other, but each stands alone. There is a gulf in philosophical discourse. In Letter 94 it is made clear that it is very difficult to attain virtue by relying on philosophical *decreta* alone. Man's psychological and intellectual shortcomings mean that his irrational emotions need to be pandered to before he is able to eliminate them completely. But Letter 95 makes it clear that any pandering to emotion or dilution of strict philosophical discourse will set one back upon the philosophical journey. *Praecepta* set themselves up as a supplement to *decreta*, a stopgap bridging the gulf between the imperfect Stoicism of most *proficientes* and the virtue of the sage. But they cannot complete philosophy, and the gulf remains. The letters also make it clear that dramatisation at the beginning of Letter 90 of the transition from *praecepta* to *decreta* as the move which defined the end of the Golden Age was a mere fable. That transition did not just happen

once and for all at a historically locatable instant, but it is the movement at the heart of the transition from philosophical student to *sapiens*. Letter 90 of course itself acknowledges this with the insistence that one must begin from a non-virtuous starting point in order to achieve virtue. *Proficientes* find themselves in the midst of that transition, with both *praecepta* and *decreta* at their disposal, but with neither completing the philosophical discourse satisfactorily. The distance between them is also the distance between the Stoic and his goal, virtue, the gulf which *proficientes* try to cross.

But though Letters 94 and 95 dispense with the idea of a historical moment when humanity progressed from *praecepta* to *decreta*, yet they ask us to imagine that such a moment might exist in the future, at least for certain individuals. With the attainment of wisdom, one will implicitly understand all general dogma, and therefore every decision he makes will have the quality of a *praeceptum*, a particular application of a general law. The question remains how the Stoic is ever to get to this harmonious position, since before he has attained it both *decreta* and *praecepta* are lacking.

Letter 71.

In Letter 71, Seneca confronts the fact that it is *praecepta* rather than *decreta* which he offers in his letters. Just as sailing can stand as a representative of the technologies which mark the movement of law-giving and of the formulation of philosophy a movement which was not a single historically locatable moment, but which is continually

repeated, so metaphors of sailing can stand in for the gulf inherent in philosophical discourse, which the voyage towards wisdom attempts to traverse.³¹⁵

Subinde me de rebus singulis consulis oblitus vasto nos mari divide. Cum magna pars consilii sit in tempore, necesse est evenire, ut de quibusdam rebus tunc ad te perferatur sententia mea, cum iam contraria potior est. Consilia enim rebus aptantur. Res nostrae feruntur, immo voluntur. Ergo consilium nasci sub diem debet; et hoc quoque nimis tardum est; sub manu, quod aiunt, nascatur. Quemadmodum autem inveniatur, ostendam.

Ep. 71.1

You are continually referring special questions to me, forgetting that a vast stretch of sea sunders us. Since, however, the value of advice depends mostly on the time when it is given, it must necessarily result that by the time my opinion on certain matters reaches you, the opposite opinion is the better. For advice conforms to circumstances; and our circumstances are carried along, or rather whirled along. Accordingly advice should be produced at short notice; and even this is too late; it should ‘grow while we work’ as the saying is. And I propose to show you how to discover the method.

Here, Seneca suggests that the timelag caused by the fact that he must send his letters across the sea to Lucilius renders the advice contained in them worthless.³¹⁶ It is

³¹⁵ On Letter 71, see Maurach 1970 147-152, Hengelbrock 2000 57-76, Inwood 2007 182-200.

³¹⁶ C.f. Ep. 22.1-2: *Iam intellegis educandum esse te ex istis occupationibus speciosis et malis. Sed quo modo id consequi possis quaeris. Quaedam non nisi a praesente monstrantur. Non potest medicus per epistulas cibi aut balinei tempus eligere; vena tagenda est. Vetus proverbium est gladiatorem in harena capere consilium; aliquid adversarii vultus, aliquid manus mota, aliquid ipsa inclination corporis intuentem monet. Quid fieri soleat, quid oporteat, in universum et mandarin potest et scribi; tale consilium non tantum absentibus, etiam posteris datur. Illud alterum, quando fieri debeat aut quemadmodum, ex longinquo nemo suadebit, cum rebus ipsis deliberandum est.* “You yourself understand by this time that you must withdraw yourself from those showy and depraved pursuits; but you still wish to know how this may be accomplished.

possible to read this remark as a veristic detail. But this sea stands in for a greater barrier to communication as well. Not only is advice given earlier no longer relevant, but *all* advice is too late. This hints at a philosophical point to which Seneca will return: precepts alone are not enough for the philosopher: one must understand doctrine in order to know *why* certain precepts are appropriate. We will return to *praecepta* and *decreta* in the following chapter. But I would like to suggest that there is a further point made here. Seneca's point is not that advice is too specific, but that it is *too late*.

This assertion has important implications for all the letters. It is not that action is worth more than words, but that words, to be effective, must be inseparable from action. Letters, which always come late, says Seneca, can never be to the point. Seneca is pointing out the same problem with Stoic injunctions that he will in Letter 95. For the Stoics virtue, reason and truth are immanent in the universe, which means that one precisely does not discover them by having someone outside them pointing them out. They can only be identified by someone who himself shares in them, and in that case they are not pointed out, but manifest themselves. The giving of advice, and the issuing of instructions, are in fact wholly alien to this Stoic sense of how virtue and truth inhere in the cosmos. By the same token, travelling towards virtue is not strictly necessary. The Supreme good is *right by us*:

There are certain things that can only be pointed out by someone who is present. The physician cannot prescribe by letter the proper time for eating or bathing; he must feel the pulse. There is an old adage about gladiators, - that they plan their fight in the ring; as they intently watch, something in the adversary's glance, some movement gives a warning. We can formulate general rules and commit them to writing, as to what is usually done, or ought to be done; such advice may be given, not only to our absent friends but also to succeeding generations. In regard, however, to that second question – when or how your plan is to be carried out – no one will advise at long range, we must take counsel in the presence of the actual situation."

Quibusdam autem evenit, ut quaedam scire se nescient. Quemadmodum quaerimus saepe eos, cum quibus stamus, ita plerumque finem summi boni ignoramus adpositum.

Ep. 71.4

It is the case with certain men, however, that they do not know that they know certain things. Just as we often go searching for those who stand beside us, so we are apt to forget that the goal of the Supreme Good lies near us.

Seneca does not say here (as he does elsewhere) that the Supreme Good is *within* us.³¹⁷ It seems here that it is at a remove: though we have no need to travel to it, nor do we have it. Thus – a journey towards the supreme good seems impossible. In the same way that distance renders Seneca's letters irrelevant, so,

Nec multis verbis nec circumitu longo, quod sit summum bonum, colliges; digito, ut ita dicam, demonstrandum est nec in multa spargendum. Quid enim ad rem pertinent in particulas illud diducere, cum possis dicere: summum bonum est, quod honestum est. Et quod magis admireris: unum bonum est, quod honestum est, cetera falsa et adulterina bona sunt. Hoc si persuaseris tibi et virtutem adamaveris, amare enim parum est, quicquid illa contigerit, id tibi, qualecumque aliis videbitur, faustum felixque erit.

Ep. 71.5

To infer the nature of this Supreme Good, one does not need many words or any round-about discussion; it should be pointed out with the forefinger, so to speak, and not be dissipated into many parts. For what good is there in breaking up into

³¹⁷ *Ep. 41.1: prope est a te deus, tecum est, intus est, "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you."*

tiny bits what you can say: the Supreme Good is that which is honourable?

Besides, and you may be all the more surprised at this) that which is honourable is the only good; all other goods are alloyed and debased. If you once convince yourself of this, and if you come to love virtue devotedly (for mere loving is not enough) anything that has been touched by virtue will be fraught with blessing and prosperity for you, no matter how it be regarded by others.

Seneca says clearly that one cannot describe or argue one's way to the Supreme Good using words. Communication about it is not only undesirable, it is impossible. The Stoic principle of *homologia* means that the Good is the Good and is always equal to itself, and nothing else. The distance that renders signification possible is absent when it comes to the Good. The Good can only be presented, never represented. By involving wisdom in any kind of proposition one is only alienating it from itself. All one can say about it is a tautology: *hoc liqueat, nihil esse bonum nisi honestum, et omnia incommoda suo iure bona vocabuntur, quae modo virtus honestaverit* (Ep. 71.5, "let this once be clear, that there is nothing good except that which is honourable, and all hardships will have a just title to the name of "goods" when virtue has made them honourable").

The metaphors of archery and travel are irrelevant: one need not travel to the supreme good. All that is required is to love it.³¹⁸ An act that involves only the self – but which is also beyond the self's control, which cannot simply be willed. Certainly talking does not help, nor a lot of words – like the endless letters Seneca writes, to bring Lucilius round the good. Just as their relevance is lost as they are carried across the sea, so their ability to present the Good is undermined by their remove from it.

³¹⁸ Inwood 2007 *ad loc.* Ep. 71.5 "just loving it is not enough'. 'Fall passionately in love with' translates *adamare*; merely 'loving it' is the simple verb *amare*. Seneca is straining to emphasise the strength of commitment which virtue requires."

Seneca scorns dialectic throughout the letters and he uses this as an opportunity to scorn it again:

Multis videmur maiora promittere quam receipt humana condicio; non inmerito. Ad corpus enim respiciunt. Revertantur ad animum; iam hominem deo metientur. Erige te, Lucili virorum optime, et relinque istum ludum literarium philosophorum, quo rem magnificentissimam ad syllabas vocant, qui animum minuta docendo demittunt et conterunt; fies similis illis, qui invenerunt ista, non qui docent et id agunt, ut philosophia potius difficilis quam magna videatur.

Ep. 71.6

Many think that we Stoics are holding out expectations greater than our human lot admits of; and they have a right to think so. For they have regard to the body only. But let them turn back to the soul and they will soon measure man by the standard of Good. Rouse yourself, most excellent Lucilius, and leave off all this word-play of the philosophers, who reduce a most glorious subject to a matter of syllables, and lower and wear out the soul by teaching fragments; then you will become like the men who discovered these precepts, instead of those who by their teaching do their best to make philosophy seem difficult rather than great.³¹⁹

But we see that he rejects interest in language precisely because he has taken the Stoics' most important propositions about language to heart. Only the good is good, not any insubstantial *lekta* which may be formed about it or anything else. A focus on words debases the soul. The Good is immanent in the world rather than transcendent over it.

³¹⁹ Inwood 2007 n. *ad loc.* *Ep.* 71.6-7 "here Seneca defends the Stoic position against the traditional objection that it makes inhumane demands on us". Inwood cites *Fin.* 4

Its immanence means that it really cannot be communicated at all: any attempt to speak about it will lose its meaning in the distance between the speaker and it. And that distance is inevitable – since a signifier and sign must be separate. All communication is across a sea which erases meaning. But the good is not across that sea. We cannot travel to it, for the same reason that we cannot talk about it: it is right next to us. It operates by contingency (anything that it has *touched* is blessed, *Ep.* 71.5). But – and here is the crucial point – nor have we yet made ourselves identical to it. We do not embody it. We *can* only talk about it, in words which do not get us any closer to it, which are insubstantial. Seneca is unable to love, to know the Good. All he has is language, which he knows is inadequate to describe it, and which he knows is lowering his soul. One cannot talk oneself into it: as Seneca points out in Letter 90, Reason is the only means of distinguishing true from false, for in both life and language are the two mingled (*Deinde a corporibus se ad incorporea transtulit veritatemque et argumenta eius excussit; post haec quemadmodum discernerentur vitae aut vocis ambigua; in utraque enim falsa veris inmixta sunt*, *Ep.* 90.29, “Finally, she has turned her attention from the corporeal to the incorporeal, and has closely examined truth and the marks whereby truth is known, inquiring next how that which is equivocal can be distinguished from the truth, whether in life or in language; for in both are elements of the false mingled with the true”). Precepts which one can follow in order to approximate virtue but which do not explain why a given action is right, dogma which one cannot really understand before one loves virtue, and whose fundamental failing is that they do not inspire love, being strictly rational ordinances.

Over the rest of the letter Seneca urges Lucilius to look beyond petty distinctions in life and see that virtue and wisdom are always constant and equal to themselves: there is

nothing which can be said about them. (Cato's coming second at the polls is equal to his coming first, *Ep.* 71.8; dying now is equal to dying later, *Ep.* 71.13; reclining at a banquet is equal to torture, *Ep.* 71.21). Virtue amounts to an erasure of the differences, the meanings, in life, until all is the one true meaning of virtue itself. It cannot be reached by a journey: following precepts can never lead a man right up to the point at which he begins to be able to understand *decreta*. What is required is the total jump in perspective, a leap across the gulf into the total apprehension of philosophy required to truly understand *decreta*. One need not travel to this: at the beginning of the letter, Seneca explains that the goal is right at hand. This is the perennial problem of Stoicism. It is not that virtue is out of reach, but that one fails to commit to it: *maximum negotium tecum habes; tu tibi molestus es. Quid velis nescis; melius probas honesta quam sequeris; vides, ubi sit posita felicitas, sed ad illam pervenire non audes* (*Ep.* 21.1, "your greatest difficulty is with yourself; for you are your own stumbling block. You do not know what you want. You are better at approving the right course than at following it out. You see where the true happiness lies, but you have not the courage to attain it").

The letter ends with a call to action: *huius rei conscius mihi sum; volo et mente tota volo. Te quoque instinctum esse et magno ad pulcherrima properare impetus video. Properemus; ita demum vita beneficium erit. Alioqui mora est, et quidem turpis inter foeda versantibus* (*Ep.* 71.36, "I fully understand what this task is. It is a thing which I desire, and I desire it with all my heart. I see that you also have been aroused and are hastening with great zeal towards infinite beauty. Let us then hasten; only on these terms will life be a boon to us; otherwise there is delay, and indeed disgraceful delay, while we busy ourselves with revolting things"). The exhortation encapsulates the tragedy of the *Letters*. Having discovered precisely that one *cannot* travel to the

summum bonum, Seneca urges Lucilius to hasten towards it. Though progress will not get one to wisdom, still it is the obvious reaction to the consciousness that one is amid what is revolting, and that one could be amid infinite beauty.

This is not to say that the Stoic journey towards wisdom is pointless. Not at all: one can make demonstrable progress towards virtue. But it is just that, progress *towards* virtue. Actually becoming virtuous is another matter entirely. And in fact, the Stoics insist that however much progress towards virtue one has made, one is still, *equally* unvirtuous as if one had never begun. Neither virtue nor wisdom can be divided or exist in degrees. In the case of language, the point for Seneca is since Stoic truth is so integral, nothing can be said about it which is not it, and it is so deeply true that it must always be identical with the act it describes.³²⁰ Any distance (represented in Letter 71 by the sea) between the object up for discussion and the discussion itself renders the latter meaningless. The problem of course is that such distance is necessary in all linguistic communication: linguistic signs *are not* the things they represent.

Advice simultaneous to a situation is impossible: this would be merely to indicate that situation rather than to describe it. It would precisely lack a semantic element. It is as if Seneca is suggesting that only the thing itself has meaning, and that nothing can be said *about* it which *is* not it. In *Ep.* 48, another letter on the language of philosophy, Seneca begins by promising a reply to the letter which Lucilius wrote while travelling – a letter as long as his journey (*Ep.* 48.1). But he will not give that answer *yet*. The postponement underscores the fact that the immediacy of letters is always dated, always lost, and that

³²⁰ Language for the Stoics is not merely performative but constitutive. In the same way that when a geometrician describes a triangle, with sides of a certain length and angles of a certain degree, he has not merely described an imaginary triangle or referred to a pre-existing one, but has in fact brought into existence a virtual triangle, which is no less real for not being drawn out on a piece of paper, so for the Stoics, *all* laws, logical, ethical, and physical, are as self-evident as the rules of geometry.

the moment at which one achieves virtue and wisdom, at which speech and reality at last correspond and are one, is always postponed. Seneca attempts to suggest that the adviser, like the archer or sailor, must know the target in order to hit it (*Ep.* 71.3). But one is left with the impression that this would be impossible in these crafts just as it is for advice. The archer and sailor only know their targets before reaching them in the sense that they have an impression of them (they see them, or plot them on a map). But this is hardly different from the sense impressions upon which propositions are based. The archer and sailor can only really know their target by having reached it.

So as in the readings offered in the previous chapter, here the sea stands for the distance between the individual and wisdom, the distance which must be crossed. And as in the previous chapter, progress towards this destination is not the same movement by which one will finally arrive there. Here this complication of the idea of philosophical progress as a problem of communication. *Praecepta* seem an appealing way forward (as in Letter 94) but actually the gulfs that separate one man from another, one instant from the next, and most of humanity from virtue lie inconveniently before any pieces of advice, so that they immediately lose their meaning. Truly to communicate, one needs the indivisible truth whose universal applicability is unchanging. But communicating this truth has its own attendant difficulties.

Letter 33.³²¹

³²¹ On Letter 33, see Cancik 1967 73ff, Maurach 1970 97 n. 78, 128f, Maso 1979-80, Summers 1983, Davies 2010 179-220, Hachmann 1995 243-6, Berno 2003b.

In Letter 33, Seneca explains why the memorable quotes he gives Lucilius are so often from Epicureans. Seneca does not take the conciliatory position that the school had many things right, even if not everything, or falling back on the reasoning that many scholars give about the prevalence of Epicurean wisdom at the beginning of the letters.³²² Instead, he claims that it is because of a feature of Stoicism rather than having anything to do with the philosophers quoted. Seneca explains that Stoic wisdom simply cannot be excerpted:

Non est ergo quod exigas excerpta et repetitia; continuum est apud nostros quicquid apud alios excerpitur. Non habemus itaque ista oclifera nec emptorem decipimus nihil inventurum, cum intraverit, praeter illa, quae in fronte suspense sunt.

Ep. 33.3

Therefore you need not call upon me for extracts and quotation; such thoughts as one may extract here and there in the works of other philosophers run through the whole body of our writings. Therefore we have no “shop-window goods”, nor do we deceive the purchaser in such a way that, if he enters our shop, he will find nothing except that which is displayed in the window.

Seneca not only suggests that Stoicism is so integral and holistic a philosophical system that it cannot be broken down into chunks, but also that Stoic writings themselves express this integral character of the philosophy. Furthermore, this is connected to the fact that in Stoicism, unlike in Epicureanism, there is no one issuing instructions from one high:

³²² See Motto and Clark 1968 for a statement the traditional view that Seneca's frequent citation of Epicurus is a sign of his philosophical moderation and eclecticism. Inwood 2007b argues for the influence of Epicurus' letters on Seneca's.

Put a nos velle singulas sententias ex turba separare; cui illas adsignabimus?

Zenoni an Cleanthi and Chrysippo an Panaetio and Posidonio? Non sumus sub rege; sibi quisque se vindicat.

Ep. 33.4

Suppose we should desire to sort out each separate motto from the general stock; to whom shall we credit them? To Zeno, Cleanthes, Chrysippus, Panaetius, or Posidonius?

The continuous, holistic character of Stoicism means further that no one individual can issue orders or philosophise: if philosophy is truly Stoic, it subsumes the individual voice. The idea of *commands* furthermore, are fundamentally alien to this way of thinking: if meaning and value is immanent in the philosophy, there can be no order transcending the philosophy, drawing a conclusion from it, telling one how to act. For if one knows the saying to be true, it is already a part of oneself:

Aliud autem est meminisse, aliud scire. Meminisse est rem commissam memoriae custodire. At contra scire est et sua facere quaeque nec ad exemplar pendere et totiens respicere ad magistrum.

Ep. 33.8

But it is one thing to remember, another to know. Remembering is merely safeguarding something entrusted to the memory; knowing, however, means making everything your own; it means not depending upon the copy and not all the time glancing back at the master.

Once one *knows* something, it can hardly be imposed from the outside as an injunction. The Stoic does not choose virtue, because he has been told to act in a certain way, or even because he has internalized any injunctions, even the most universalising injunction (there could be no Stoic version of the categorical imperative). Instead, virtue simply is identical with happiness for the Stoic, and an expression of the divine reason: it is self-evidently right. But this does not mean that Stoicism is a static, stagnant philosophy. There is no sage, who knows all: every *proficiens* is in the process of coming to know, and there lies out there unknown tracts of truth, waiting to be discovered.

Praeterea qui alium sequitur, nihil invenit, immo nec quaerit. Quid ergo? Non ibo per priorum vestigia? Ego vero utar via vetere, sed si propriorem planioremque invenero, hanc muniam. Qui ante nos ista moverunt, non domini nostri, sed duces sunt. Patet omnibus veritas, nondum est occupata. Multum ex illa etiam futuris relictum est.

Ep. 33.10-11.

However, the truth will never be discovered if we rest contented with discoveries already made. Besides, he who follows another not only discovers nothing, but is not even investigating. What then? Shall I not follow in the footsteps of my predecessors? I shall indeed use the old road, but if I find one that makes a shorter cut and is smoother to travel, I shall open the new road. Men who have made these discoveries before us are not our masters, but our guides. Truth lies open for all: it has not yet been monopolized. And there is plenty of it left even for posterity to discover.

The language of this passage, which ends Letter 33, reminds us of imperial expansion: exploration, occupation, roads cut into new territory. Its optimism might remind us more specifically of the final stanza of the second choral ode in the *Medea*, where the Chorus find themselves dazzled by the infinite possibilities opened up by sailing, with lands beyond Thule to be discovered. And we are reminded again of the sense that philosophy is yet incomplete: there is always another horizon to be reached, and roads must be cut anew, rather than merely followed. The idea that the moment at which laws took over from advice was a single historically locatable moment, as dramatized at the beginning of Letter 90 (before the account is complicated further on in that same letter) and in *Medea*, is merely a fable. Rather, engagement with philosophy is a grappling with both *praecepta* and *decreta*, with each reinforcing the other, but (before sagacity is attained) neither completing the discursive journey towards wisdom.

Chapter 5.

Despite its troubled manuscript history and consequently confusing book numbering, the structure of the *Natural Questions* is readily comprehensible in terms of the Stoic tradition. It begins, in our Book 3, with the earth and what is beneath the earth, and ends with three books on phenomena in the sky and outer atmosphere, on comets (Book 7), rainbows and lights in the sky (Book 1), and lightning and thunder (Book 2). The shape of the work's narrative thus implicitly endorses a cosmic hierarchy: increasing knowledge carries the reader from the bowels of the earth up to the heavens. Furthermore, each of the three final books begins with a programmatic discussion of natural philosophy, meaning that the books are climactic also in the sense that they lay out the theory behind the entire *Natural Questions*. This graduation to abstract discussion seems to suggest an identification of reason and philosophy with the heavens.

This structure reflects the Stoic conception of the universe's physical structure. According to a model of the cosmos which goes back to the early Stoa, the universe is one limited, spherical body, situated in an infinite expanse of void. It consists of four elements –earth, water, air, and fire arranged in concentric spheres around the centre.³²³ The entire thing is made from matter, the passive principle, given its form and cohesion by *pneuma*, a total mixture of air and fire which form a “dynamic continuum” and permeate all matter, as the active principle (*logos*; both principles are corporeal).³²⁴ But though *pneuma* necessarily inheres everywhere in the universe, it was also identified

³²³ For the physical structure of the Stoic cosmos, see Hahn 1977 91-96.

³²⁴ LS 45G= SVF 1.98. See also LS 44, 45, 46

with, or thought to exist in a pure form as, the fire at the edge of the cosmos, called *aether*. The fires at the edge of the cosmos and the planets were therefore accorded an important place in the governing of the universe. Cleanthes considered the sun to be the ruling principle or *hegemonikon* of the cosmos, an analogue of the *hegemonikon* of the human soul.³²⁵ Zeno deemed that “the sun and the moon and each of the other stars are intelligent and prudent and have the fieriness of designing fire.”³²⁶ Seneca’s discussion of the role of the stars and planets in his Book 2 (*N.Q.* 2.32.7) reveal that he also entertains the notion that they might have a controlling force.

The human mind’s reflection in the cosmos, and *vice versa*, is a major justification for the Stoic study of natural science. But the precise mechanism of that reflection is complex. Not only are we a part of the universe, but we are like miniature universes ourselves: learning about the cosmos allows us to learn about ourselves both directly, by coming to understand our place in the universe, and by analogy, by understanding cosmic processes which we too enact on a smaller scale. In this final chapter, I look at the figure of reflection in the final three books of the *N.Q.* I explore how reflection is used to explore the limitations of human perception and comprehension, and how it is also central to Seneca’s model for transcending ordinary human understanding.³²⁷

Book 7.

³²⁵ SVF 1.499. Reesor 1989 3: “The *pneuma*, in its carious manifestations throughout the whole cosmos, constituted the world soul, and *aether* was its ruling part (SVF 2.634). Just as the other seven parts of the human soul cannot be identified with the ruling part, the *pneuma* itself cannot be identified with the *aether*, although we are told that the *pneuma* and the *aether* fall under the same definition (SVF *logos*, 2.471). The *aether* controls and directs the *pneuma*, just as the ruling part of the human soul controls and directs the other seven parts. The seminal *logos*, that may be called god or *aether*, fabricates the several things (SVF 2.134).”

³²⁶ LS 46D = SVF 1.120, part; given that Zeno’s soul has 8 parts, these might conceivably be identified with the sun, moon, earth, and five stars.

³²⁷ For images of climbing, rising, and altitude in Seneca, see Armisen-Marchetti 1989 169-172, s.v. “Verticalité”. Limburg 2007 384 cites *Ep.* 79.11-12 and 92.29 ff.. As we will see, the start of Book 1 alludes specifically to the soul’s ascent in Plato’s *Timaeus*.

Book 7 begins with a comment on humans' propensity to natural scientific observation that can be read as programmatic for the entire work: marveling at the natural world is evidence of the spark of divine reason which makes us human and capable (in theory) of comprehending god.³²⁸

*Nemo usque eo tardus et hebes et demissus in terram est ut ad divina non
erigatur ac tota mente consurgat, utique ubi novum aliquod e caelo miraculum
fulsum.*

N.Q. 7.1.1

No one is so slow and sluggish and stooped to the earth that he is not roused by divine things and lifts himself with his whole mind, especially when some new wonder gleams from the sky.

Here, in the opening of Book 7, the literal distinction between the ground and the sky is invested with symbolic meaning: to stare at the ground is to be slow and docile, like a beast, but divine occurrences raise up the mind (rather than the body, which is stuck on the earth), to the sky, which is where those phenomena in fact take place. Furthermore, all men have the capacity to be thus mentally elevated. The earth/sky distinction is mirrored by the body/mind distinction, with the immaterial, transcendent mind being asserted over the material and contingent body. However, in this passage, earth and sky are not unproblematically aligned with the philosophically misguided and the philosophically pure.

³²⁸ Book 7 bibliography: Stahl 1960 102-112, Gauly 2004 143-164, Gross 1989 275-306, Waiblinger 1977 79-90 (discussion of Books 6 and 7), Berno 2003a 291-323, Limburg 2007 343-376, Williams 2007, Williams 2012 258-294.

Seneca continues by pointing out that the minds of men are raised up most often by *unusual* celestial events (N.Q. 7.1.1), which thus reveal mens' shallowness and superstition (N.Q. 7.1.2, *superstitione vana*). What is *really* impressive is the absolute regularity and control nature exerts on all the natural bodies: the changing length of days, the fact that the sun heats but does not burn the earth, the phases of the moon. But we do not notice these things, "so natural it is to wonder at the new rather than at the great" (N.Q. 7.1.4, *adeo naturale est magis nova quam magna mirari*). That this is *natural* highlights the ambivalence of the term for Seneca: it may signify either the correct course of action that is in accordance with the divine nature of the universe, or the wrong course of action that comes most easily to humans, and which ought to be overcome by effort. Nature has as big a stake in men's minds as in the wider cosmos.

The discussion of marveling at new things leads into the book's main topic: comets. For Seneca, the question is whether a comet is the same sort of thing as a planet or star (N.Q. 7.2.1), that is whether its movements are as controlled and predictable as the phenomena which Seneca deems *truly* deserving of our awe. The problem is that we know very little about comets. In fact, observation of celestial bodies is itself a young science (*nova haec caelestium observatio est et nuper in Graeciam invecta*, N.Q. 7.2.1, "This observation of celestial bodies is new and has been recently introduced to Greece"). The lack of a strong scientific tradition combines with comets' rareness and inaccessibility to make them a difficult case for science. In their analysis, human perception is as much at stake as the properties of the comets themselves. Thus, Seneca devotes as much space to examining the credentials of the scientists who have made claims about comets as to the comets themselves.

Seneca examines the argument of one man who focused precisely on the limitations of our own perceptions: Artemidorus. He argued, according to Seneca, that only certain things are within our perception – there will be things beyond our line of sight which we cannot know about. Given this, Artemidorus argues, we can suppose that comets are planets following an orbit not yet tracked by science and in fact mostly invisible from earth (*N.Q.* 7.13.1). Seneca is vehemently hostile to this view, insisting that there are only five planets: *Hoc ex his quae mentitur levissimum est: tota eius enarratio mundi mendacium impudens est* (*N.Q.* 7.13, “This is the most trivial of the things that he lies about. His whole account of the universe is a shameless lie”). He ridicules Artemidorus’ idea that there might be a hard outer shell of the universe: what support from below or cable from above could keep up such a ‘ceiling’ (*N.Q.* 7.13.2-14.3)? And yet Seneca acknowledges that he cannot *demonstrate* that there are no more than five planets or that there is no roof on the cosmos. “Disproving these things is no different to shadow boxing and throwing your arms into the wind,” (*N.Q.* 7.14.1, *solvere ista quid aliud est quam manum exercere et in ventum iactare brachia*): there is nothing to fight against. Artemidorus’ theory is *levissimum* – in the sense that it contains nothing of substance to refute. When it comes to things in the sky, and beyond, no one can grasp anything more substantial than air: neither party can produce any evidence for their claims about the cosmos. So Seneca is reduced to attacking the man himself instead: he is a liar.

As Seneca continues his *ad hominem* demolition of Artemidorus it becomes clear that he is treating it as a rhetorical exercise: *contra testes dicendum est* (*N.Q.* 7.16.1, “Now I must discredit the witnesses”). The structure of the argument is the same as that of a trial speech: Artemidorus’ arguments from logic are dismissed, then his “witnesses.”

Seneca attacks Ephorus, who describes phenomena supporting Artemidorus' theories, for being a historian, and thus untrustworthy: *quidam creduli, quidam negligentes sunt; quibusdam mendacium obrepit, quibusdam placet; illi non evitant, hi appetunt* (N.Q. 7.16.1 "Some are gullible, some are negligent. On some, falsehood creeps up, some it pleases. The former do not avoid it, the latter seek it out"). The tactic demonstrates what is at stake in analyses of phenomena in the heavens: how can these phenomena be perceived? And if they can be perceived, can the person who claims to have perceived them be trusted? It seems that in the area of science it is one man's word against another's. In the case of comets, there are no tests which can be done to test general principles, and no way accounts can be verified, because the phenomena in question occur rarely, and are out of human control and human reach. Furthermore, individuals can lie. Some historians enjoy it. More disturbingly, even philosopher-scientists are also susceptible to it: at N.Q. 7.30.1 Seneca recommends treating questions about the nature of the universe with a religious reverence since otherwise even the earnest enquirer might be tempted to lie. It needs hardly be mentioned that this raises a question mark over Seneca's own trustworthiness.

Thus, though the heavens should be the most pure and transcendent part of the universe, they are actually the part whose understanding is most governed by the partiality and contingency of human perception, being beyond the reach of direct experience. As if to illustrate this, Seneca gives a series of theories about comets in rapid succession: Apollonius Mundiis makes some observations (N.Q. 7.17-18); Zeno, the Stoic, has a theory (stars come together and combine their rays and from this union of light there comes into existence the image of a rather long star, N.Q. 7.19), but there are other ones too: some say comets do not exist but are reflections of other celestial

bodies, others that they do exist but with their own orbits and they come into men's view, and yet others think they exist but cannot be called celestial bodies since they are impermanent (this last is the view of most Stoics, who also think comets are made from condensed air: *N.Q.* 7.20-1). None of the theories mentioned from *N.Q.* 7.17-21 seem obviously right, or wrong. Seneca does not accept or refute any of them.

In fact, Seneca seems to have no idea what he thinks about comets. *Quare ergo per longum tempus apparet et non cito exstinguitur?* ("why then does [a comet] appear for a long time and is not quickly extinguished?") he asks. What follows is a description of the comets which appeared under Nero and Claudius, and the difference in their appearances, (*N.Q.* 7.21.3-4), which completely fails to address the question raised. In a suggestion which echoes the hypothesis of Artemidorus which he so vehemently rejected, at *N.Q.* 7. 22.1 Seneca concludes that comets are heavenly bodies, but ones whose movements we do not understand. The universe is enormous, and it is implausible that we should know all its secrets.

Credis autem in hoc maximo et pulcherrimo corpore, inter innumerabiles stellas quae noctem decore vario distinguunt, quae minime vacuum et inertem esse patiuntur, quinque solas esse quibus exercere se liceat, ceteras stare fixum et immobilem populum.

N.Q. 7.24.3

Do you believe, moreover, that in this so great and so beautiful celestial body, among the numberless stars which distinguish the night with shifting ornament, in which there is suffered to be so little void and still, there are only five stars which may move, and that the others stand by as a fixed and immobile crowd?

The distinction between this idea and Artemidorus' theory that there may be many more than five planets out there seems tenuous at best. Our total lack of understanding of the farthest reaches of the universe, Seneca says, is like our ignorance of our own minds:

Habere nos animum, cuius imperio et impellimur et revocamur, omnes fatebuntur; quid tamen sit animus ille rector dominusque nostri, non magis tibi quisquam expediet, quam ubi sit. Alius illum dice spiritum esse, alius concentum quondam, alius vim divinam et dei partem, alius tenuissimum animae, alius incorporealem potentiam; non deerit qui sanguinem dicat, qui calorem. Adeo animo non potest liquere de ceteris rebus ut adhuc ipse se quaerat.

N.Q. 7.25.2

That we have a mind by whose command we are pushed forward and called back, everyone agrees; what though that mind, our director and master, is, no more may someone explain to you, than where it is. One person may say that it is a spirit, another that it is some kind of concord, another that it is divine force and a part of god, another that it is the slightest part of the soul, another that it is an incorporeal power; there is not lacking someone who will say it is blood, and someone who will say it is heat. So far is it impossible for the mind to be clear about other things that it inquires into itself.

Seneca's point is that it is not surprising that we cannot agree on what is going on in the farthest reaches of the universe, since we also cannot work out what our own mind is – the very thing closest to us. But it is also that our lack of understanding of the cosmos *is* an ignorance of our own mind: those substances posited as the material of the mind may

also be what controls the cosmos itself. Thus it is no surprise that the part of our world which is most elevated and removed from ordinary human experience should be so mired in questions of human perception and thought. If we could understand our own mind, we might be able to remove the misconceptions and false perceptions which prevent us from really knowing what goes on at the edge of the cosmos. And conversely, understanding the edges of the cosmos would itself give insight into our own minds – or rather it would actually be identical to knowing ourselves.

Furthermore our ignorance about the cosmos is related to the youth of humanity: the science of astronomy is not yet fifteen hundred years old (*N.Q.* 1.25.3). This turn back to the history of science suggests that the question of whether we will understand the furthest reaches of the cosmos is intimately linked with the fate of humanity itself.

Seneca first evinces an optimistic outlook in regard to the onward march of human knowledge, suggesting that science will continue to make progress: *veniet tempus quo ista quae nunc latent in lucem dies extrahat et longioris aevi diligentia* (*N.Q.* 1.25.4, “The time will come when a day and the diligence of a long age will drag those things which are now hidden into the light”). But he continues in a more pessimistic tone: one of the reasons human knowledge is advanced so slowly is *quod tam paucos annos inter studia ac vitia non aequa portione dividimus* (“because we do not divide our so few years in equal proportion between study and vice”, *N.Q.* 7.25.4). Seneca vacillates: much of our current knowledge is fairly recent and it is surely patchy: more knowledge is bound to be revealed in times to come (*N.Q.* 7.25-30). Our knowledge of the universe is connected with how well we know ourselves. The question of whether mankind will decline in morality and dedication to philosophy or flourish determines the future of science. But then again, human life is not all positive progress, and philosophy and science, far from

making steady advances, seem now to be dying out (luxury and corruption are on the rise, philosophy is neglected; instead, people put their energy into acting, dancing, and gladiatorial fights: *N.Q.* 7.32.1-3). Seneca cannot seem to decide whether human knowledge is advancing backwards or forwards. This itself seems to be yet another one of the universe's unknowables; or perhaps the human fate is like a star – sometimes advancing, sometimes in retrograde.

The uncertainty about whether humanity is progressing towards or away from knowledge, is matched by a final rejection of the idea of looking *out* into the universe at all: *ipse qui ista tractat, qui condidit, qui totum hoc fundavit deditque circa se, maiorque est pars sui operis ac melior, effugit oculos; cogitatione visendus est* (*N.Q.* 7.30.3, “He who manages those things, who established them, who founded this whole and placed it around himself, and is the greater and better part of his work, escapes our eyes, and must be seen in thought”). After all the book’s straining to look at the sky, Seneca decides that God, the figure really at stake at the edges of the cosmos, can only be known inwardly, in the mind. And furthermore, God’s works are not elevated, but buried: *qui condidit... qui fundavit*: these verbs suggest the laying of foundations. Comets move, *per secretum*, as if through hidden recesses, rather than through the immense tracts of the sky. Again, the point is that the heavens are in fact a mirror for the nature which lies deep inside ourselves. Some things are simply beyond human perception and comprehension: *aut fortasse, quod magis mireris, oculos nostros et implent et effugiunt, sive illis tanta subtilitas est quantum consequi acies humana non possit, sive in sanctiore secessu maiestas tanta delituit et regnum suum, id est se, regit, nec ulli da adytum nisi animo* (*N.Q.* 7.30.4, “Or perhaps, what may surprise you more, they both fill and flee our eyes; either their subtlty is so great that the human gaze cannot follow it, or

such great majesty shelters in inviolable retirement, and rules its kingdom, that is, itself, and gives no entrance to anything but the mind”).

Finally, Seneca remarks upon the best philosophy can hope for:

*At mehercules, si hoc totis membris premeremus, si in hoc iuventus sobria
incumberet, hoc maiores docerent, hoc minores addicerent, vix ad fundum
veniretur in quo veritas posita est, quam nunc in summa terra et levi manu
quaerimus.*

N.Q. 7.32.4

But, by Hercules, if we were to press forth with all our strength, if one were to lay on this soberly from one’s youth, if the elders were to teach it and the youngers were to learn it, we would hardly come to the bottom where the truth resides, which now we seek on the earth’s surface and with little power.

The end of philosophy, it seems, will not be soaring in the heavens after all, but reaching deep below the surface. As I argued in my Chapters 1 and 2, for Seneca the recesses of the earth are associated with the inside of the human body. The mention of elders in the passage also calls to mind the earth’s association with past generations buried in it, whose knowledge forms the foundations of our own. The point is that the sky is so far away that it is difficult to make empirical observations about it; any hypotheses we do evince about the behavior of comets will be filled in by reasoned guesses, and thus tell us as much or more about ourselves observing than about the phenomena themselves. This is not to say that science is pointless: rather it vindicates the idea that observation of the universe will reveal to us the true extent of that reason which animates us and

drives our enquiries. What makes us human is that piece of divine reason that connects us with the furthest reaches of the cosmos. Conversely, as Seneca points out at *N.Q.* 7.25.2, our ignorance of the cosmos is like our own lack of self knowledge.

Book 1.

As if to confirm the idea that any process of scientific enquiry will reveal to the enquirer at least as much about his reasoning process as about the external object of his scrutiny, the following book, traditionally designated Book 1 takes reflection as its major theme: the reflections and refractions which produce light effects in the lower atmosphere. It begins, though, with another programmatic discussion of the nature of philosophy.³²⁹ Although the discussion does not dwell explicitly upon reflection, it is revealing as to the central importance Seneca accords a reflective *structure* to his philosophy, and lays the ground for the major theoretical claims of the book. Seneca draws a distinction between the terrestrial and the celestial, a great conceptual distance:

Quantum inter philosophiam interest, Lucili virorum optime, et ceteras artes, tantum interesse existimo in ipsa philosophia inter illam partem quae ad homines et hanc quae ad deos pertinent. Altior est haec et animosior; multum permisit sibi; non fuit oculis contenta; maius esse quiddam suspiciata est ac pulchrius quod extra conspectum natura posuisset.

³²⁹ Book 1 bibliography: Stahl 1960 46-81, Gross 1989 12-63, Flammini 1992 643-59, Weber 1995, Berno 2003a 31-64, Limburg 2007 265-298 377-441, Williams 2012 60-74; Williams 2005a, Waiblinger 1977 59-73 discusses Books 1 and 2 as a pair.

As much as lies between philosophy, Lucilius best of men, and the other arts, so much I think lies within philosophy itself between that part which pertains to men and that which pertains to the gods. The latter is higher and more rational; it has allowed itself much; it was not limited to the eyes; rather it is suspected that there is something more beautiful which nature has placed out of sight.”

Critics disagree about precisely what Seneca means by *illam partem [philosophiae] ...quae ad deos pertinet*. For Limburg, Seneca is referring to the transcendent truths to which study of physics may bring one.³³⁰ She paraphrases N.Q. 1.praef. 4-6, “Virtue is said not to be achieved for itself, but because it prepares the mind for the knowledge of celestial phenomena.”³³¹ Elsewhere, Seneca certainly evinces the idea that study of nature of moral improvement go hand in hand. And the association of physics and theology was familiar to Stoicism.³³²

Rosenmeyer draws the opposite conclusion, arguing that the initial distinction drawn between the two forms of philosophy lies in the fact that one deals with the visible (philosophy of men) and one with the invisible (philosophy of the gods): thus, physics is for him identified with *terrena*, not, as for Limburg, *caelestia*.³³³ The objects of the latter

³³⁰ Limburg 2007 380 “Worthwhile questions that are said to be answered when one studies physics concern the nature of the universe and other important matters (see EM 65.19, 90.28-29, 93.9, 117.19). This area of physics is covered in N.Q. 7 and in this preface (and perhaps in the discussion of divination in N.Q. 2), but it does not correspond to the general content of the *Naturales Quaestiones*”

³³¹ Limburg 2007 380.

³³² LS 267, “since the world is the ‘substance’ of god, and god is the Nature which sustains the world and makes things grow [43A], physics, in the final analysis is theology (26C; 63E).”

³³³ Setaioli 2007 334-5 emphasises that Seneca is talking about a true conception of god, as opposed to the customary religious conception, and argues that Seneca sees knowledge of god as beginning in the visible and then transcending it.

“are the *secretiora* of Nature, and Seneca is grateful to *rerum natura* for allowing him to cut through to them.”³³⁴ Like many critics, Rosenmeyer notes resonances with other non-materialists here: “Now this train of thoughts, the distinction between what is visible and what is not, deriving ultimately from Plato’s Cave and from Aristotle’s *On Philosophy*, might well have been written by a Middle Platonist for whom visible things are paltry tokens of what really counts, and it is striking that it is nature that has removed this reality from our vision.”³³⁵ In particular, Plato’s *Timaeus*, which depicted the creation of the universe by the demiurge, was an important influence on Stoic cosmogony, and may be a direct influence here.³³⁶ The *Timaeus* also included an account of visual perception which is relevant to the theme of this book.³³⁷

But the split in philosophy between *illam partem quae ad homines et hanc quae ad deos pertinent* also recalls the distinction between *decreta* and *praecepta*, as elaborated in Seneca’s Letters 94 and 95. In those letters Seneca argues *both* that even though *praecepta* cannot fully communicate Stoicism, they are useful bolsters to those who have not yet achieved sagehood precisely because they exercise men’s unreason for persuasive effect, *and* that *praecepta* are misleading and dangerous props which by giving men the illusion of acting philosophically already, impede their process towards actually doing so. Conversely, *decreta*, while certainly being true philosophical statements, *both* cannot be comprehended by the ordinary man without considerable

³³⁴ 2000 107.

³³⁵ 2000 107. Rosenmeyer compares *Ep.* 90.34.

³³⁶ *Tim.* 40d-44d. On the Platonic influence on this passage see Waiblinger 1977 68, with n. 57 for references, Gauly 2004 164-170 and Limburg 2007 382, with further references. The *Timaeus* was fundamental to Stoic cosmogony: LS 271 “As the active principle, god is a ‘craftsman’ (44 E3-4) recalling the cosmology of the *Timaeus*, with its ‘receptacle’ which is utterly plastic and functions as the recipient of qualities.” For the *Timaeus* as an influence on the early Stoics, Reydams-Schils 1999, Hahn 1977 43, 137-8. For Seneca and Plato: Inwood 2007 110-112, 136-7, Reydams-Schils 2010.

³³⁷ *Tim.* 45b-46a..

supplementation, *and* are the only means by which wisdom may be attained and incapable of being supplemented.

The model of philosophy which Seneca briefly evokes here is striking: it contains within it a gulf, equal to that between itself and other branches of human knowledge. Great gulfs are a familiar feature of Stoicism. It is a tenet of Stoic philosophy that the distance between virtue and non-virtue, the gods and men, is absolute – a distance which cannot be measured on the same scale as different vices are from one another, a distance besides which different vices are shown not to be distant from one another at all. The distance between philosophy and non-philosophy is clearly the same as that between virtue and vice: philosophy is the discourse of logos, and hence of god. In the following section Seneca confirms, “in short, between the two parts of philosophy there is as much difference as there is between man and god” (*N.Q. 1.Praef. 2, denique inter duas interest quantum inter deum et hominem*).³³⁸ But though the distance between men and gods exists outside philosophy (between philosophy and the other arts), it also returns again *within* philosophy (between the philosophy of the gods and the philosophy of men).

Thus the spatial metaphor for distinction between the philosophy of gods and that of men can help us to understand the relationship between *decreta* and *praecepta*, which in Letters 94 and 95 seems unclear and contradictory. The two modes of philosophy are separate, and the latter should hardly be called philosophy at all. But *decreta* are in practice supplemented by *praecepta*. Yet there is always a part of the truth of *decreta*

³³⁸ Limburg 2007 379 “Although the preface is unrelated to the scientific discussion of Book 1, it is certainly related to the general enterprise of the *Naturales Quaestiones*.” Leitão 1998 138 and Williams 2012 58 see the preface and end of Book 1 as laying out a tripartite scheme which is important to both their interpretations.

which escapes expression through *praecepta*. This escaping truth is expressed in this passage by the second split.

And the doubling of the divide suggests a recursive relationship. If the distance between men and gods is replicated within philosophy to give the terrestrial and celestial branches, perhaps it is repeated again within the celestial branch, and so on, so that there is always a base, human element, in every rarefied godly strain, and yet beyond that, always a pure, divine absolute which eludes the grasp of man every time.

Philosophy seems a *mise en abyme*, a universe unto itself which can reflect and contain even what is excluded from it: even though philosophy is at a complete remove from trivial human indifferents, that very remove, that absolute difference, is also found again, inside philosophy. Perhaps we should not be surprised at this double recurrence of the gulf between man and god. Philosophy is the discourse of *logos*, of god and of nature, but it is conducted by the non-virtuous philosopher. As we saw in the previous chapter, the voyage towards wisdom is not one that may be completed (though one may very well travel *towards* wisdom, the acquisition of wisdom itself cannot be gradual, but is a total and instantaneous transformation of self) so it makes sense that even within the rational discourse of philosophy, a little of the divine should be held back across another divide.

One branch of philosophy lights the way, the other lifts us to the place from where the light emanates (*N.Q.1.Praef.2*). Again, this traces the difference between *praecepta* and *decreta*. The terrestrial branch merely allows us to use philosophy or wisdom as a tool for the improvements of our lives, the celestial branch offers to make us occupy the same position as philosophy or wisdom itself (an argument for the philosophy of the

gods being, in its perfect and complete form, identical with virtue). But the suggestion of a recursion within philosophy raises the possibility that this simple identity, or co-extensiveness, with virtue can never be *without* a simultaneous separation from virtue, whereby it is the light by which one sees one's way.

Rosenmeyer (2000) touches on this recursive relation in his reading, although he frames it in different terms. According to him, the distinction which Seneca draws in the opening lines between "metaphysics and physics slides" into a distinction between "ethics and natural science," and it turns out that, "[t]he subject with which he is concerned lies *between* the two kinds of philosophy heralded at the start, which, as so often in Seneca, turns out to have been a false start.... But the function of *natura* as a hider of visibles will continue to play a role in the work. In fact, one of the roles ascribed to *natura* is to be penetrated (*N.Q.* 1.*Praef.* 7–8): only if we break the barrier set up by *natura* or, another image, if we hide in the *interior naturae sinus*, its sheltering but obstructive lap, can we begin to study the secrets of a universe which is divine because it is natural."³³⁹ Thus, for Rosenmeyer, nature functions in Seneca as *both* the veil hiding the secrets of the universe, *and* the secrets of the universe themselves. The distinction philosophy/other arts is predicated on the opposition divine/earthly – but that division is repeated *within* philosophy as well.

This reading of the suggestion of a recursive function within this description of philosophy is made more plausible by the book's central preoccupation with mirrors and reflections. Its central focus is the luminous objects which appear in our skies, which are so often tricks of the light, reflections and refractions.

³³⁹ Rosenmeyer 2000 107-8.

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Seneca moves on: *nunc, ut ad propositum opus veniam, audi quid de ignibus sentiam quos aer transversos agit* (N.Q. 1.1.1 “Now to come to my proposed work, listen to what I think about those fires which the air drives crosswise.”) Seneca explains that light may be transmitted through the atmosphere like the ripples that emanate when a stone is dropped into a pond (N.Q. 1.2.2).³⁴⁰ Light effects like the *corona* around stars, whose formation Seneca describes, must be formed in the inner atmosphere, as “in the vicinity of the stars and the sun nothing of this sort can possibly happen because the aether is thin there” (N.Q. 1.2.4, *in vicinia autem stellarum et solis nihil tale fieri potest, quia illic tenuis aether est*). This point is crucial to the understanding of the main scientific content of the book. Seneca will describe what happens when light from the outer heavens comes down to our own atmosphere.³⁴¹ Given the identification of the divine fire with reason, there is an obvious metaphorical significance: just as we interact with reflections of divine light distorted by their interaction with the material of our atmosphere, so we know only perverted shadows of reason and virtue.

Waiblinger notes that the ancient association of light with “enlightenment” is played upon here.³⁴² Leitão introduces the book as follows, “[t]he goal of natural philosophy, Seneca

³⁴⁰ As Leitão 1998 131-2 notes, the point that all light (N.Q. 1.2.2) is round is important: in the chapter we will see how interaction with air and water will produce distortions, bending light to different shapes in the inner atmosphere where it is visible to us. For the Stoics, light, like most things, is corporeal. See Cooper 2009 on the Stoic conception of fire.

³⁴¹ Leitão 1998 128-9 and *passim* is particularly good on the fact that we observe mostly reflections and refractions of celestial light.

³⁴² Waiblinger 1977 68. See also Bartsch, “Light and the sun itself, as Seneca makes clear both here and throughout his writing, are metaphors for true seeing (as indeed in Plato)” (2006 104 n. 151, *Ep.* 115.6). For metaphorical uses of light in Seneca, see Armisen-Marchetti 1989 131-132, s.v. “Lumière”, 144-145, s.v. “Obscurité”, and 146-147, s.v. “Ombre”.

begins, is to rise to the realm of celestial light, to that region whence the light shines, *perducit illo unde lucet* (*N.Q. 1.Praef.2*). In his pursuit of ethical philosophy, man is limited to wallowing in the darkness of earth, but by contemplating nature and the divine, he liberates the soul from the body and comes to shine together with the sun, moon and stars in the heavens (*N.Q. 1.Praef.6, 11*). We might be tempted to interpret this ‘enlightenment’ as merely a metaphor were it not for the fact that Seneca’s topic in Book 1 is indeed meteorological ‘lights’ in the sky.... But these lights, to which Seneca devotes the bulk of Book 1, are not the same as the pure celestial light of the heavens (*unde lucet*), but are mere reflections (and distorted ones at that) of this pure celestial light in the earth’s atmosphere.”³⁴³

Light looks different, in our realm, because it has come into contact with material. A rainbow, for example, is formed when light hits clouds: *quia aliae partes in nubibus tumidiores sunt, aliae summissiores, quaedam crassiores quam ut solem **transmittant**, aliae imbecilliores quam ut excludant, haec inaequalitas alternis lucem umbramque permiscet et **exprimit** illam mirabilem arcus varietatem* (*N.Q. 1.3.1*, “because some parts in the clouds are more swollen, others are more sunken, some thicker so that they transmit the sun, others weaker so that they exclude it, this inequality mixes light and shade in alternation and expresses that marvelous variety of a rainbow”). The rainbow is a reflection of light, but a distorting reflection. Though the light is celestial, the distortion is terrestrial, and this latter is what is visible to men.

These tricks of the light, which form the subject of Book 1, are of course the perfect example of men’s inability properly to perceive the divine. There are material barriers to

³⁴³ 1998 128-9.

our ability to see how light, which in its pure form is the divine fire at the edge of the universe, “really” looks. That the rainbow, like other luminous phenomena, is to be thought of as a reification of the relationship between the terrestrial and the divine is perfectly illustrated by the image of a fuller squirting out water from his mouth (N.Q. 1.3.2). Water that has passed through the human body interacts with celestial light to produce the distortion of a rainbow. That we are meant to think of this light as having entered a base, human domain is underscored further by inevitable recollection by the reader of the stream of liquid we more usually associate with a fuller: urine.

The rainbow is thus a product of the interaction between the base material nature, in which we too share, and celestial light. It might then represent the struggles of the philosopher himself, who attempts to contemplate the divine with his flawed and imperfect mind. This is an association hinted at by one of the more implausible luminous effects in which Seneca claims to believe:

Quidam itaque hoc genere valitudinis laborant ut ipsi sibi videantur occurrere, ut ubique imaginem suam cernant. Quare? Quia infirma vis oculorum non potest perrumpere ne sibi quidem proximum aera, sed resilit.

Itaque quod in aliis efficit densus aer, in his facit omnis; satis enim ualet qualiscumque ad imbecillam aciem repellendam.

N.Q. 1.3.7-8

And so some people labour under this type of infirmity, that they seem to run into themselves, and see their own image everywhere. Why? Because the weak

power of their eyes cannot penetrate even the air closest to them, but bounces back.

Thus what dense air achieves for other people, all air does for them; for any amount is strong enough to repel their weak gaze.

The improbability of the idea that some people are constantly faced with their own reflection in the air – never mind the allegation offered in support that *anyone* might see his own face before him on a foggy day – lends it to a direct allegorical interpretation: one might conclude that Seneca means to say that the weaker a man's vision, the more he will just see himself in the air, the less he will be able to see through to the pure divine light beyond. Perhaps he is even suggesting that it is an infirmity to see oneself everywhere in the universe: one must realize that the universe is not made in one's own image. To see the self everywhere is to forget there is something beyond the human. The allegory throws doubt upon the intended tone of the previous book, which seemed to suggest that some things are so far away that speculation about them reveals more about the working of human reason than the distant phenomena themselves. Now it seems that this represents a weakness to overcome. Given that self-scrutiny and self-reflection are a central part of Seneca's philosophical repertoire, this turn is somewhat surprising. But in this book, as we will see, Seneca casts serious doubts on the salubriousness of looking at one's own reflection. Given this book's placing near the end of the work, it is tempting to see this apparent discrepancy as a progression: recognising that one has something in common with the furthest reaches of the cosmos is one step, the next is to understand that one has no privileged place in the cosmos oneself, and to

transcend the particularistic viewpoint by which one identifies the cosmos with oneself rather than with itself.

Further discussion of the rainbow leads Seneca into an exploration of another salient property of reflective objects: their ability to multiply images.

Quidam ita existimant arcum fieri: in ea parte in qua iam pluit singula stillicidia pluviae cadentis singula esse specula, a singulis ergo reddi imaginem solis; deinde multas imagines, immo innumerabiles, et devexas et in praeceps euntes confundi; itaque arcum esse multarum solis imaginum confusionem.

N.Q. 1.3.5

Some judge the rainbow to be produced thus: in each part in which now single drops of falling rain fall, from each single one is therefore reflected an image of the sun; then many images, no, innumerable ones, drawn down and going headlong, are mixed up; and so the rainbow is a confusion of many images of the sun.

This argument for the production of rainbows contains two propositions about how reflection works. Firstly, single droplets act as single mirrors, so that as many separate but identical images may be reflected as there are reflective surfaces: *Quare? Quia omnis circumscripta levitas et circumdata suis finibus speculum est* (N.Q. 1.3.6, “Why? Because every smooth surface bounded and surrounded by its own edges is a mirror.”) Secondly, a multitude of separate, individual reflections may appear to the observer as one large, single reflection: *Ergo stillicidia illa infinita quae imber cadens defert, totidem specula sunt, totidem solis facies habent. Hae contra intuenti perturbatae apparent, nec*

discipiuntur intervalla quibus singulae distant, spatio prohibente discerni; deinde pro singulis apparet una facies turbida ex omnibus (N.Q. 1.3.6 “And so these countless drops which the falling rain brings are so many mirrors, and have so many images of the sun. These seem confused to the eye, and the intervals by which the drops stand apart from one another cannot be made out, the space prevents it from being seen; then instead of the single images there appears one blurred reflection from all of them”).

On this understanding, the rainbow is the product of reflective surfaces’ capacity to both multiply images, and to reduce them again to a single unit. It seems that in this way multiplication and division of visible phenomena is infinitely possible. Whereas for Lucretius, the atom is the basic unit, forming objects which one might not immediately guess to be made up of millions of tiny particles, here it the tiny reflective drop plays a similar role, reflecting reflections of colour, producing differences in size, colour, or number from the original object (N.Q. 1.3.8).³⁴⁴ Seneca suggests that to understand nature, it is not enough to merely know the materials of the cosmos, rather one must understand how our own perception interacts with the material world around us. And this is not a neutral process, but our perception is deficient:

Ut haec quae proposuisti refellam et alia quae non minus refellenda sunt, illud dicam oportet, nihil esse acie nostra fallacius non tantum in his a quibus subtiliter pervidendis illam locorum diversitas submovet, sed etiam in his quoque quae ad manum cernit.

³⁴⁴ Reflection is not the only way our vision can distort reality: N.Q. 1.3.10, *ad ipsum solem revertere. Hunc, quem toto terrarum orbe maiorem probat ratio, acies nostra sic contraxit ut sapientes viri pedalem esse contenderent, quem velocissimum omnium scimus, nemo nostrum moveri videt, nec ire crederemus, nisi apparet isse*, “Go back to the sun itself. Although reason proves it is larger than the globe of the earth, our sight has so contracted it that philosophers have contended that it is the size of a foot. We know it is the swiftest of heavenly bodies, but no one of us sees it move. In fact, we would not believe it moved at all except that it obviously has changed position.”

N.Q. 1.3.9

In order to refute what you have proposed and other things which must be refuted no less, I should say that nothing is more deceitful than our eyesight, not only in the case of things whose close examination distance prevents, but also in what it perceives at hand.

Whereas Lucretius' vision of the make-up of physical objects provides an explanation for their appearance which traces back to the microscopic level, for Seneca, closer examination reveals that visible phenomena may be based on tricks of the light and distortion. *Sed quoquomodo, imago similis redidi debet e speculo. Quid autem est tam dissimile quam sol et arcus, in quo neque figura solis neque color neque magnitudo apparet?* ("What moreover is so different from the sun as the rainbow, in which neither the shape nor the colour nor the size of the sun are evident?"). Mirrors, and indeed other things in nature, may distort to a frightening degree (N.Q. 1.5.14). Seneca remains agnostic on the question of the physical status of a reflection, whether it is a replicated body, or merely our own eyesight bent back on itself:

Contra haec illa dicuntur. De speculis duae opiniones sunt. Alii enim in illis simulacra cerni putant, id est corporum nostrorum figuras a nostris corporibus emissas ac separatas; alii non aiunt imagines in speculo sed ipsa aspici corpora retorta oculorum acie et in se rursus reflexa. Nunc nihil ad rem pertinent quomodo videamus quodcumque videmus.

N.Q. 1.5.1

Against these theories the following is said. There are two opinions regarding mirrors. For some think that replications are seen in them, that is that the shapes

of our bodies sent out and separated from our bodies. Others do not say that they are images in the mirror, but that bodies themselves are seen, when the gaze of our eyes is turned back and reflected back on itself again. Now it makes no difference how we see whatever we see.

Most importantly, reflections are entirely dependent upon the position of the observer in relation to the object, that is they are an interaction of objects and perception: *nubem enim nemo qui in ipsa est videt* (N.Q. 1.5.11, “for no one who is inside a cloud can see it”). Though he inclines towards seeing reflections as only seeming rather than being, he does not insist on the point.: *denique inter me teque convenit colores illos quibus caeli regio depingitur a sole esse; illud unum inter nos non convenit: tu dicis illum colorem esse, ego videri. Qui sive est, sive videtur, a sole est* (“finally you and I agree that those colours, by which the region of the sky is painted, are from the sun; the one thing that we do not agree on: you say that that colour exists, I that it only appears to. Whether it exists or it appears to, it is from the sun”). In fact, Seneca is reducing this very scientific question itself to an issue of perspective, yours and mine, which may or may not, like light rays, converge (*convenit*) at a certain point. However, he insists that the images are not substantial: *Non est ergo propria in ista nube substantia, nec corpus est sed mendacium, sine re similitudo* (N.Q. 1.6.4, “for there is no actual substance in that cloud, nor is it a body, but a lie, an likeness without reality”).³⁴⁵ This is a controversial position for a Stoic, who insist upon the corporeal basis of all things. Yet the mendacious status of images means that none are more or less real: in the case of *parhelia*, “sundogs”, “some are of that opinion, that whenever two such likenesses exist, that they judge one of them to be an image of the sun, the other an image of the image” (N.Q. 1.13.1 *quidam*

³⁴⁵ And, in the sense that it does not give a true image of the thing it reflects, a reflection is certainly not real: *non est enim in speculo quod ostenditur* (“what is shown does not really exist in the mirror” N.Q. 1.15.7).

in illa sententia sunt, quotiens duo simulacra talia existunt, ut iudicent in illis alternam solis imaginem, esse, alteram imaginis), Seneca is quite content to call them all suns (*hi soles – utar enim historica lingua*, N.Q. 1.13.3, “these suns – for I will use the historians’ term”). This blurring of the conventional distinction reality and image recalls the Stoic counter-intuitive equivocation between all vicious acts – even those which seem closer to virtue; in the case of both visual and moral phenomena the singularity of *logos* makes all imperfection equal.

Finally, Seneca comes to doubt that a reflective surface could fuse images together. Rather, it can only keep reflecting and reflecting:

Nam apud nos quoque, cum plura specula disposita sunt ita ut alteri sit conspectus alterius, omnia implentur, et una imago a vero est, ceterae imaginum effigies sunt. Nihil enim refert quid sit quod speculo ostendatur; quicquid videt, reddit. Ita illic quoque in sublimi, si sic nubes fors aliqua disposuit ut inter se conspiciant, altera nubes solis imaginem, altera imaginis reddit.

N.Q. 1.13.1

For also among us, when many mirrors are arranged so that one is in the line of another, they are all filled, and one image is from the true object, the rest are copies of images. For it makes no difference what it is that is shown to a mirror; whatever it sees it reflects. Thus it is also there in the sky, if some chance has arranged clouds so that they see each other among themselves, one cloud reflects the image of the sun, the other an image of an image.

The unstopability of reflections is a reminder of the vitality of the Stoic cosmos, wherein every action, however small, impacts upon the universe, and is reflected in it. No action comes uncaused (there is no room for any equivalent of the Epicurian “swerve”), but is rather implicated in the chain of causality, or reflections, which goes back to the first cause.³⁴⁶ Rather than being a mirror for ourselves, the cosmos is a hall of mirrors, occasionally distorting, but always reflecting.

Book 1, which is probably the part of the *N.Q.* which has received most attention in recent years, continues the theme of reflection. It is not hard to see why readers and critics have been tickled by the shocking tale of the solipsistic scopophile Hostius Quadra, who lived and died under the emperor Augustus. The account of Hostius’ sexual activities – submitting to a man and woman at the same time while also penetrating someone else, and watching the movement of body parts unnaturally magnified in the distorting mirrors that lined his bedroom – is unusually explicit.³⁴⁷

It is also one of the moralising “digressions” which bears the clearest thematic link with the scientific discussions with which it shares its place in the book.³⁴⁸ Hostius’ mirrors

³⁴⁶ For the Stoics, fate and causation were fixed, and in fact part of the same single fate which governed the universe (LS 55 L = Cicero *On divination* 1.125-6 = SVF 2.921: “By ‘fate’, I mean what the Greeks call *heirarmenē* – an ordered sequence of causes, since it is the connection of cause to cause which out of itself produces everything. It is everlasting truth, flowing from all eternity. Consequently nothing has happened which was not going to be, and likewise nothing is going to be of which nature does not contain causes working to bring that very thing about. This makes it intelligible that fate should be, not the ‘fate’ of superstition, but that of physics, an everlasting cause of things – why past things happened, why present things are now happening, and which future things will be.”) As Seneca affirms at *N.Q.* 2.45.2, for the Stoics fate itself is god, and the first cause: *god vis illum [sc. Iovem] fatum vocare, non errabis; hic est ex quo suspensa sunt omnia, causa causarum* (“You wish to call him [sc. Jupiter] fate. You shall not be wrong. He is the one on whom all things depend, the cause of causes”). On Stoic causality and the problem of free will, see LS 55, Long 1971 173-99, Botros 1985, Sambursky 1987 49-80, Bobzien 1998, Salles 2005, Dorothea Frede 2008.

³⁴⁷ On the passage : Stahl 1960 81-6, Waiblinger 1977 69-71, Gross 1989 59-64, Leitão 1998, Berno 2003a 31-64, Gauly 2004 115-134, Limburg 2007 265-298, Williams 2012 55-60.

³⁴⁸ Gross 1989 is a dissenting voice who downplays the connection between the scientific bulk of the book and the moralising prologue, seeing them as no more than cosmetically related: “Nach meiner Ansicht ist die philosophische Bedeutung dieses Finales von Stahl und Waiblinger überschätzt worden. Seneca benutzt das Thema “Spiegel”, um zum Schluss des Buches noch eine moralphilosophische Paränese anzufügen,

obviously produce effects similar to the imperfect reflections cast by clouds,³⁴⁹ and given the existing Roman association of mirrors with eroticism (and auto-eroticism), the turn the book takes is not entirely unpredictable.³⁵⁰ For Berno, the parallelism between the scientific content of Book 1 and the Hostius incident, with mirrors governing both the content of and the relation between the two, is the *N.Q.*'s central emblem of the "specularity" between virtue and vice which she sees as a central message of the work as a whole.³⁵¹

Although the thematic relation is understandable, the similarities serve to make the anecdote more, rather than less, perplexing. After giving the shocking details of Hostius' sexual habits, Seneca asks why nature invented mirrors in the first place (*N.Q.* 1.17.1). They are, he judges, useful tools for knowledge: the sun is too bright to look at except in reflection (*N.Q.* 1.17.2). Furthermore, mirrors were invented so that man might know himself (*N.Q.* 1.17.4). But the proper, improving and educational uses of mirrors soon give way to decadence and self-indulgence: whereas first of all man would glance in a clear stream to see his reflection, soon he was polishing metal and preening himself.

die einerseits eine Hinwendung zur praktischen Ethik (im Gegensatz zur für Senecas Zeit weitgehend theoretischen Naturwissenschaft) darstellt, anderseits dem Unterhaltungsbedürfnis des Lesers entgegenkommt. Von einem inneren philosophischen Zusammenhang zwischen den naturwissenschaftlichen Aussagen des Mittelteils und den moralphilosophischen Epilog kann keine Rede sein. Der Zweck der zahlreichen naturwissenschaftlichen Aussagen kann nicht allein die Vorbereitung deiser "Kapuzinerpredigt" (Goethe) oder "Sittenschelte" (Strohm) und *laudatio temporis acti* sein" (Gross 1989 59).

³⁴⁹ Gauly 2004 117: "Das Thema der Spiegelung und das damit verbundene der Wahrnehmung und Erkenntnis durchziehen das ganze Buch: Optische Erscheinungen der Atmosphäre werden als Spiegelsphänomene erklärt, auf die Anwendung von Spiegeln also Hilfsmittel bei der Erforschung der Natur wird verweisen, und die Schwäche des Sehsinns, der sich leicht – und insbesondere durch Spiegel – täuschen lässt, wird mehrfach thematisiert."

³⁵⁰ For the erotic and moral connotations of mirrors, see McCarty 1989, Balensieffen 1990, Melchior-Bonnet 1994, Frontisi-Ducroux and Vernant 1997, Bartsch 2006 and Taylor 2008. Limburg 1997 279 notes the relevance of the passage of Apuleius' *Apologia* (13ff) where he defends himself against the charge that he owns a mirror. Pliny reports that a mirror goes cloudy if a menstruating woman looks in it (*N.H.* 28.24; fortunately the mirror will recover its shine if the woman looks at its back, and the mishap avoided entirely if she simply carries a mullet on her person); see Richlin 1997 203-4.

³⁵¹ Berno 2003a 22 for Hostius as emblematic.

The increase in vice is made to seem the natural consequence of the multiplying effect of mirrors: *processit enim paulatim in deterius opibus ipsis invitata luxuria et incrementum ingens vitia ceperunt*, (N.Q. 1.17.10, “for luxury proceeds gradually corrupted by its own wealth and vices have taken on enormous growth”). Just as Hostius’ very name suggests that he has been multiplied to the power of four – so mirrors induce the kind of self indulgence which leads to monetary inflation:

An tu existimas auro inditum habuisse Scipionis filias speculum, cum illis dos fuisset aes grave? ... Iam libertinorum virunculis in unum speculum non sufficit illa dos quam dedis populus Romanus animose.

N.Q. 1.17.8-9

Do you think that the daughters of Scipio had a mirror backed in gold, when their dowry was heavy brass? ... Now that dowry which the Roman people gave eagerly would no suffice for one mirror for the little daughters of freedmen.

That vice increases down the generations seems a multiplication as natural as generation itself, so reflection, copulation and the increase of wealth are made to seem one and the same.³⁵²

But, as with all reflections of reflections, and as with the recursive structure of philosophy described in the opening passage of the book, there is no clear division between the distorted and the undistorted. The virtuous men glancing at themselves in the stream

³⁵² Leitão makes the point that the distortion of morals down the generation mirrors the distortion of light as it reaches the earth (Leitão 1998 133 and passim. Leitão 1998 134-5 notes that the idea is influenced by Platonism: “The argument about ‘images of images’ is familiar from Plato’s Republic: only the original objects (the Forms) have any claim to metaphysical being, while the copies of the original are the phenomena of the sensible world which ‘come to be’ and ultimately ‘pass away’. Copies of these copies, in turn, the stuff of art and literature, are at the farthest remove from the Forms and the Good” (1998 134-5, citing Plat. Resp. 598b, 509d-517a.).

might seem models of self-restraint, but their action recalls that of Narcissus – another early adopter of the pool of water as proto-mirror.³⁵³ And a closer look at the passage describing the men of old casts doubts on their alleged austerity.

Tunc quoque, cum antiqui illi viri incondite viverent, satis nitidi si squalorem opere collectum adverso flumine eluerant, cura comere capillum fuit ac promonentem barbam depectere, et in hac re sibi quisque, non alteri in vicem, operam dabat. Ne coniugum quidem manu crinis ille quem effundere olim mos viris fuit attrectabatur, sed illum sibi ipsi sine ullo artifice formosi quatiebant, non aliter quam iubam generosa animalia.

N.Q. 1.17.7

Then too, when those ancient men lived informally, they were polished enough if they washed the squalor accumulated at work in a running river, their care was to brush their hair and comb their beards, and in this matter each man attended to himself, not to another in turn. That hair which it was man's custom to let flow was not even touched by the hands of a wife, but those handsome men used to shake it out themselves without any artifice, not otherwise than noble animals do a mane.

The passage itself seems to dramatize the perverting effects of the men's gazing at their reflection. First the men are said to live informally (*incondite*), that they were polished enough (*satis nitidi*)... but then it is revealed that they were refined enough only if they washed themselves in the stream (*eluerant* is saved until the end of the clause for effect), and then they are described as caring not for each others' hair and beards but their own – requiring more use of the stream-mirror presumably, and a step away from

³⁵³ Berno 2003a 46, Citroni Marchetti 1991 157 note the parallels between Narcissus and Hostius.

communal living towards the solipsism which the mirror represents. Though Seneca ends the book by denouncing the use of mirrors by men – even soldiers – and complains that “what used to be called the ornament of a woman is now a man’s equipment” (*N.Q.* 1.17.10, *mundus muliebris vocabatur, sarcinae virile sint*), these *virī antiqui* wear their hair long and make caring for it their own work rather than that of their wives. And given that Hostius had previously expressed envy of animals, who can indulge their lusts however they like, the final image of early men shaking their mane “like animals” is striking.³⁵⁴

And as Gauly points out, the opposition between contemporary vice (Hostius) and old-time virtue (the men of yore who did not yet have mirrors) is rather complicated. He observes that although Seneca calls the days of old a simpler time (*N.Q.* 1.17.5, *aetas illa simplicior*), the use of the comparative suggests that they might not be wholly *simplex*. And the quotation from the *Eclogues* with which Seneca illustrates these hoary old folks’ indifference to their own reflections comes from a passage illustrating precisely a rustic’s vanity as he peers at his reflection in a sea (*Ecl.* 2.25-7).³⁵⁵ Furthermore this view of vice as existing on a continuum across time, rather than in a binary opposition, recalls the model of philosophy which Seneca presented in the prologue.

Leitão points out that the Hostius passage poses a problem, insofar as Hostius seems to “mirror” the descriptions given in the preface of Book 1 of the Stoic sage and even of the god. Whereas mankind is preoccupied with artificial boundaries (*N.Q.* 1.*Praef.* 7-11), Hostius, like the Stoic deity, dissolves boundaries, while his death by dismemberment

³⁵⁴ As Gauly notes, “der Vergleich mit den stolzen Gesten edler Tiere unterminiert die Vorstellung schlichter Strenger” (2004 126).

³⁵⁵ Gauly 2004 125. Limburg 2007 rejects this ambivalence 284-5.

reinforces them.³⁵⁶ At a loss for how to deal with these reflections, Leitão concludes that they are unconscious eruptions of subversive voices, a judgement for which Williams takes him to task.³⁵⁷

I have argued that alternately splitting and closing of schisms is a characteristic of Seneca's discourse; the preface of Book 1 gives an insight into how a split can be preserved even in an integral whole. The end of this book gives another perspective on the "specularity" which critics have observed throughout Seneca's works. It is a reminder that a mirror cannot reflect something that is not already there, however it might enlarge it. The passage highlights how dangerous Seneca's strategy of emphasising the "specularità" of virtue and vice is. The controversial proposition is that even in the virtuous prototype, the seeds of perversion are present. For all that the similarities between the two throw the crucial differences into higher relief, and for all that a reflection might be distorting, no reflection introduces something that was not already there in the first place. The mirror image contropositioning of virtue and vice suggests that despite the undeniable divide between the two as opposites (as Berno suggests) they might nonetheless enjoy an intimate relationship: vice needs reason to flourish, and in that sense grows out of it, a perverse offshoot.

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³⁵⁶ Leitão 1998 142-6.

³⁵⁷ Williams 2012 58-9. I agree with Williams that these parallels are open to critical analysis, but disagree with him over the ascertainability or importance of whether or not they were "consciously intended."

Thus the book on lights in the sky, as did the one on comets, despite its concern with phenomena above our heads, leads us back into ourselves, while also warning us against excessive introversion. The taking up of mirroring as a theme of course makes such reflexivity inevitable.

The figure of the mirror recalls the kind of self-scrutiny and introspection which Seneca recommended elsewhere in his works as a spiritual exercise.³⁵⁸ But even in moral contexts, the mirror is an ambivalent figure. At the beginning of the *De Clementia*, Seneca addresses Nero with a metaphor that has been influential throughout the history of writing to princes:

*Scribere de clementia, Nero Caesar, institui, ut quodam modo speculi vice
fungerer et te tibi ostenderem perventurum ad voluptatem maximam omnium.*

De Clem. 1.1

I have decided to write about mercy, Nero Caesar, in order that I may function in some way as a mirror and show you to yourself as you are on the verge of attaining the greatest pleasure of all.

Bartsch 2006 183-8 argues that this use of the metaphor of a mirror is a new turn in the tradition, denying that Nero is being encouraged to improve himself, just to enjoy a flattering image of himself.³⁵⁹ The idea that the text might be a mirror in which the reader can see himself achieving pleasure is a remark which takes on a new meaning in the context of *N.Q.* 1.16: the pleasure the reader will see himself taking is a vicarious delight in the disgusting pleasures of Hostius. Or if the text really is a mirror, the reader

³⁵⁸ *E.g.*, *Ep.* 16.2 *Excute te et varie scrutare et observa*. See Leitão 1998 153-160 and Berno 2003a 43, with n. 37 for an extensive list of secondary literature on the importance of the figure of the mirror in ancient conceptions of self-knowledge.

³⁵⁹ On the passage see further Armisen-Marchetti 2006b.

delights in seeing himself delighting, just as does Hostius himself. Similarly, in *De Ira*, a suggested cure for an angry man is to place him in front of a mirror. The shock of seeing his distorted face will shake him out of his rage. However, there is always a danger that this cure may fail: to an angry man the sight of distorted things may be pleasurable.³⁶⁰ The theme of mirrors in the Hostius Quadra passage issues a challenge to the reader: just how are they supposed to read the story, and how will they?

For Seneca, the reader always has a choice. In a discussion of how we learn virtue by analogy (*analogia*, *Ep.* 120.4-5) through exemplarity, the man brought up as an *exemplum* of *exempla* is one Horatius Cocles, who achieved glory by cutting a bridge down behind him, precisely so that no one could follow him (*Ep.* 120.7). The striking example hints at the ultimate singularity and separateness of virtue, even as it is held up for reproduction. The similarly named Hostius in the *N.Q.* likewise suggests that one's relationship with *exempla* may be more complex than simple reflection or inversion of their behavior.

I suggest that this passage about mirrors is intended to make the reader consider his own reaction. Seneca's philosophical exhortation for each of us to scrutinize ourselves is a more serious version of Horace's satiric warning – *quid rides? mutato nomine de te fabula narratur* ("what are you laughing at? With a change of name the story is told about you," *Sat.* 1.69-70) – and the moment when he allows us to see the funny side of that idea is when he presents us with the grotesque image of Hostius having sex in front of mirrors (*N.Q.* 1.16-18). The name Hostius might not remind us too much of Horatius if

³⁶⁰ *De Ira* 2.36.1: *Quibusdam, ut ait Sextius, iratis profuit aspexisse speculum. Perturbavit illos tanta mutatio sui; uelut in rem praesentem adducti non agnouerunt se: et quantum ex uera deformitate imago illa speculo reperiens reddebat! 2. Animus si ostendi et si in ulla materia perlucere posset, intuitus confunderet ater maculosusque et aestuans et distortus et tumidus. Nunc quoque tanta deformitas eius est per ossa carnesque et tot impedimenta effluentis: quid si nudus ostenderetur? 3. Speculo quidem neminem deterritum ab ira credideris. Quid ergo? qui ad speculum uenerat ut se mutaret, iam mutauerat: iratis quidem nulla est formosior effigies quam atrox et horrida qualesque esse etiam uideri uolunt.*

an ancient biographer had not ascribed the perversion to the satirist himself. It is generally supposed that Suetonius or one of his sources somewhere down the line mistook the name Horatius for that of Hostius.³⁶¹ But Horace conceived of satire as a mirror of the reader.³⁶² The conflation of the decadent Hostius Quadra with satirist Horace is a clue that the anecdote is to be read as a satire, as a story which says as much about the reader as about the subject. Thomsen reminds us that Seneca introduces the story as a “fabella,” a fable. Perhaps we should categorise it as a “Milesian Tale:” at home in satire.³⁶³

Certainly satire often took the goings on in the clouds as its subject: from the fragments of Lucilius which remain it is clear that the sky-court was a major theme in Menippean (or at least Lucilian) satire. Seneca’s own *Apocolocyntosis* clearly inscribes itself in this tradition. What is striking though is how many satirical characteristics can be read into the *N.Q.*: it is by turns political, scatological, hectoring, and playful. Verse quotations are used liberally. The entire work ends, as Seneca alleges did the life of Claudius, at *N.Q.* 2.59, with a flood of diahorrea.

It is certainly possible to read a broader social import to the Hostius story, such that might be appropriate to satire. Gauly contends that Hostius’ threat was primarily to the social order of the Roman Empire.³⁶⁴ Williams also notes the importance of the

³⁶¹ So Wilkinson 1949 47, cited in Williams 2012 57 n.9. *Ad res Venerias intemperantior traditur; nam speculato cubiculo scorta dicitur habuisse disposita, ut quocumque respexisset ibi ei imago coitus referretur.*

³⁶² See also Hor. *Sat* 1.1.3, which discusses how everyone is blind to their own faults but eager to point out those of others, and uses the language of Stoicism. See also Brink 1982 211, on Hor. *Ep.* 2.2.168.

³⁶³ Gauly 2004 121 “fabella bezeichne bei ihm eine Erzählung, die in mehr oder weniger Weise auf Unterweisung des Lesers zielt” (cit Limburg 265). On *fabella* and *fabula* see further Berno 2002 223 n. 61 and Limburg 2007 265. n. 158.

³⁶⁴ Gauly 2004 122-9. In going against the social order in his sexual practices, particularly by taking the passive role, Hostius posed a challenge to the social order in general, particularly in the Augustan Age, when social norms were enforced through legislation of sexual behavior (“Die Datierung des Skandals in Augustus’ Regierungszeit eröffnet allerdings auch eine historische Perspektive, die bedeutsam ist, weil gerade der frühe Prinzipat eine Zeit ist, in der die beschriebenen Normen Gefährdungen ausgesetzt waren, Gefährdungen, die mit der neuen politischen Ordnung einhergingen”).

Augustan context: Hostius comes up against the princeps, and loses. “In Hostius’ mirror image we may further see an exaggerated textual reflection of early imperial decadence, as if a counterimage of Augustan propriety; hence perhaps the fitting significance of Seneca’s claim that, after Hostius was killed by his own slaves, Augustus himself “virtually declared that he was seen to have been rightfully murdered” (in *N.Q.* 1.16.1).³⁶⁵ As an enemy of the emperor, later murdered with the potentate’s complicity it is easy too to see Seneca himself as another reflection of Hostius, unwittingly or predictively mirroring his own demise in his writings. Williams further notes that Hostius dies a *hostia*, a sacrificial victim, who can stand in for any unfortunate the community chooses.

The satiric undertones of the passage, which implicate the reader in the text and force him to reflect upon himself, find a counterpart in the mirrored relation between philosophy and non-philosophy, and again between divine and human philosophy, at the start of Book 1. There, man finds himself both included and excluded from philosophy: here there is an ambivalence about whether the reader finds himself opposed to Hostius Quadra, or whether he sees himself in him.

The ambiguity between whether the reader is expected to identify with or identify against what is presented in the text is of course raised whenever Seneca tells a story of vice. The ambiguity itself is important: as we have seen, for Seneca it is man’s capacity for vice which makes virtue attainable for him, and conversely the vices that look most like virtues which are the most dangerous (this is why Seneca dismisses precepts: they allow man to behave in a manner so nearly virtuous that he is unlikely to be spurred on to attain true virtue). The closeness of virtue and vice and their interrelation is important to Seneca.

³⁶⁵ Williams 2012 57. See further Williams 2012 68 for lexical clues to the parallelism between Augustus and Hostius.

Book 2.

To finish, I look at how this theme of reflection plays out in Book 2, the final extant book of the *N.Q.*³⁶⁶ At the start of that book Seneca discusses a layered division of the cosmos: *omnis de universe quaestio in caelestia, sublimia, terrena dividitur* (*N.Q.* 2.1.1, “any study of the universe is divided into study of the heavens, the skies [*i.e.*, the inner atmosphere] and the earth”).³⁶⁷ As Hine notes, the division is conventional.³⁶⁸ One might conclude from the phrasing that Seneca regards the divisions to inhere in the study rather than the cosmos itself. That classification depends more on the perspective of the observer than some objective property of the phenomena in question is suggested by the fact that despite an imagined objection from the reader,³⁶⁹ Seneca writes that he will discuss earthquakes in the section on thunder and lightning (*N.Q.* 2.1.3),³⁷⁰ and he

³⁶⁶ For the book order in the *N.Q.* and the structure of Book 2 see Hine 1981 2-45. On Book 2 see Hine 1981, Marino 1996, Book 2 bibliography: Stahl 1960 87-91, Gross 1989 64-102, Marino 1996, Berno 2003a 209-238, Limburg 2007 339-342, Williams 2012 295-334; Waiblinger 1977 59-73 discusses Books 1 and 2 as a pair.

³⁶⁷ Berno 2003a notes that all of Book 2 is dominated by tripartite division: “Seneca suddivide in tal modo non solo l’insieme dei fenomeni naturali (*caelestia, sublimia e terrena, nat.* 2.1.1), ma anche ogni questione trattata, da quelle generali alle più particolari” e.g. 12.1, 32.4, 3. “La classificazione triadica, contribuendo a porre la discussione sulla divinazione sullo stesso piano dell’analisi scientifica, riconduce i fenomeni atmosferici dal piano soprannaturale a quello natural, e diviene così uno strumento atto a combattere la paura superstiziosa (che deriva dal considerare i fulmini inperscrutabili in quanto divini). Anche questa struttura, dunque, sembra rispondere alla medesima esigenza della conclusione, la cui principale argomentazione consiste, come si è visto, nel ridurre qualsiasi tipo di morte a fenomeno naturale” (223-5).

³⁶⁸ Hine 1981, *ad loc.*

³⁶⁹ Williams 2012 argues that a consistent interlocutory voice emerges in Books 1 and 2: “As soon as the man interlocutory interventions in the main body of Book 1 are granted to the same narrative voice, a consistent character emerges to provide formidable opposition... as no mere straw man for Seneca’s “superior” position, but as a rounded *dramatis personae* in his own right, a literal-minded character, albeit capable of mordant wit and irony, who argues doggedly for a plainer interpretation of such phenomena as rainbow” (26). See further Williams 2012 26 n. 26, 69-75 and 322-323.

³⁷⁰ Or he says he will: in fact he does not, and earthquakes have already been discussed in Book 6. This is perhaps evidence that the *N.Q.* was unfinished, or at least unrevised. Hine 1981 insists there is a lacuna

will even treat the earth itself not only among the *terrena* but also in the section on astrology (*ubi quaeretur quis terrae situs sit, qua parte mundi consederit, quomodo adversus sidera caelumque posita sit, haec quaestio cedit superioribus et, ut ita dicam, meliorem condicionem sequetur*, N.Q. 2.1.5 “where it is asked what the location of the earth is, in what part of the universe it has rests, how it is positioned as opposed to the stars and the sky, this inquiry gives place to what is above, and so to speak follows a better condition”).³⁷¹

Hine insists that Seneca emphasises the slippage in classification more for rhetorical effect than because it is actually surprising,³⁷² but in fact there is something controversial here. Depending upon the perspective of the person making the enquiry, the earth may be opposed or integrated into the heavens. But at the same time, the parts into which the whole subject of nature is divided (*in quas omnis rerum naturae material dividitur*, N.Q. 2.2.1) are not arbitrary: each phenomenon must be considered in the region where nature has placed it (*cogitetur in ea sede in qua illum natura desposuit*, N.Q. 1.1.3). Thus, the earth may occupy two sections of the study – but that is because nature has made it so. Seneca is *not* proposing to abandon the distinction between earth and sky, or a tacit agreement that the distinction is merely a useful classification system for humans. Classification is a matter for the human perspective, the *quaestio*. Yet it is

somewhere in this passage, “because at s.3 an imaginary interlocutor asks *Quomodo ... de terrarium motu quaestionem eo posuisti loco quo de tonitribus fulmiibus dicturus es?*” This question only makes sense if S. has just referred to earthquakes in the same place as thunder and lightning. Since the *paradosis* only contains a reference to thunder, something about earthquakes has been omitted; so too, probably, has something about lightning, although thunder and lightning are such a natural pair that S. need not have mentioned both for the question in s. 3 to be phrased it is”. (See Hine 1981 ad loc. for bibliography on this point.) Hine 1981 ad loc. “For the inclusion of earthquakes in meteorology by Aristotle and others see pp.33, 126-7; also Alex. Aphr. *In Mete.* 3.5-13; Phip. *In Mete.* p. 2.7-10, 22-8.

³⁷¹ See Hine 1981 125-7 for this scheme’s place in the history of philosophy.

³⁷² Hine 1981 127 “This is scarcely as strange as he pretends, for all he means is that questions concerning the earth’s relation to the heavens will be dealt with under *caelestia* rather than *terrena*, a sensible enough procedure (adopted, e.g. by Arist. *Cael.* 2.13-4).”

nonetheless dictated by *natura*. The study does not merely take *natura* as its object, but is itself governed by *natura*: in this sense the study is a way of traversing the distance between the human observer and the cosmos.

The *Natural Questions* ends in the skies, but not quite on high. In Book 7 we are taken into the realm of heavenly bodies. Or at least, we might be, depending on what the status of comets turns out to be. Then we go further down again, to look at light reflected and refracted through the middle atmosphere (Book 1), and when we come to the final book, Book 2, we are presented with bolts of lightning which traverse the distance between heavens and earth. As Hine notes, the *N.Q.* is “literally poised between earth and heaven, for its principal subject is meteorology, the study of the phenomena occurring in, or caused by, the air or atmosphere.”³⁷³ This passage of Hine’s is cited by Williams (2012 26), for whom the entire *N.Q.* is situated in the *sublimia* since it focuses on mankind’s attempt to transcend mundane terrestrial life and attain the pure reason of the heavens. In this it is directly parallel to the letters which, as we have seen, explore the broad intermediary zone between vice and the absence of philosophy, and philosophical virtue. But in the *N.Q.*, simply on the evidence of where the work ends (back down to earth on a thunderbolt), it seems that the attempt to reach *caelestia* fails. Indeed, I argue that for Seneca *philosophy itself* is precisely the discourse which mediates between heaven and earth, and philosophical problems arise from the contradictions inherent in this zone, and from the paradox that philosophy is *both* an instance of virtue, an exercise of virtuous reason, *and* the tool by which virtue must be attained. This last is a paradox which Seneca explores on his Books on the atmosphere.

³⁷³ Hine 2006 67-8.

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The recursive relationship of philosophy with itself outlined in the prologue to Book 1 also seems to govern the picture of matter which Seneca draws in the following book, Book 2. It begins by asserting a distinction between *caelestia*, *sublimia*, and *terrena*. But Seneca also remarks that the earth will be treated *both* among the *terrena*, and among the *caelestia* – in the latter case being considered as a heavenly body alongside the others in the cosmos (*N.Q.* 2.1.5). The earth's being counted twice, first among earthly things, and then amongst cosmic, is another example of the mirrored recursive relation seen in the previous book: the distance between men and gods is seen both outside philosophy (between philosophy and the other arts) and then returns again within philosophy (between the philosophy of the gods and the philosophy of men).

It is in this final book of the *N.Q.* that Seneca finally gives a general discussion of his conception of the cosmos: *et hoc primum praesumendum inter ea corpora quibus unitas est aera esse* (*N.Q.* 2.2.1, “and this must be assumed, that atmosphere is among those bodies which have unity”). Seneca explains that everything is either a continuum (*N.Q.* 2.2.1, *continuum*) or a composite (*N.Q.* 2.2.1, *commissum*). *Et commissura est duorum coniunctorum inter se corporum tactus, continuatio est partium inter se non intermissa coniunctio. Unitas est sine commissura continuatio.* (*N.Q.* 2.2.2, “Composition is the touching of two bodies joined to one another, a continuity is when there is no join

interspersed between the parts. Unity is continuity without the composite feature.”).³⁷⁴

This conception of matter is entirely orthodox in its Stoicism.³⁷⁵

Seneca goes on to explain,

*Omnia quae in notitiam nostram cadunt aut cadere possunt mundus
complectitur. Ex his quaedam partes eius sunt, quaedam materiae loco relictæ;
desiderat enim omnia natura materiam, sicut ars omnis quae manu constat.*

N.Q. 2.3.1

Everything which falls under our notice or which can fall is contained in the universe. Of these, some are parts of it, some are relegated to the place of material; for all nature demands material, just as every art does which is done by hand.

One might assume that *materia* refers to the material substrate upon which the controlling *pneuma* of the universe works, and part to some finished object, the combination of a material and *pneuma*. But the distinction between the two is not so clearcut:³⁷⁶

³⁷⁴ Hine 1981 n. ad loc. “S. has set out to explain the concept of unity, and in the previous sentence he has introduced the terms *continuum* and *commissum*. This sentence, in the manuscripts, proceeds to define *continuation* and *unitas*. It is surprising that S. does not also define *commissura*; or maybe he expects the reader to understand this without explanation.”

³⁷⁵ See Hine 1981 143-149, especially 144. The Stoics had always held that in a true mixture, the two substances which are mixed come to occupy exactly the same space (a drop of wine is distributed throughout the ocean). Thus as Seneca uses it, the term unity need not mean that a substance is made up of only one ingredient (though it may be). It could be a true mixture. In the case of *aer*, which Seneca seems to be using to translate the Greek *pneuma*, it may be a mixture of the fire and air substance which pervades the entire universe – coexisting in exactly the same space as other substances.

³⁷⁶ Hine 1981 164 “By *materia* S. means the raw material required to keep something functioning... Clearly *materia* here is not the metaphysical *hyle* which the Stoics inherited from Aristotle, for in that sense *hyle* is not identical with any of the things which S. calls *materia*, and indeed it underlies them, *partes* and *quasi-partes* alike. Perhaps S.’s *materia* is a debased descendent of the Aristotelian and Stoic doctrine, but his

*Quid sit hoc, apertius faciam. Pars est nostri oculus, manus, ossa, nervi.
Materia sucus recentis cibi iturus in partes. Rursus quasi pars est sanguis nostri,
qui et tamen est materia; praeparat enim is alia, et nihilominus in numero eorum
est quibus totum corpus efficitur.*

N.Q. 2.3.2

What this is, I will make more clear. The eye, the hand, bones, sinews are parts of us. The material is the sap of recent food going to the parts. Again, blood is a sort of part of us, but it is also a material; for it provides for the other parts, and it is no less in the number of those by which the whole body is made up.

Thus blood appears as one item on the list of all the parts of the body, but it also forms part of the make-up of every item on that list. Similarly, Seneca goes on, *aer*, atmosphere, is a part of the universe which is omnipresent everywhere in the universe. Furthermore it both connects and separates heaven and earth (N.Q. 2.4).

*Sic mundus pars est aer, et quidem necessaria. Hic est enim qui caelum
terramque conectit, qui ima ac summa sic separat ut tamen iungat. Separat,
quia medius intervenit; iungit, quia utrique per hunc inter se consensus est; supra
se dat quicquid accepit a terris, rursus vim siderum in terrena transfundit.*

N.Q. 2.4.1

Thus, atmosphere is a part of the universe and indeed an essential one. For it is this which connects heaven and earth and which separates the lowest from the

use of *material* can be closely paralleled in medical contexts ..., so S. may ultimately owe something to medical writers. The frequent conception of the universe as a living organism may have facilitated the adoption of this medical notion. Medical ideas also influenced the Stoic idea of *pneuma*. (One might compare Cic. *Inv.* 1.7-9 on the *materia* and *partes* of rhetoric, but that distinction is a different one)."

highest so that it nevertheless joins them. It separates because it comes in the middle; it joins because through it each has an accord with one another. It transmits to the upper region whatever it receives from the earth, and again it transfuses to earthly things the power of the stars.

The way Seneca discusses air makes it seem that he means both the element which we breathe, which surrounds the earth and comprises its atmosphere, *and* divine *pneuma*, which traverses all things and ensouls them by means of its tension. As Hine notes, the early Stoics would have been more concerned to emphasise the distinction between these two. But rather than understanding this ambivalence as sloppiness, Seneca is interested precisely in the double character of *aer* – the idea that it could be both a separate entity against which all else is defined, and the substance which gives all things their character.

This way of problematising the elements was not alien to Stoicism: in fact the philosophy's insistence on the centrality of the elements to matter, and on the corporeality of various substances not apparent in everyday life invites the problematic. There is a discussion in Stobaeus of *pyr*, fire, which he says was considered by Chrysippus as one of the four elements, as *the* sole basic element, *and* in a third way.³⁷⁷ In Seneca's conception of the cosmos, atmosphere separates and joins the parts of the

³⁷⁷ What this third way is has been a matter of some scholarly discussion: see LS II, 278, and especially Cooper 2009 (and for further bibliography on the passage), who argues that Chrysippus would wish to have a material distinction between fire (the element) and proto-fire (the originary material). In the passage presently under discussion, on the contrary, Seneca does not make any similar distinction between *aer* as a part and *aer* as a material, but is fascinated precisely by the fact that one substance can function in both ways simultaneously (and he does not seem to make any distinction between everyday fire and the fire of the conflagration, as described in Book 3).

universe just as a mirror does and its recursive relationship with the universe as a whole is the same as the recursive phenomena observable in mirrors.³⁷⁸

Atmosphere is not the only part of the universe with this relation: the earth too is like this, in exactly the same way, as Seneca says, as *aer* (N.Q. 2.5.1). *Aer* and *terra* are the active and passive principles of Stoicism, substance and form. These principles are co-present everywhere in the universe. Neither one constitutes the universe on its own (each is a part) but at the same time each one is *everywhere* present (each is a material). This conception of matter helps us to see why the mirroring, recursive relation should so fascinate Seneca.

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In Books 7 and 1 study of phenomena in the sky direct the reader back to scrutiny of himself; in the case of Hostius Quadra, reading about vice obliges the reader to read himself reading about vice. The final book, Book 2, treats more grandly the idea that it is possible to read the world like a text. The book's main subject is lightning – *fulgurationes*, *fulmina*, and *tonitrua* (lightning flashes, lightning bolts, and thunder). One of the main themes in the discussion of thunder and lightning is causality. Seneca gives over a long section to discussing how lightning is caused, but no discussion of lightning's implication in causality is completed by a mere rundown of its physical causes. "What about the fact that lightning foretells future events and gives signs not only of one or two

³⁷⁸ Hine 1981 179: the notion of the earth's role as a material providing "not only sustenance for living creatures on the earth but also nourishment for the stars... was an old and well-established one in Greek thought." See Hine's note for references.

events but often announces a long series of successive fates, actually with far more obvious and clearer marks of evidence than if these were in writing?" (N.Q. 2.32.1, *Quid quod future portendunt, nec unius tantum aut alterius rei signa dant, sed saepe longum fatorum sequentium ordinem nuntiant, et quidem notis eventibus longeque clarioribus quam si scriberentur?*).

Far from discussing whether or not such divination is really possible (the principal issue at stake in the two books of Cicero's *De Divinatione*; the first book presents arguments for divination, the second against),³⁷⁹ or how lightning might be read, in this book Seneca instead looks into a dispute over *what kind* of signification lightning actually entails:

Hoc inter nos et Tuscos, quibus summa est fulgurum persequendorum scientia, interest: nos putamus, quia nubes collisae sunt, fulmina emitti; ipsi existimant nubes collidi ut fulmina emittantur; nam, cum omnia ad deum referent, in ea opinione sunt tamquam non, quia facta sunt, significant, sed quia significatura sunt, fiunt. Eadem tamen ratione fiunt, sive illis significare propositum, sive consequens est.

N.Q. 2.32.2

This is the difference between us and the Etruscans, who have consummate skill in interpreting lightning: we think that because clouds collide lightning is emitted; they believe that clouds collide in order that lightning may be emitted. Since they attribute everything to divine agency they are of the opinion that things do not reveal the future because they have occurred, but that they occur because they

³⁷⁹ Cicero's *De Divinatione* makes it clear that the possibility of prophesy was Stoic orthodoxy. Beard 1986 convincingly argues against the traditional scholarly view that Cicero himself identified with the arguments against divination, Denyer 1985 similarly shows that Cicero's arguments are not to the point because Stoic divination was not scientific. On divination in Seneca, see Armisen-Marchetti 2000.

are meant to reveal the future. Whether it is displaying their purpose or their consequences they none the less occur on the same principle.

At first sight the dispute between “us” and the Etruscans seems arcane.³⁸⁰ But in the context of Seneca’s assertion that lightning is a sign “clearer than writing” it is interesting, because in fact only the Etruscans see lightning as a form of signification analogous to writing. The Etruscans understand lightning to be the intended product of the process which produces it, and its function to be expressive. They see it an essentially linguistic or symbolic phenomenon. “We” on the other hand, see it as a mere by-product of a broader set of meteorological phenomena. On that understanding, lightning “signifies” in the way that does a clue or a symptom: as footprints signify that someone has passed by, or smoke signifies fire. It may be interpreted, but it is not intended as a means of communication. Indeed, there is no intentionality behind it. On this understanding, lightning may well be a sign that is clearer than writing, but it is also a sign that is fundamentally unlike writing. In other words, whereas the Etruscans understand thunder and lightning to be symbolic signs of the future, “we” know that they are in fact indexical signs.

The viewpoint which Seneca introduces as “ours” is the Stoic one, and it is directly relevant to a long discussion of the continuum of *aer* earlier in the book. As Seneca goes on to explain, god sets in motion the cosmos as a whole: he does not control particular parts of it, nor does he need to since the entire system is connected by the *tonos* of *aer*. Everything is connected – every action has both causes and effects within the system, and these are far more wide-ranging than the mere physical causality which

³⁸⁰ Hine 1981 ad loc. claims that in this passage Seneca “uses the convention of the imagined interlocutor (in this case an Etruscan diviner)”.

Seneca has outlined for lightning. Rather, things like the flight of birds can be used to predict things like affairs of state: not because they have been sent as an intentional sign or linguistic communicator, but as an inevitable mechanical consequence of the workings of the incomprehensibly complex cosmic system (*N.Q.* 2.31.3-4).³⁸¹ Naturally, birds are only a special case in the context of divination because we have worked out how to read their auguries. In fact, the actions of all animals everywhere could theoretically be used for divination, if we know how to interpret them (*N.Q.* 2.31.5-6: *Ceterum fiunt et illa quae pereunt*. “Yet [signs] also occur which pass unnoticed”). Similarly, though the Chaldeans, expert astrologers, only know how to interpret the powers of the five planets, we can assume that all the thousands of stars have some effect on the cosmos. Again, this would be a sign of a direct, physical influence, not a linguistic expressive sign: *Summissiora forsitan propius in nos vim suam dirigunt et ea quae frequentius mota aliter nos aliterque prospiciunt* (*N.Q.* 2.31.7, “Perhaps the lower stars, and those which look upon us sometimes one way sometimes another because they change position more frequently, influence us more directly”).

Now the full significance of reflection in Seneca’s cosmos becomes clear. The fundamental interconnectedness of everything, through the *tonos* of *aer*, and the propensity of every action to be reflected, like ripples through water, mean that the single divine *ratio* can be reflected and transmitted throughout the universe, and identified in any given object. Thus, everything is a sign of the greater whole. However, this universe of signs must be properly understood. People often make the Etruscan mistake of understanding the signs read by divination to be intentional and symbolic:

³⁸¹ Hine 1981 ad loc, “This Stoic position was perhaps the result of more careful formulation in response to the attacks of Carneades and Panaetius; see *Cic. Div.* 1.12 and also 1.117-20.

they think that one omen may cancel out another, for example (N.Q. 2.34.1). But the unity of the cosmos makes this impossible:

In quo mihi falli videntur. Quare? Quia vero verius nihil est. Si aves futura cecinerunt, non potest hoc auspicium fulmine irritum fieri, aut non futura cecinerunt. Non enim nunc comparo et fulmen, sed duo veri signa, quae, si verum significant, paria sunt.

N.Q. 2.34.2

On this point they seem to me to be mistaken. Why? Because nothing is truer than the truth. If birds have foretold the future then such an auspice cannot be nullified by lightning – or they foretold what was not the future. I am not now comparing a bird with lightning but two revelations of the truth which, if they do foretell the truth, are the same.

Seneca's point is that every bird, flash of lightning, and everything else in the cosmos, is implicated in the cosmic truth means precisely that there can only be *one* cosmic truth.

Fatum unum est ("fate is single," N.Q. 2.34.3). This unity, which he has described before as a *continuum* of *aer*, means that apparent contradictions between divinatory signs may be put down to faulty interpretation (N.Q. 2.34.2). It also points to another reason why divinatory signs cannot be thought of as akin to writing and other forms of communication: there is only one truth, and it can never be contradicted or modified.

(Fatum fulmine mutari non potest. Quidni? Nam fulmen ipsum fati pars est. "So I say it does not matter whether we seek the truth by one means or another since the truth which is sought is the same. Fate cannot be altered by a lightning stroke. Why not? For lightning itself is a part of fate" N.Q. 2. 34.3-4). We may be reminded of the

etymological connection of *fatum* with *fari*, a connection most notably exploited by Virgil in the *Aeneid*. Whereas linguistic communication depends upon contrast and exchange of opinion, this is impossible in the case of the divinatory signs which the universe sends out.

Seneca says that whatever you look at it, you will come to the same conclusion.

Whatever you ask, you will receive the same answer. This is not to say that there will not be antecedent causes, but in terms of their signifying properties these are reduced to a unified oneness: *Si dicas flammae maiorem vim esse quam fumi, non mentieris; sed, ad indicandum ignem, idem valet flamma quod fumus* (N.Q. 2.34.3, “If you say the power of flame is stronger than the power of smoke, you are quite right. But flame has no more power than smoke to predict fire”). Similarly, fate will not respond to human attempts to communicate with it:

Fata aliter ius suum peragunt nec ulla commoventur prece. Non misericordia flecti, non gratia sciunt. Cursum irrevocabilem ingress ex destinato fluunt. Quemadmodum rapidorum aqua torrentium in se non recurrit, ne moratur quidem, quia priorem superveniens praecipitat, sic ordinem fati rerum aeterna series rotat, cuius haec prima lex est, stare decreto.

N.Q. 2.35.2

The fates perform their function otherwise and are not moved by any prayer. The fates do not know how to be turned by pity or by favour. Once started upon an irrevocable course they flow on in accordance with an unalterable plan. Just as the water of a rushing torrent does not flow back upon itself and does not even pause since the flood coming from behind pushes ahead the water that passed

before, so the eternal sequence of events causes the order of fate to roll on. And this is its first laws; to stand by its decrees.

The Stoics did not think of causality as we do, in primarily temporal terms. For the Stoics an antecedent cause does not need to be temporally prior to its effect. Fire is the antecedent cause of smoke, and an object of its reflection, but they arise simultaneously. In fact, even when causes are spread out through time, this is just an illusion caused by our own temporal experience of reality, which is not shared by god:

Quid enim intellegis fatum? Existimo necessitate rerum omnium actionumque, quam nulla vis rumpat. Hanc si sacrificiis aut capite niveae agnae sexorari iudicas, divina non nosti. Sapientis quoque viri sententiam negates posse mutari; quanto magis dei, cum sapiens quid sit optimum in praesentia sciat, illius divinitati omne praesens sit?

N.Q. 2.36.1

What do you understand as fate? I consider it the necessity of all events and actions which no force may break. If you think this is averted by sacrifices or by the head of a snow-white lamb, you do not understand the divine. It is your saying that the decision of a wise man cannot be changed. How much more true is this in the case of a god! A wise man knows what is best in the present. For god's divinity everything is the present.

This is the final and most important sense in which the reflective function is fundamental to the cosmos: though there was only one decree of fate, it is reflected and transmitted everywhere, as the chain of causality, and every part of the universe provides a mirror

onto the whole. Cause and effect are in fact both causes of the same fate (though naturally causes cannot be omitted from the causal chain).

The reflecting relation which governs the universe ensures that every action, every bird that flies across the sky, is a reflection of the first cause. Since it is this, it cannot be an intentional sign. The status of the universe as a giant echo chamber for the first cause precludes the possibility of any kind of divine providence, any meaning to anything, beyond the single, unified meaning which traverses everything. Later, Seneca observes how language changes – *fulgere* used to have a short e and now it has a long one (*N.Q.* 2.56.2).³⁸² The comment demonstrates the arbitrariness of language, and also the reason for its arbitrariness: its susceptibility to change over time, without conscious effort by its users. Language too is part of the causal chain, and if we think we are expressing anything particular by it, we are mistaken.

Though people follow Caecina's division lightning into the advising, the confirming, and the conditional or monitory (*N.Q.* 2.39) this is misguided: *non sunt fulminum genera sed significationum* (*N.Q.* 2.40.1, "they are not types of lightning, but of interpretation").³⁸³ All semantic and signifying properties are projected onto lightning by people. Lightning itself falls into types not according to its signifying capacity, but its physical properties (*N.Q.* 2.40.1-6).

³⁸² The example also gives strength to the sense that the physics Seneca describes in these final books of the *N.Q.* is set up consciously against Lucretius' natural science. As Holmes 2012 points out, at *D.R.N.* 4.190, Lucretius plays on the word *fulgur* and *fulgere* to illustrate "a change of letters (that is, literally, atoms)—as they deviate from the nominative, that is, the *naming*, form" (Holmes 2012 331-2).

³⁸³ Hine 1981 n. ad loc. Caecina: "a member of a distinguished Etruscan family from Volterrae, and a friend of Cicero".

The Etruscans say that lightning is sent by Jupiter (N.Q. 2.41.1). Seneca does not agree, but turns it into an opportunity to moralise on the power of kings – they should confer benefits alone, but punish in consultation with advisors (N.Q. 2.43-1-2). Furthermore, Seneca denies that the ancient Etruscans thought that Jupiter sent lightning in any kind of literal or anthropomorphic way.³⁸⁴

*Ne hoc quidem crediderunt Iovem, qualem in Capitolio et in ceteris aedibus
colimus, mittere manu sua fulmina, sed eundem quem nos Iovem intellegunt,
rectorem custodemque universi, animum ac spiritum mundi, operis huius
dominum et artificem, cui nomen omne convenit.*

N.Q. 2.45.1

The ancient sages did not even believe that Jupiter, the sort we worship in the Capitol and in other temples, sent lightning by his own hand. They recognized the same Jupiter that we do, the controller and guardian of the universe, the mind and spirit of the world, the lord and artificer of this creation. Any name for him is suitable.

As in the previous book, where men of old did not spurn mirrors, but looked at their reflections in bodies of water, so here again Seneca insists that the past was more like the present than we think. We are direct heirs of our ancestors, and nothing new has been introduced, like reflections of reflections. And we see again here the unity of fate means that Jupiter has no one name, but can have any name. He is both Fate,

³⁸⁴ Hine 1981 387-8 n. ad loc. “Lucretius implicitly attributes such a belief to them when in his attack on them (6.379-422) he objects that the innocent men are struck by lightning while the guilty go unharmed (39-5). But for the Etruscans lightning was primarily an omen (so chs. 32-40, 47-51), and there is no other evidence that they also regarded it as a punishment. S. and Lucretius may be mistaken in ascribing a ‘punishment view’ to them.” Berno 2003a 230-3 sees Seneca’s intent here as making divination realistic rather than superstitious, normalising it.

Providence, Nature, and Universe (*fatum, providentiam, naturam, mundum*).³⁸⁵ *Ipse enim est hoc quod vides totum, partibus suis inditus, et se sustinens et sua* (N.Q. 2.45.3, “he himself is all that you see, infused throughout all his parts sustaining both himself and his own”). Jupiter is so omnipresent that he cannot be named, or rather he takes all names. Again fate completely forestalls the possibility of communication.

Classifying lightning would be an impossible task (*haec si digere in partes suas voluero, quid postea faciam? In immensa procedam*. N.Q. 2.48.2, “If I were willing to arrange lightning bolts into their categories I would not have time for anything else. I would be getting into an enormous task”). Another indication that lightning is not a linguistic or symbolic sign is that it does not easily fall into categories. It is rather a schizophrenic signifying system, in which every sign is unique in itself.

Lightning, a system of signification that is “clearer than writing,” turns out in fact to forestall signification. It is clearer than writing in the sense that it reflects directly the state of the universe, but this absolute clarity means that it can never have writing’s capability of communicating particulars and with intention, that is, it can only signify and never communicate. In *Ep.*118 Seneca had dismissed to Lucilius the idea of merely writing letters for the sake of form, in the manner of Cicero, and insisted on the preservation of content:

Exigis a me frequentiores epistulas. Rationes conferamus: soluendo non eris.

Conuenerat quidem ut tua priora essent: tu scriberes, ego rescriberem. Sed non ero difficilis: bene credi tibi scio. Itaque in antecessum da bonum faciam quod

³⁸⁵ Hine 1981 397 “In form and content there are resemblances to hymnic style. Hymns often catalogued different names of the deity”. See Hine for references to parallels in hymns, philosophy, and Stoicism.

Cicero, uir disertissimus, facere Atticum iubet, ut etiam'si rem nullam habebit, quod in buccam uenerit scribat'.

Numquam potest deesse quod scribam, ut omnia illa quae Ciceronis implent epistulas transeam: quis candidatus laboret; quis alienis, quis suis uiribus pugnet; quis consulatum fiducia Caesaris, quis Pompei, quis arcae petat; quam durus sit fenerator Caecilius, a quo minoris centesimis propinqui nummum mouere non possint. Sua satius est mala quam aliena tractare, se excutere et uidere quam multarum rerum candidatus sit, et non suffragari.

Ep. 118.1-2

You have been demanding more frequent letters from me. But if we compare the accounts, you will not be on the credit side: We had indeed made the agreement that your part came first, that you should write the first letters, and that I should answer. However, I shall not be disagreeable; I know that it is safe to trust you, so I shall pay in advance, and yet not do as the eloquent Cicero bids Atticus do: "Even if you have nothing to say, write whatever enters your head."

For there will always be something for me to write about, even omitting all the kinds of news with which Cicero fills his correspondence: what candidate is in difficulties, who is striving on borrowed resources and who on his own; who is a candidate for the consulship relying on Caesar, or on Pompey, or on his own strong-box; what a merciless usurer is Caecilius, out of whom his friends cannot screw a penny for less than one per cent each month. But it is preferable to deal with one's own ills, rather than with another's – to sift oneself and see for how many vain things one is a candidate, and cast a vote for none of them.

But the cosmos itself is sending such dead letters all the time. The contrast may be understood as staging the very sticking point in Seneca's reluctance to commit fully to Stoicism: it would mean giving up his own voice. The personal letter means the telling of political affairs, or the affairs of one's own mind. Neither of these may communicated from the cosmic viewpoint.

In fact, Seneca represents his interlocutor as stunned into silence, but finally breaking it to ask:

Intellego quid dudum desideres, quid efflagites. "Malo," inquis, "fulmina non timere quam nosse; itaque alios doce quemadmodum fiant; ego mihi metum illorum excuti volo, non naturam indicari."

N.Q. 2.59.1

I know what you have wanted for a long time, and what you keenly ask. You say, "I should rather I did not fear lightning than know about it. So, teach others how lightning bolts occur. I want to shake off the fear of them, not have their nature explained to me".

We have come to the final section of the entire *Natural Questions*, and Lucilius confesses that he no longer cares about knowledge or understanding – he just wants not to be afraid. The *Naturales Quaestiones* appears ready to revert in its final moment to the mode of philosophy most associated with Seneca: spiritual guidance.³⁸⁶ This abandonment of the reasoning, scientific approach to nature in the very final section of the work is striking. It is as Lucilius has come to the realisation that the cosmos is so

³⁸⁶ See Berno 2003a 219-20 for the consolatory quality of this section: Seneca subverts consolation by showing that it is not death itself but its "apparatus" which we fear.

interconnected that he cannot understand any given part of it without understanding it all, and so huge that comprehending it in its entirety would be an impossible task. He has come to the conclusion (and we come along with him) that it must be merely coped with instead.³⁸⁷

We learn, “not in order that we might escape the blows of things – for weapons are hurled at us from all sides – but in order that we might endure them bravely and firmly” (N.Q. 2.59.2, *non ut effugiamus ictus rerum – undique enim in nos tela iaciuntur – sed ut fortiter constanterque patimur*). Our one hope of being unshaken as well as unmoved – of achieving transcendent wisdom: *contemne mortem* (N.Q. 2.59.3, “scorn death”). The great and the damned strive equally (N.Q. 2.59.5, *certe paria conantur animus magnus ac perditus*) for we are all damned to death (N.Q. 2.59.6, *cogitemus nos quantum ad mortem perditos esse. Et sumus.*). Asking for a delay is foolishness (N.Q. 2.59.7), we are bound to die, *non maximum ex periculis tuis sed speciosissimum fulmen est* (N.Q. 2.59.9, “lightning is not the greatest of dangers, only the most conspicuous”).

Sec pavescis ad caeli fragorem et ad inane nubilum trepidas et, quotiens aliquid effulsit, expires. Quid ergo? Honestius putas deiectione perire quam fulmine? Eo itaque fortiori adversus caeli minas surge et, cum undique mundus exarserit, cogita nihil te tanta morte perdendum.

³⁸⁷ In Aristotle’s aesthetics, things too big to comprehend are monstrous: *Poetics* 7 “though a very small creature could not be beautiful, since our view loses all distinctness when it comes near to taking no perceptible time, an enormously ample one could not be beautiful either, since our view of it is not simultaneous, so that we lose the sense of its unity and wholeness as we look it over; imagine, for instance, an animal a thousand miles long.”

*Quodsi tibi parari credis illam caeli confusionem, illam tempestatum discordiam,
si propter te ingestae illisaeque nubes strepunt, si in tuum exitium tanta vis
ignium excutitur, at tu solacii loco numera tanti esse mortem tuam.*

*Sed non erit huic cogitationi locus; casus iste donat metum et inter cetera hoc
quoque commodum eius quod expectationem suam antecedit. Nemo umquam
timuit fulmen, nisi quod effugit.*

N.Q. 2.59.11-13

But you shake at a crash in the sky, you tremble at a hollow cloud, and whenever there is any flash, you expire. Then why? Do you think it more glorious to die from diarrhea than from a lightning bolt? So, rise up all the more bravely against the threats of heaven, and when the universe burns on all sides think that you have nothing to lose in so glorious a death.

But if you believe that disturbance in heaven, that discord of tempests, is being prepared against *you*; if clouds pile up, collide, and roar on *your* account; if such a great fiery force is being scattered around for *your* destruction, then reckon it a comfort that your death is valued at so much.

But there will be no time for this thought. An accident of this sort bypasses fear and among other things presents this advantage: it comes before it is expected. No one has ever feared any lightning except that which he has escaped.

The passage evokes the sentiments I examined in my second chapter: that fear of death, though vicious, is as valid a reaction to death as dumb acceptance of it (with both

in contrast to the enlightened acceptance of the sage).³⁸⁸ There is, Seneca argues, no need to fear death. And in fact, death *cannot* be feared. Fear is evidence that one has not died. Death, like fate, allows no testimony to be given about it. It is no matter whether one dies by thunderbolt or in a bout of diarrhea. One empties oneself into death, and not in any expressive way, but in the same manner as the expulsion of one's insides in diarrhea. In fact, we find that here, at the end of the *Natural Questions* we are taken back to where we were at the beginning, with fate identified with death itself. This ring composition is entirely appropriate, since the very lesson of the first book was that each end brings a new beginning and the point that links the two is death.

In Book 3, Seneca denounced history as a genre whose attempts to immortalise men with *fama* evidenced its incorrigible alienation from reason, but here we see that science too is limited. It is a tool for bringing oneself to the understanding of the insignificance of man and the true meaning of death (in a way that history is of course not), but insofar as a science exists as a body of knowledge and thought it denies death. Here we see that truly to think about death means the death of thought: death is the single truth of the cosmos, and as such its unity – or its infinite complexity – precludes the selection and alternation of silence and speech inherent to thought and meaning. This is the deeper reason why Seneca ends his work of science with the conclusion that scientific truth is irreducible and unsayable, that it cannot be parsed or paraphrased, but only experienced as fear and death.

³⁸⁸ Berno 2003a 220-3, 283 connects the passage with the part of Book 6 which I discussed in chapter 2, concluding that Seneca feels that fear is not vicious, as long as it is not exaggerated: “Il vizio, in questo caso, non sta nel *timor* in sé, ma nell'esagerazione di esso (e nell'angoscia che ne deriva), dovuta in buona parte a credenze errate in merito ai fenomeni atmosferici. E proprio in questa indebita *amplificatio* si può ritrovare un aspetto della specularità: mentre il *metus* dell'uomo comune *dilatat* (*nat.* 6.32.9) l'apparenza di fenomeni come i fulmeni e i terremoti, che in realtà non sono eccezionali (*ib.*) – e in tal modo trasforma un affezione naturale in vizio – la *ratio* del filosofo, scrive Seneca altrove (*Brev.* 6.4), *dilatat* la vita assegnataci, solo apparentemente breve. Attraverso una stessa azione, proiettata in direzioni opposte, l'apparenza, sopravvalutata nel primo caso, viene ‘smascherata’ nel secondo” (Berno 2003a 223).

This is not to say that wisdom will be to know everything about the universe: as we know wisdom is the perfect application of reason rather the knowledge of a body of facts. But wisdom will mean understanding the whole as a whole. How could one do this and continue with one's ordinary life? On the one hand we do not have to worry about his situation. Just as Seneca expected infinite scientific progress,³⁸⁹ so he seemed uncertain that anyone would ever actually attain wisdom. As I have tried to show in this dissertation, there are moments when he seems unsure if it is even theoretically possible to attain it.

Of course, most of Seneca's beliefs about the universe depend upon the idea that there is a currently unthinkable but definitely existing reason grounding our reality and thought, which are secondary to it. But as I hope to have shown there are moments when he appears to suggest that this reason which apparently grounds our thought is in fact a secondary effect of that thought and that it can never been defined apart from it. Thus, in Chapter 3 we saw that the journey *towards* wisdom is an entirely separate and qualitatively different process from the actual *attainment* of wisdom, which is by definition an instantaneous and total change, and not a gradual procedure. None of Seneca's philosophical writings pertain to that attainment: he stresses constant effort, gradual improvement and acknowledgement of one's own imperfections instead of describing how the final step can be taken. If the actual attainment of sagacity is not impossible it at the very least appears not to be a subject that can be treated by philosophy. In fact, at times it seems that the very discourse of philosophy is by definition the means by which

³⁸⁹*Ep.* 64.7 "no one born a thousand ages hence will lack the opportunity to add to the store of knowledge. *C.f.* also *N.Q.* 6.5.3, 7.25 and 7.30.5.

the unwise move towards wisdom. This explains the analogy between philosophy and sailing: both are means of transport.

At the beginning at Book 1, Seneca describes a recursive relationship between men and gods, and philosophy of men and philosophy of the gods. As I argued earlier in this chapter, the passage hints that there may *always* be something of wisdom which is held back. Given the emphasis on reflection in the final two books, perhaps then what grounds philosophy is not the divine reason which is inaccessible to us, but the recursive relationship between human and divine thought itself. In any case, reflection in practice characterises the human experience of philosophy: however far one looks out into the sky, one is confronted with one's own image, and the limitations of one's own mind. No wonder then, Seneca chooses to end the *N.Q.* with a sudden meditation upon mortality. Death is at the heart of human life, and also describes the limit between philosophy and ignorance, individual and cosmos. It is the moment where life from the flawed human perspective and life from the cosmic perspective meet, in the same way that failure is the moment when the flawed philosopher's discourse and the discourse of nature can become one. The surface which reflects is itself death.

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