

## SENECA'S LANGUAGE AND STYLE. I\*

There are excellent studies on Seneca's language and style.<sup>1</sup> Since the present overview cannot cover all details, it will concentrate on some aspects relevant to Seneca's literary and philosophical intentions.

'Studied negligence'. As for the study of language and style as an aim in itself, Seneca's ideas are clear:<sup>2</sup> "We should not hunt out archaic or far-fetched words and eccentric metaphors and figures of speech, but ... we should seek precepts (*praecepta*) which will help us, utterances of courage and spirit (*magnificas voces et animosas*) which may at once be turned into facts. We should so learn that words may become deeds" (*Epist.* 108. 35). Lists of rare words or figures of speech would certainly not find Seneca's approval. His aversion to 'irrelevant pursuits' is not limited to philology (*Epist.* 88. 42): "Think how much superfluous and impractical matter the philosophers contain! Of their own accord they have also descended to establishing nice divisions of syllables and determining the true meaning of conjunctions and prepositions ...; the result is that they know more about careful speaking than

---

\* The author is very grateful to Francis R. Schwartz and John Velz for a careful reading of his manuscript and for critical suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> Style is understood here as the literary (and philosophical) use of linguistic means. Basic are A. Traina, *Lo stile drammatico del filosofo Seneca* (Bologna 1987); A. Setaioli, "Seneca e lo stile", in: *ANRW* II. 32. 2 (Berlin - New York 1985) 776-858; idem, *Seneca e i Greci. Citazioni e traduzioni nelle opere filosofiche* (Bologna 1988); idem, *Facundus Seneca: Aspetti della lingua e dell'ideologia senecana* (Bologna 2000) and H. M. Hine, "Poetic Influence on Prose: The Case of the Younger Seneca", in: T. Reinhardt and others (eds.), *Aspects of the Language of Latin Prose* (Oxford 2005) 211-237; for the tragedies: M. Billerbeck, *Senecas Tragödien. Sprachliche und stilistische Untersuchungen* (Leiden 1988); B. Seidensticker, *Die Gesprächsverdichtung in den Tragödien Senecas* (Heidelberg 1970); for Seneca's imagery: M. Armisen-Marchetti, *Sapientiae facies. Etude sur les images de Sénèque* (Paris 1989); for the problem of a style typical of the Neronian epoch: Setaioli 1985: 818-821.

<sup>2</sup> Loeb translations were gratefully used here, but not always followed literally: *Ad Lucilium epistulae morales*. Transl. by R. M. Gummere (1917-1925); *Moral Essays*. Transl. by J. W. Basore (1928-1935); *Naturales quaestiones*. Transl. by T. H. Corcoran (1971-1972); *Tragedies*. Transl. by J. G. Fitch (2002); Transl. by F. J. Miller (1917).

about careful living” (cf. also *Epist.* 48. 4 f.; 106. 11). Such remarks (taken at face value) must have provoked Quintilian (*Inst.* 10. 1. 129) to label Seneca as *in philosophia parum diligens*. It is equally true, however, that Seneca in his later letters gradually approaches dialectics and insists on the indispensability of theoretical insight – even in the field of ethics. On closer inspection, Seneca's readers discover that, in matters of philosophy as in matters of style, if there is negligence, Seneca's negligence is a studied one.

**Word and self-education.** Of course, Seneca is fully aware of the importance of language and style as instruments of philosophical education. His use of linguistic modes is conditioned by oral performance. “Throughout antiquity books were written to be read aloud, and ... even private reading often took on some of the characteristics of a modulated declamation”.<sup>3</sup> Seneca's tragedies were read aloud in any case (no matter whether they were acted on the stage or only “recited”). No less important is the acoustic dimension in his philosophical writings (a group of these writings is explicitly called *dialogi*<sup>4</sup> in our manuscript tradition), and especially in the *letters*, which, according to epistolary theory, are one half of a conversation between distant persons.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the transposition of some features of orality into a literary form lends the *Epistles to Lucilius* a special charm. What is more, Seneca's prose often echoes a philosopher's dialogue with himself (even lonely meditation was put into audible words in antiquity).<sup>6</sup> The importance of language and style (even of rhetorical structures of thought) to philosophical self-education comes to the fore in his philosophical texts.

**Form and content: the context.** No single word or phrase is a predetermined entity; its meaning is largely conditioned by the context. This is especially true for authors writing dialogues (Plato, for

---

<sup>3</sup> E. J. Kenney, “Latin Literature”, in: *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (Cambridge 1982) 11.

<sup>4</sup> According to M. T. Griffin, *Seneca. A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford 21992) 412–415, *dialogi* refers to *sermocinatio* as a technique within a work and it might have been used for all the prose works “aside from the letters” (see, however, below!) “and speeches”.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Seneca, *Epist.* 75. 1; 67. 2; letters as “one half of a dialogue” (τὸ ἕτερον μέρος τοῦ διαλόγου): Artemo, quoted by Demetrius, *De elocutione* 223; cf. Cic. *Q. fr.* 1. 1. 45.

<sup>6</sup> P. Rabbow, *Seelenführung. Methodik der Exerzitien in der Antike* (München 1954); I. Hadot, *Seneca und die griechisch-römische Tradition der Seelenleitung* (Berlin 1969); P. Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* (Paris 21987).

instance) or adopting a style relatively close to dialogue (such as Seneca employs; his own views on language and style call for a reading of that kind). In the past, some scholars neglected the fact that Seneca is writing in Latin and were satisfied to find Greek sources and parallels; today, in the light of a critical approach to language, philosophical readers become increasingly aware of the difficulty of separating philosophical thought from the linguistic (and even the literary) form adopted by a given philosopher; so the time may be right for a fresh appraisal of Seneca's language and style.

Short sentences: An Anti-Cicero? Seneca's concise style – which fatigues the reader only if enjoyed to excess – is meant to satisfy the Stoic ideal of *brevitas*.<sup>7</sup> However, many short sentences may accumulate and coalesce into rather long letters and even books. In both groups of works, the syntax of the individual sentence is mostly straightforward and simple (for telling exceptions, see below, p. 79 Differences of style). Even so, paragraphs are carefully linked internally by both verbal correspondences and figures of thought. Hence, Caligula's description of Seneca's style as “sands without lime” (*harenam esse sine calce*: Suet. *Cal.* 53. 3) is not correct.

Seneca's style is janus-faced. In his day, he was *en vogue* among young people<sup>8</sup> although that ‘modern style’ had already attained the venerable age of 100 years. Under Augustus, teachers of rhetoric had cherished a diction rich in short, rhythmical sentences, with an epigrammatic turn in both content and form. Seneca is the heir to this tradition, which ultimately hearkens back to the breathless colometry of Asiatic rhetoric and to the aggressiveness of Cynic diatribe. His mockery of Cicero earned him harsh censure from such defenders of traditional Latin as Gellius (12. 2. 1–14) and from a guardian of classical style, Quintilian, who, while grudgingly acknowledging Seneca's talent, deplored his lack of self-control (*Inst.* 10. 1. 125–131). However, sometimes Seneca shows a more severe taste than Cicero, for instance, in his sparing use of “poetic” vocabulary in prose.<sup>9</sup> As for Seneca's Latin, modern scholarship has shown that his language is less un-Ciceronian than one might have expected, even surprisingly pure.<sup>10</sup> “Despite some licenses (e. g., in the use of tenses) it can be said that Seneca's language

<sup>7</sup> Stoic brevity is criticized by Cicero, *Brut.* 120.

<sup>8</sup> Quint. *Inst.* 10. 1. 126; cf. Suet. *Cal.* 53. 3; Tac. *Ann.* 13. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hine (n. 1).

<sup>10</sup> For previous judgements on Seneca's style, see: E. Norden, *Die antike Kunstprosa* (Darmstadt <sup>5</sup>1958) 306–314, especially footnote pp. 313 f.; Hine (n. 1).

presents an overall picture of the greatest grammatical correctness and in several respects is more correct than, for instance, Cicero's".<sup>11</sup>

In other respects, too, the gulf between Cicero and Seneca is less deep than one would expect. Actually Senecan passages showing that our philosopher was not blind to Cicero's merits should no longer be neglected. Seneca knew, used and appreciated Cicero's works (even the *Hortensius* that has not come down to us).<sup>12</sup> He quotes Cicero as the authority for the Latinization of a philosophical term (*Epist.* 58. 6). What is more, he acknowledges Cicero's stylistic achievement, e. g. (*Epist.* 100. 7): "Read Cicero: his style has unity; it moves with a modulated pace, and is gentle without being degenerate. The style of Asinius Pollio, on the other hand, is 'bumpy', jerky, leaving off when you least expect it. And finally, Cicero always stops gradually while Pollio breaks off, except in the very few cases where he cleaves to a definite rhythm and a single pattern": here, Cicero as the "greatest author" is assigned a place of honour – before Asinius Pollio, Livy, and Seneca's own teacher Fabianus. In the same passage Seneca praises Cicero's prose rhythm. Actually he prefers the same *clausulae*; however, instead of building long Ciceronian 'periods', he splits up his sentences into small units (*cola*). For this reason, Seneca is often called an "anti-Cicero",<sup>13</sup> a representative of the "pointed manner" adverse to the periodic style cherished by the famous orator. This view is too simplistic. Cicero himself used long periods only in certain genres and in certain contexts where such a style was appropriate;<sup>14</sup> in his letters and even in

<sup>11</sup> B. Axelson, *Neue Senecastudien* (Lund 1939) 11.

<sup>12</sup> To give an example, in Letter 102. 16 Seneca got the quotation *Laus alit artis* ("Praise nurtures the arts", from Ennius, *Annales*, Book 16) through Cicero's *Hortensius*. There are points of contact between Seneca's *Epistulae*, his (fragmentary) *Exhortationes* and the *De philosophia* with the *Hortensius*. Reminiscent of the *Hortensius* (and the protreptic tradition) are other images and expressions: Seneca, *Epist.* 90. 7 *vivaria piscium...*; 71. 31 (the colouring of wool); 17. 2 *ut Ciceronis utar verbo, opituletur (philosophia)*; *Epist.* 89. 1; 49. 5; 16. 1 f.; *Epist.* 88 (liberal arts); criticism of bad teachers *Epist.* 108. 23: A. Grilli, "Seneca e l'*Hortensius*", in: *Hommages à C. Deroux*, éd. par P. Defosse, II. *Prose et linguistique, Médecine* (Bruxelles 2002) 204; G. Mazzoli, "Il frammento enniano *laus alit artis* e il proemio al XVI libro degli *Annales*", *Athenaeum* 55 (1964) 307–315.

<sup>13</sup> After many others, M. Möller, *Talis oratio – qualis vita. Zu Theorie und Praxis mimetischer Verfahren in der griechisch-römischen Literaturkritik* (Heidelberg 2004) 167 "Ciceros stilistischer Widersacher"; against this view see already M. v. Albrecht, *Meister römischer Prosa* (Tübingen 1971; <sup>3</sup>1995) 149–151; idem, *Masters of Roman Prose*. Translated by N. Adkin (Leeds 1989) 123 f.

<sup>14</sup> M. v. Albrecht, *Cicero's Style* (Leiden 2003) 1; 189 and other instances.

his late orations we find an abruptness and directness which defies the idea of the "wordy Cicero" of our textbooks.

'Poetic' vocabulary. Each word must be considered in its own merits.<sup>15</sup> Some words known to us from poetry and absent from Seneca's prose are occasionally found in Cicero's.<sup>16</sup> However, when searching for poetic words in Seneca's prose, one should keep in mind that (unlike, for instance, *verba prisca* – 'archaisms' – , which is an established term) *verba poetica* is a category unknown to the ancients. Modern research<sup>17</sup> has done much to narrow down the alleged influence of 'poetic vocabulary' on Silver Latin prose.

From the lists compiled in older publications, some words must be eliminated since they are found in prose before Seneca.<sup>18</sup> In a seminal

<sup>15</sup> This sound principle is followed by Hine in his article throughout.

<sup>16</sup> An example is *nati* (Cic. *Lael.* 27; *Fin.* 5. 65); *caelites* (used by Seneca only in his tragedies) is attested in Masinissa's prayer (Cic. *Rep.* 6. 9), a passage rich in archaisms. *Genitor* (lacking in Seneca's prose) is found twice in Cicero's *Timaeus*. Cicero uses *serpens* and *anguis*, Seneca in his prose writings only *serpens*. *Ales* is not rare in Seneca's tragedies, but he avoids it in his prose, even in an augural context (*Nat.* 2. 32–34), whereas Cicero applies the same word even in a non-technical meaning (*Nat. deor.* 2. 101). Cicero describes *effari* as old (*De orat.* 3. 153); he uses it in a religious context (*Dom.* 141), once in the letters and several times in the treatises. The imperative *effare* is frequent in Seneca's tragedies; other forms come up only occasionally. This verb is absent from his prose, except for the philosophical term *effatum* which he quotes from other sources not without proposing alternatives (*enuntiatum, dictum: Epist.* 117. 13). *Fari* is part of an idiomatic phrase in Cicero's early oration *Pro Quinctio* 71 (*ne fando quidem*); furthermore, there are two instances in the philosophical works. In Seneca, this verb is strictly limited to the tragedies. Cicero uses the noun *questus* once in the *Pro Quinctio*, in Seneca it appears only in the tragedies. *Ductor*, which in Seneca is confined to the dramatic works, is attested in Cicero once in a speech and once in a philosophical writing. Another word rarely found in prose is *heu*. In Cicero (*Phil.* 7. 14) it is part of the standard phrase *heu me miserum*. Seneca uses *heu* exclusively in his poetry; the only exception (*Benef.* 7. 5. 2) confirms the rule: there *heu* is part of a quotation from Virgil. *Gradior* (three times in Cicero's philosophical works) and *immitis* (only once in a letter to Atticus) are entirely limited to poetic texts in Seneca (*Prov.* 5. 11 is a quotation from Ovid). *Coniugium* (used by Seneca only in his tragedies) appears 13 times in Cicero's orations and once in a letter; in his philosophical works the orator uses both *matrimonium* and *coniugium*. *Famulus* and *-a* (generally rare in prose, and absent from Seneca's prose writings) occur in Cicero's *De legibus* (in archaizing laws). *Aetherius* (attested in Seneca only in his tragedies) is not rejected by Cicero in *De natura deorum*; it will come back in prose only in Apuleius.

<sup>17</sup> Excellent: Hine (n. 1); the present overview is much indebted to his study of 'poetic' vocabulary.

<sup>18</sup> *Barbaricus, cacumen, degener, flavescere, inextricabilis, mulcere, percussus, pererrare, vivax*. Braschi (G. Braschi, "L'uso stilistico della sintassi nelle

article, Hine<sup>19</sup> shows first that some further words, though not attested in prose before Seneca, may be neutral, not specifically poetic; second, some words that originally did have a poetic colouring might have lost this nuance at a later stage of the Latin language; third, the choice of a poetic word may be favoured by a specific context; fourth, if we consider only poetic words appearing in Seneca's prose for the *first* time, poeticisms incorporated by earlier prose writers escape us; fifth, since ante-Ciceronian literature has survived mostly in fragments, we know far less about Cicero's background than about Seneca's; hence, the impression that poetic words are more frequent in Silver Latin prose may be "a mirage generated by the accidents of survival of Latin literature".<sup>20</sup>

To exclude randomness, Hine considers only the 160 words that occur three times or more often in verse before Seneca. Verbs with prefixes are generally shown not to be specifically poetic.<sup>21</sup> Of other derivatives, those in *-men* (except for old words like *agmen*, *carmen*, *nomen*, etc.) are mostly poetic; in fact, Seneca uses *gestamen* only once (*Benef.* 3. 37. 1), and in an elevated context (with reference to Aeneas).

Certain words deemed poetic are rather part of technical languages: *letal* occurs 11 times in earlier verse and only once in Seneca's prose (*Nat.* 3. 21. 1 *letal* *aqua* 'lethal water'). It is found after a poetic quotation, but in a scientific context. Since the same word is also often used by Pliny in medical contexts, it is part of the considerable presence of medical<sup>22</sup> vocabulary in Seneca.<sup>23</sup> As for loanwords that first appear in prose in Seneca, they all are *technical terms*, and some of them (*adamas*, *lyricus*, *sistrum*) even have no synonyms. *Cathedra*, *machaera*, *mannus*

---

*Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* di Seneca", *Rivista di cultura classica e medioevale* 32 [1990] 99) quotes the following "poetic" words found in the Letters to Lucilius: *dissilire* (*Epist.* 71. 9 and 72. 3), *desaevire* (15. 8), *dehiscere* (30. 2). For a criticism of the fuller lists found in Summers (W. C. Summers [ed.], *Select Letters of Seneca* [London 1913] lii) and A. Bourguery, *Sénèque prosateur: Etudes littéraires et grammaticales sur la prose de Sénèque le philosophe* (Paris 1922) 223–243, see now: Hine (n. 1).

<sup>19</sup> Hine (n. 1) 212 f.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 216 f.

<sup>22</sup> P. Migliorini, *Scienza e terminologia medica nella letteratura latina di età iberonica. Seneca, Lucano, Persio, Petronio* (Frankfurt a. M. 1997); cf. also Armisen-Marchetti (n. 1) 347; M. v. Albrecht, *Wort und Wandlung. Senecas Lebenskunst* (Leiden 2004) 27–29.

<sup>23</sup> In his tragedies Seneca prefers *letificus* (*Med.* 577; cf. *Herc. O.* 208 *letifer*), while *mortifer* is standard in Cicero's and Seneca's prose.

do have synonyms, but are technical in flavour, and their effect is 'specific' rather than typically poetic.<sup>24</sup> *Fulvus* ('orange-coloured') is frequently used in earlier verse, but colour terms are generally more common in verse than in prose;<sup>25</sup> in the relevant passages (*Nat.* 1. 10. 1; 1. 14. 2), Seneca was clearly more interested in the exact shade of colour than in poetic flavour. *Opacus* (an adjective never common in prose writers) appears in the tragedies several times; but Seneca uses *opacitas* twice in his prose; so the absence of the adjective from his prose may be accidental. The verb *meare* is frequent in poetry, and first appears in prose in Seneca. Here it always describes the motion of heavenly bodies (*Dial.* 12 [= *Helv.*] 8. 6; *Nat.* 7. 10. 2) or elements (2. 17. 1; 2. 21. 3; 6. 14. 1). This seems to be technical usage in his day (Cicero used *commeo* and, once, *remeo* in such contexts). Another instance is *impos sui* ('having no control over himself': *Epist.* 83. 10 and *Ag.* 117).<sup>26</sup> Possibly this archaism is conditioned by traditional *iuncturae* (such as *impos animi* or *impos mentis*) and reflects established juridical usage.<sup>27</sup>

As for differences between the writings and the plays, there are over 150 words that occur three or more times in Seneca's tragedies and never in his prose (many of them typically poetic, e. g. adjectives in *-fer* and *-ger*). Of 48 words found seven or more times in the tragedies and never in the prose, 17 are absent both from Cicero's and from Seneca's prose; 13 of these are "poetic" indeed;<sup>28</sup> they all have valid synonyms in

<sup>24</sup> The absence of some animal names (*cicada*, *damma*) and botanical terms (*palmes*) from earlier prose is accidental (cf. Columella; Pliny); the same is true for a technical term such as *laqueare* (Cicero uses the adjective *laqueatus*: Hine [n. 1] 221). *Ceu* (in Seneca only once: *Nat.* 6. 24. 4) is surprising, but the alternative reading [Z] *quemadmodum* looks like a gloss or a stopgap (Hine [n. 1] with lit.); this old word, however, is often used by Pliny the Elder, and might have enjoyed a revival at that moment. One might add that the word is found in a quotation; it is not part of Seneca's active vocabulary.

<sup>25</sup> J. André, *Etude sur les termes de couleur dans la langue latine* (Paris 1949) 265.

<sup>26</sup> Billerbeck (n. 1) 24 f. thinks of rhythmic reasons, Hine (n. 1) 224 deems *impos* "stronger" than *impotens*.

<sup>27</sup> As for *contagio/contagium*, in this group of words, the forms in *-um* are much rarer than those in *-o* (M. Leumann, *Lateinische Laut- und Formenlehre* [München 61977] 294). Seneca avoids *obsidium* and *oblivium*, whereas *obsidio* (6 times) and *oblivio* (27 times) appear in his prose. *Contagium* is found once in Seneca (the first extant occurrence of the singular), Curtius, Pliny, and later (the plural *contagia* is preferred by poets for its metrical convenience, but Ennius and Plautus use *contagio* as well).

<sup>28</sup> Hine (n. 1) 226–229: *ensis*, *femineus*, *forsan*, *gressus*, *iubar*, *latex*, *ligo*; *antrum*, *boreas*, *notus* (wind from south), *polus*, *pontus* ('sea', not 'Black Sea'), *thalamus*.

prose. No exact synonyms are available for *thyrsus*, *pharetra*, *iuvencus*; so there is no need for considering them poetic. *Insons* is found in the historians and the *Digest*; its archaic sound may have appealed to the poets (Seneca uses this word only in the tragedies).

The absence of some other words from Seneca's prose is accidental: *regina*, *nurus*, *socia*, *habena*, *isthmus* (in the context of Corinth), *plaustrum*, *puppis* (in his prose, Seneca never refers to the 'poop of a ship'; in poetry the word means simply 'ship'), *gena*, *mala*, *maxilla*. Some words common in earlier prose are not found in Seneca's (they may have looked slightly old-fashioned to him): *haud* (absent from the *Ad Herennium*, Varro, and Cicero's correspondents), *expromo*, *abnuo* (these three appear, however, in the tragedies), *arbitror*, *interea*, *siquidem*.

Cicero uses *letum* ('death', a poetic word) when reporting from an earlier historian a prophetic dream of C. Gracchus (*Div.* 1. 56) and in a letter when making mock-heroic jokes about Antony (*Att.* 10. 10. 5). In Seneca's dramas the word is frequent, in his prose it is found only once (*Nat.* 6. 2. 8): there, *ignobile letum* ('un-heroic death') alludes to Horace (*Carm.* 1. 12. 36 *nobile letum*). *Proles* is an elevated word; in Cicero it appears in a sublime context (*Rep.* 6. 23). Seneca uses it 24 times in his tragedies and only once in his prose (*Dial.* 11 [= *Polyb.*] 9. 7): here the style is lofty, the text refers to the emperor.

To be brief, with regard to differences of vocabulary between prose and poetry,<sup>29</sup> Seneca's practice is not significantly different from Cicero's.<sup>30</sup> Both reject excessive archaism and poeticism as well as exclusive use of everyday language (*Epist.* 114. 13–14). Seneca's use of many terms formerly considered 'poetic' is often better explained by his striving for precision. This is true for medical,<sup>31</sup> gastronomic, economic, financial, nautical vocabulary. The use of technical vocabulary gives Seneca's imagery a precision which helps the student of philosophy to enliven and intensify the contents of his teaching (see below, p. 78 *V i v i d n e s s*).

As for philosophical vocabulary, cf. *Epist.* 58. 6: Seneca uses the artificial word *essentia* to render the Greek word οὐσία and he relies for this on Cicero's authority. In the later group of the letters there

<sup>29</sup> Words used in Seneca's tragedies at least ten times more frequently than in his prose: *astrum*, *castus*, \**chaos*, *cieo*, \**daps*, *dolus*, *en*, *geminus*, *infandus*, \**infaustus*, \**lacer*, *laevus*, *letum*, *libro*, *macto*, *nefandus*, \**niveus*, *perimo*, \**planctus*, *proles*, *queo*, *ratis*, *sceptrum*, \**sospes*, *victrix* (the asterisk marks words absent from Cicero's prose).

<sup>30</sup> Norden (n. 10) 286–287; Hine (n. 1) 236 f.

<sup>31</sup> Migliorini (n. 19).

appear abstract Latin nouns as ‘calques’ for their Greek equivalents. To give an example, in a paraphrase of Posidonius’ teachings, abstract Latin nouns pullulate (*Epist.* 95. 65 *praeceptionem ... suasionem ... consolationem ... exhortationem ... causarum inquisitionem*). The first of these nouns is duly excused (“there is nothing to prevent my using this word”); this shows that (given the reluctance of Latin to abstract philosophical terms) the word might have sounded slightly unfamiliar to Seneca’s readers; on the other hand, the last term of the series (*causarum inquisitionem*) is only quoted to be replaced with the original Greek word (*aetiologian*) which evidently had become part of the Latin vocabulary (“since the scholars who mount guard over the Latin language thus use the term as having the right to do so”). Hence, Seneca’s attitude regarding technical terms is un-dogmatic: he ventures a ‘calque’, when the result does not offend Roman ears, but he uses the Greek term, when Latin-writing scholars have accepted it. In both cases he respects the linguistic usage of his day. Seneca’s ‘moral’ vocabulary both in his prose and drama has been studied by Borgo.<sup>32</sup>

Greek: translation<sup>33</sup> as a problem. It is generally thought that before Humboldt nobody reflected on the different natures of languages and on the impossibility of translation in some cases.<sup>34</sup> These views are belied by a letter to Lucilius (58. 7), where Seneca discusses the problem how to Latinize the Greek τὸ ὄν: “And you will condemn our narrow Roman limits even more, when you find out that there is a word of one syllable which I cannot translate. ‘What is this?’ you ask. It is the word τὸ ὄν. You think me lacking in facility; you believe that the word is ready to hand, that it might be translated by *quod est*. I notice, however, a great difference; you are forcing me to render a noun by a verb (*verbum pro vocabulo ponere*). But if I must do so, I shall render it by *quod est*”. The words *angustias Romanas* allude to the much-debated poverty<sup>35</sup> of the Latin vocabulary; however, Seneca discovers not only

<sup>32</sup> A. Borgo, *Lessico morale di Seneca* (Napoli 1998).

<sup>33</sup> Setaioli 1988 (n. 1) esp. 11–46, quotes previous literature and deplors modern scholars’ neglect of Seneca’s reflections on differences between Greek and Latin.

<sup>34</sup> C. Tsitsiou-Chelidoni (Χρυσάνθη Τσίτσιου-Χελιδόνη), “Seneca, *Epist.* 58, 7: Τα ὄρια της μετάφρασης”, in: *Επιστημονική Επετηρίδα της Φιλοσοφικής Σχολής. Πρακτικά ζ’ Πανελληνίου Συμποσίου Λατινικών Σπουδών. Τεύχος Τμήματος Φιλολογίας* X (2002) 188–197; cf. also *Epist.* 117. 5 on verbal adjectives.

<sup>35</sup> On the poverty not only of Latin, but of human language more generally, *Benef.* 2. 34. 4 *inopia sermonis*; cf. *Epist.* 75. 2; Setaioli 1988 (n. 1) 17.

the limits of a single language, but, more generally, the impossibility of translation.

Use of Greek expressions and quotations.<sup>36</sup> Unlike the philosophical writings, the *Menippea* quite easily allows insertion of Greek words and sentences into the Latin text – changes of language may happen within a sentence, even without the additional signals that usually accompany Latin quotations (such as *ut ait*). Lines from Homer marvellously suit the mock-heroic mode of the *Apocolocyntosis*.<sup>37</sup> Further examples of Greek are the Epicurean definitions of ‘god’, ironically applied to Claudius (*Apocol.* 8. 1).<sup>38</sup> (Tellingly in the same paragraph a *Latin* quotation is duly introduced with *ut ait Varro*).

Whenever the quoted Greek words form a strong unit, an inseparable ‘block’, amusing *tautologies* become possible (*Apocol.* 12. 3) “a gigantic mega-chorus”: *ingenti μεγάλῳ χωρικῶ*. Such thoughtless repetitions occur in modern languages as well: “a good *bon mot*”, “holy St. Florian”.<sup>39</sup>

Other current expressions are varied and distorted deliberately (*Apocol.* 7. 3): “a blow inflicted by the god” *θεοῦ πληγὴν* playfully becomes “a blow inflicted by the fool” *μωροῦ πληγὴν*. The same substitution is presupposed (*Apocol.* 8. 3), when the inhabitants of Britain pray to Claudius wishing “to find a merciful – fool” *μωροῦ εὐιλᾶτου τυχεῖν*. (On the philosophical use of lines from poetry see part II of my article in the next issue of *Hyperboreus*).

Repetitions. Durs Grünbein<sup>40</sup> judges Seneca's philosophical writings “pretty monotonous”. However, as Mutschler<sup>41</sup> and Beck<sup>42</sup> have shown, the numerous repetitions must be intentional. Since Seneca's

<sup>36</sup> M. Fucecchi, “Il plurilinguismo della menippea latina. Appunti su Varrone satirico e l'*apocolocyntosis* di Seneca”, in: R. Oniga (ed.), *Il plurilinguismo nella tradizione letteraria latina* (Roma 2003) 91–130 with bibl.

<sup>37</sup> Allusions to Homer (paraphrased in Latin) are found in Seneca's philosophical writings, e. g. *Dial.* 10 (= *Brev. vit.*) 19. 2 *dum calet sanguis (Iliad* 11. 477); cf. K. Abel, “Seneca filius Homeri aemulator”, *Mnemosyne* 39 (1986) 409–410.

<sup>38</sup> Ἐπικούρειος θεὸς *non potest esse*: οὔτε αὐτὸς πρᾶγμα ἔχει τι οὔτε ἄλλοις παρέχει (cf. Epicurus apud Diog. Laert. 10. 139).

<sup>39</sup> Binder G. (ed.), *L. Annaeus Seneca: Divi Claudii Apokolokyntosis I* (Frankfurt 1987) 44 f.

<sup>40</sup> D. Grünbein, *An Seneca. Postscriptum* (Frankfurt a. M. 2004) 81.

<sup>41</sup> F.-H. Mutschler, “Variierende Wiederholung. Zur literarischen Eigenart von Senecas philosophischen Schriften”, in: *Mousopolos Stephanos: Festschrift H. Görgemanns*, ed. by M. Baumbach and others (Heidelberg 1998) 143–159.

<sup>42</sup> J.-W. Beck, “Seneca 107. Brief: Sand ohne Kalk?”, *Gymnasium* 113 (2006) 432 f.

readers – no professional philosophers, but busy Roman citizens – are exposed to the same troubles every day anew, the letters are ‘daily lessons’. This is true on a general scale; in a narrower context verbal repetitions have significant structural functions.

Verbal repetition<sup>43</sup> (such as anaphora, for instance) is an important means to bind together Seneca’s prose: even sentence connection is established by repetition. Two examples of fourfold anaphora are found in *Dial.* 1 (= *Prov.*) 6. 6–8: *contemnite paupertatem: ... contemnite dolorem: ... contemnite fortunam: ... contemnite mortem: ... sive ... sive ... sive... sive...* The rhetorical verve of these series of sentences is especially appropriate in a final chapter, where some emotional appeal is expected. Such expandedness and expansiveness is parried by the surprising brevity of the very last line of the book (brief cola of three, two, four, and two words), a contrast enhancing the impression of Catonian abruptness: *quidquid est, properat. Ecquid erubescitis? Quod tam cito fit, timetis diu?* This finale of the *De Providentia* shows that Seneca’s prose is more than a mere accumulation of short maxims: he knows that, on a larger scale, the effect of *brevitas* can be prepared and intensified by premised longer developments. The same happens on a smaller scale: within the short last line, the peremptory two-word sentences are preceded by slightly longer cola.

Comparable is the function of synonyms (see below p. 79 Variation; p. 88–89 Self-persuasion). Another important means is antithesis (see below p. 79 and part II of my article).

Vividness, imagery.<sup>44</sup> Even in a letter developing the importance of theoretical insight (*Epist.* 95), Seneca returns to his vivid style and gives graphic examples instead of dry definitions. His terms are: *descriptio cuiusque virtutis, ethologia, caracterismos, iconismos* (95. 65–66). An example is Virgil’s portraiture of the good horse (*Epist.* 95. 68 f.; Verg. *Georg.* 3. 75–85): “Virgil’s description, though referring to something else, might perfectly well be the portrayal of a brave man”. Other life-like images of virtue are Cato’s wound (95. 72) and Tubero’s deliberately modest earthenware<sup>45</sup> (*vasa fictilia*: 95. 73). Such impressive images placed at the end of a letter will stick in the addressee’s mind and accompany him during the day.

Strikingly, the tragedies are not particularly rich in images.<sup>46</sup> ‘Philosophical’ imagery is less frequent here; however, more easily than the

<sup>43</sup> Traina (n. 1) 31.

<sup>44</sup> Armisen-Marchetti (n. 1) is seminal.

<sup>45</sup> On this passage, v. Albrecht (n. 22) 91–96.

<sup>46</sup> Armisen-Marchetti (n. 1) 347 f.

philosophical works, the tragedies revert to the tradition of the epic simile (for instance, in messengers' reports) and to the imagery of fire, especially in the context of *furor*. Medical imagery is paramount in Seneca's prose, but much rarer in his dramas (248 : 14 instances); for nautical images the relation is 84 : 15, for financial ones even 150 : 2. Military comparisons are twelve times more frequent in the philosophical works than in the tragedies. All this is indicative of an artistic choice: the tragedies are not an instrument of 'philosophical conversion'.

Variation, differences of style. Seneca tries to keep his readers' attention awake by changing his means of expression: for instance, there is much variation in his use of synonyms. Even on a larger scale, his prose style is less uniform than one might have expected. There are generic differences. In the genre of *consolatio* and in some *prooemia* the quasi-Ciceronian impression is due to Seneca's use of the florid 'middle style', which is appropriate to the content. The introduction to the *Consolatio ad Helviam*, for instance, is written in well-rounded periods, which perceptibly differ from the staccato style adopted in other works, where parataxis and antithesis dominate. However, even in this work Seneca's love for aphorism stands out. Having told us that twenty days after the death of Helvia's grandson her son was exiled, he goes on: "This misfortune you had still lacked – to mourn the living".<sup>47</sup> Even in the very first chapter a *bon mot* appears (1. 2): Seneca hesitated to compose this work since in no book ever written was there anyone comforting those who were mourning for him.

There are differences of style within one and the same work. In the *De clementia*, Book 1 is rhetorical in character, and Book 2 is more abstract and philosophical. Correspondingly there is a contrast between 'common' and terminological use of vocabulary: in Book 1, *miser cordia*, *venia*, *ignoscere* are synonyms for *clementia*; in Book 2, they are differentiated semantically. *Severitas* is an antonym to *clementia* in Book 1; in Book 2 they are ultimately identical since both are virtues. Such metamorphoses within a longer work correspond to the gradual metamorphosis of the reader in the course of the reading process. We will come back to the importance of philosophical re-definition of words (see below p. 84–85 Deliberate use of words and part II of my article).

For differences between the philosophical works and the tragedies, see part II of my article.

<sup>47</sup> *hoc adhuc defuerat tibi: lugere vivos* (*Dial.* 12 [= *Helv*] 2. 5)

Colloquial versus sublime style. Seneca's style has been described in divergent, even contrary ways. On the one hand, Seneca's style might be compared to the *diatribes* of philosophical preachers; colloquialisms<sup>48</sup> are in harmony with the personal tone of his prose works – their closeness to dialogue and epistolary style. However, such elements are used with discretion. In the main, Seneca keeps aloof from 'low style'; occasionally his diction even may border on the sublime. According to the anonymous author of the treatise "On sublimity" (Περὶ ὕψους, chapters 8–9) – perhaps a contemporary of Seneca, grand style springs from a great mind: *animus magnus* (cf. Seneca, *Epist.* 41, esp. 5). Rejection of trifling puerilities (τὸ μαιρακιῶδες) is a corollary to this.<sup>49</sup> Sublimity is not achieved by unusual vocabulary, but by depth of ideas and seeming simplicity of form.

Artlessness? It is true that Seneca praises the unpretentious writings of his teacher, Papirius Fabianus (*Epist.* 100. 9–11; cf. 100. 9). In *Epist.* 75. 1–2 we read: "I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another's company or taking walks together – spontaneous and easy (*inlaboratus et facilis*);<sup>50</sup> for my letters have nothing strained or artificial about them (*nihil habent accersitum nec fictum*). (2) If it were possible, I should prefer to show (*ostendere*), rather than speak my feelings/opinions (*quid sentiam*)". However, it does not come as a surprise that in his literary practice Seneca is far from adopting Fabianus' unadorned style. According to the Stoic Cleanthes, an elevated subject matter requires an appropriate style.<sup>51</sup> Seneca agrees (*Epist.* 75. 3–5): "I prefer, however, that our conversation on matters so important should not be meagre and dry; for even philosophy does not renounce the company of cleverness (talent, *ingenium*). One

<sup>48</sup> A. Setaioli, "Elementi di *sermo cotidianus* nella lingua di Seneca prosatore", *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica* 52 (1980) 5–47; 53 (1981) 5–49, cf. idem (n. 1) 9–95 with lit. Examples are: *homo* = "one", French "on"; *non concupiscendo* a intransitive ("medial") use of transitive verbs (*aperit* for *se aperit* or *aperitur*); *se ferunt* for *feruntur*. There are also colloquial uses of *facio* and occasional confusion of *alius* and *alter* or of *hic* and *iste*. But on the whole the deviations from classical usage are neither frequent nor important. Further material in I. Dionigi, "Il *De providentia* di Seneca fra lingua e filosofia", *ANRW* II. 36. 7 (1994) 5410–5412.

<sup>49</sup> Even the narrative mode of messengers' reports in Seneca's tragedies is in harmony with Ps.-Longinus (C. Reitz, *Die Literatur im Zeitalter Neros* [Darmstadt 2006] 53). See Möller (n. 13) 324.

<sup>50</sup> B. L. Hijmans jr., *Inlaboratus et facilis. Aspects of structure in some letters of Seneca* (Leiden 1976).

<sup>51</sup> *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta* I. 109. 9 ff., frg. 486: only poetry can explain adequately the θεῖα μέγεθη.

should not, however, bestow very much attention upon mere words ... (5) If, however, you can attain eloquence without effort, and if you either are naturally gifted or can gain eloquence at slight cost, make the most of it and apply it to the noblest uses. But let it be of such a kind that it displays facts rather than itself (*ut res potius quam se ostendat*).<sup>52</sup> In any case, extremes should be avoided: On the one hand there is *inflata explicatio* (*Epist.* 114. 1). I do not think that Seneca is alluding here to the *genus grande*.<sup>52</sup> Actually the *genus grande* prefers manly forcefulness to prolixity, verbosity and over-explicitness. An inflated or turgid diction is rather typical of the florid "middle style". The other extreme would be a style that is *infracta* (powerless) and resembles a theatrical monody (*canticum*) vulnerable to the objections of effeminacy and 'childishness' (μειρακιώδες).<sup>53</sup>

Between archaism and everyday speech. "Moreover, style has no fixed laws; it is changed by the usage of the people – never the same for any length of time. Many orators hearken back to earlier epochs for their vocabulary, speaking in the language of the Twelve Tables. Gracchus, Crassus, and Curio, in their eyes, are too refined and too modern; so back to Appius and Coruncanius! Conversely, certain men, in their endeavour to maintain nothing but well-known and common usages, fall into a humdrum style (*sordes*). These two classes, each in its own way, are degenerate; and it is no less degenerate to use no words except those which are conspicuous, high-sounding, and poetical, avoiding what is familiar and in ordinary usage (*necessaria atque in usu posita*)" (*Epist.* 114. 13 f.). Some examples of unobtrusive use of everyday speech<sup>54</sup> may be mentioned here: accumulated pronouns (*illas ipsas radices: Dial.* 1 [= *Prov.*] 3. 6); parenthetical *puto* (*Epist.* 58. 6; 76. 11 twice and frequently); an element of vividness is added by the "corrective" use of *immo* (one of many examples: *Dial.* 1 [= *Prov.*] 3. 7 *post fidem, immo per ipsam fidem*); in this passage, as in others, the effect is far from trivial, even highly emotional. The same is true for apostrophe (e. g. *Dial.* 1 [= *Prov.*] 6 extr.). Such elements enliven Seneca's prose style without impairing its dignity.

'Preacher's style'?: exoteric and esoteric communication. The style of Seneca's letters is often described as "preacher's

<sup>52</sup> I disagree with Möller (n. 13) 173 n. 716.

<sup>53</sup> Plutarch, *De liberis educandis*, 9 (*Mor.* 7 a): a pompous, tragic and theatrical speech is as ineffective as a dry one. Cf. also Plutarch, *Praecepta gerendae reip.* 6 (*Mor.* 802 e);

<sup>54</sup> The closeness to philosophical preaching (*diatribe*) should neither be neglected nor overrated. Seneca's style is dignified despite its vividness.

style".<sup>55</sup> This is partly misleading. His voice is rather intended to be that of a personal adviser. One ought to distinguish between the style of a public homily (which requires rhetorical adornment) and private philosophical advice (which does not).

Given the primary importance of personal advice in the *Letters to Lucilius*, there are many references to the (alleged) simplicity of the epistolary style, which is called "spontaneous and easy", *sermo... inlaboratus et facilis* (*Epist.* 75. 1). Of course, in a private letter, elaborate over-correctness would be terribly out of place (*Epist.* 75. 1): "You have been complaining that my letters to you are rather carelessly written (*minus... accuratas*). Now who talks carefully unless he also desires to talk affectedly (*putide*)?" The epistolary form is appropriate to private philosophical advice in everyday life (*Epist.* 38. 1): "You are right when you urge that we increase our exchange of letters. But the greatest benefit is to be derived from conversation, because it creeps by degrees into the soul (*minutatim inrepat animo*). Lectures prepared beforehand and spouted in the presence of a throng have in them more noise but less intimacy. Philosophy is good advice; and no one can give advice at the top of his lungs". In the same context, Seneca stresses the differences to public sermons (*Epist.* 38. 1–2): "Of course, we must sometimes also make use of these harangues, if I may so call them (*contionibus*), when a doubting member needs to be spurred on; but when the aim is to make a man learn, we must have recourse to the low-toned words (*summissiora verba*) of conversation. They enter more easily and stick in the memory; for we do not need many words, but, rather, effective words. (2) Yes, precepts and seeds have the same quality; they produce much, and they are slight things". Such concentrated teaching fulfills the Stoic ideal of *brevitas* (in fact, *Epist.* 38 is very short), a quality Diderot praised in Seneca's style.<sup>56</sup>

Verbal cascades? Private advice requires a quiet way of speaking, neither too fast nor too slow (*Epist.* 40. 4): "Besides, speech that deals with the truth (*veritati*) should be unadorned (*incomposita*) and

---

<sup>55</sup> R. G. G. Coleman, "The Artful Moralists. A Study of Seneca's Epistolary Style", *CIQ* 24 (1974) 285: "The movement by association of ideas... is not a whimsical drift but a carefully controlled progression, in which a particular group of ideas is approached from a number of different angles and reinforced at each new exposition. The technique is not that of the philosopher, developing a systematic argument..., but of the preacher, concerned to drive home with all the arts of rhetoric one or two chosen doctrinal propositions".

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in: D. Grünbein, *Seneca Thyestes deutsch* (Frankfurt a. M. 2002) 159.

plain (*simplex*). Here Seneca alludes to the Greek proverb "The word of truth is simple" ἀπλοῦς ὁ τῆς ἀληθείας ἐστὶν λόγος. He goes on to stress the importance of regularity and justly mentions medical treatment as a parallel to philosophical tutoring: "Remedies do not avail unless they remain in the system [i. e. when applied regularly] (*immorantur*) ... (5) what physician can heal his patient in a fleeting visit (*in transitu*)?"<sup>57</sup> Too voluble speech (apart from being un-Roman)<sup>58</sup> is neither fruitful nor even enjoyable (5): "May I add that such a jargon of confused and ill-chosen words (*verborum sine delectu ruentium strepitus*) cannot afford pleasure, either?" Verbal cascades certainly do not fit (7) philosophy, which "should carefully place (*ponere*) her words, not fling them out, and should proceed step by step" (*pedetemptim*); (8) "What then?" you say; 'should not philosophy sometimes take a loftier tone?' Of course she should; but dignity of character should be preserved, and this is stripped away by such violent and excessive force. Let philosophy possess great forces, but kept well under control; let her stream flow unceasingly (*perennis*), but never become a torrent". Unlike a salesman, the philosopher should not show off his oratorical power (*Epist.* 52. 9): "What is baser than philosophy courting applause? Does the sick man praise the surgeon while he is operating? In silence and with reverent awe submit to the cure..." (14) "Let them be roused to the matter, not to the style (*ad rem commoveantur, non ad verba composita*)". (15) The teacher of philosophy should be "a priest, not a pedlar (*non institorem, sed antistitem*)". The good adviser, who gives his discourse the silent but steady fluency of a great river, is represented by Seneca's teacher Fabianus (*Epist.* 40. 14) with his "restrained style of speech, far removed from boldness (*oratio pressa, non audax*)". Even Lucilius' style is praised for the same quality (*Epist.* 59. 4 f.): "You have your words under control. You are not carried away by your language or borne beyond the limits which you have determined upon"... (in what you say there is) "nothing superfluous nor bombastic"; cf. also (*Epist.* 46. 2): "There was no burst of force (*impetus*), but an even flow (*tenor*), a style that was vigorous and chaste (*compositio virilis et sancta*). Nevertheless, I noticed from time to time your sweetness and here and there that mildness of yours. Your style is lofty (*grandis*) and noble; I want you to keep to this manner and this direction".

Hence, there is a marked difference between *disputatio* / *admonitio* (a public homily, meant to attract students, which needs rhetorical

<sup>57</sup> Cf. *Epist.* 2. 2 *immorari*; 2. 3 *in transitu*.

<sup>58</sup> *Epist.* 40. 11: *In Graecis hanc licentiam tuleris; nos etiam cum scribimus, interpungere adsuevimus.*

elaboration) and *sermo* (personal advice, *consilium*), which uses “humbler speech” (*summissiora verba*: *Epist.* 38. 1) and is especially effective since it creeps into our mind in homoeopathic doses: a distinction fundamental for any appraisal of Seneca’s style.

The importance of a theoretical basis: *decreta* versus *praecepta*. There is a further distinction (developed by Seneca in *Epist.* 94 and 95): *praecepta* and *decreta*. *Praecepta* (which refer to behaviour in practical life) use *paraenetic speech* and play a role in propaedeutics (without losing importance later on, of course), whereas *decreta* (theoretical principles) are explained in serious philosophical teaching.<sup>59</sup>

Deliberate use of words: Semantic metamorphosis. The *decreta* help us to define the true meaning of words (one of Seneca’s

---

<sup>59</sup> *Epist.* 94. 2: “But Aristo the Stoic ... believes ... that the greatest benefit is derived from the actual *decreta* (‘doctrines’) 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 case”. In the following letter Seneca defines the nature of such *decreta*: “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” (*Epist.* 95. 12). “There should be deeply implanted a firm conviction (*persuasio*) which will apply to life as a whole: this is what I call a ‘doctrine’ (*decretum*). And as this conviction is, so will be our acts and thoughts. As our acts and thoughts are, so will our lives be (*qualia autem haec fuerint, talis vita erit*)” (*Epist.* 95. 44). Tellingly, Seneca ascribes to theoretical insight more power than to admonitions. He who has really understood philosophy by means of rational proofs will lead a different and better life. “It is useless for us to have mouthed out precepts, unless we begin by reflecting what opinion we ought to hold concerning everything” (95. 54; here he mentions poverty and riches, glory and shame, home and exile). Let us ask, “what it is, not what it is called” (*quaeramus, quid sint, non quid vocentur*: 95. 54). The same is true for notions such as *virtus*: “If we would learn virtue, we must learn all about virtue” (*discendum de ipsa est, ut ipsa discatur*: 95. 56). “If you would always desire the same things (*eadem semper velle*), you must desire the truth (*vera*). But one cannot attain the truth (*verum*) without doctrines; for doctrines embrace the whole of life” (95. 58). “There are certain matters in philosophy which need admonition; there are others which need proof (*probationem*)... Hidden things (*occulta*) need proof; proof cannot come without doctrines; therefore, doctrines are necessary” (95. 61) “Precepts... are manifest, while the doctrines of wisdom are concealed (*in abdito*). And as only the initiated know the more hallowed portion of the rites (*sanctiora sacrorum*), so in philosophy the hidden truths are revealed only to those who are members and have been admitted to the sacred rites. But precepts and other such matters are familiar even to the uninitiated (*profanis*)” (95. 64).

central issues). This proves that serious philosophical reflection must be present already at a very early stage of philosophical education – and, in addition, that language and style of Seneca's philosophical writings cannot be discussed without taking into account their content. The 95<sup>th</sup> letter proves that practical rules (*praecepta*) are not enough; the theoretical part of philosophy is indispensable. According to *Epist.* 95. 65, Posidonius says that not only *praeceptio*, *suasio*, *consolatio*, *exhortatio* are needed, but also *aetiologia* (*causarum inquisitio*), which implies a rational approach. In Seneca's view (95. 34 f.), false opinions can be eradicated only by learning “what is good”, “what is bad” (*quid malum, quid bonum sit*), and consequently re-defining the current meanings of words. Otherwise, *praecepta* are inefficient. “They must know that everything – except virtue – changes its name (*mutare nomen*) and becomes now good and now bad”. It is necessary to inquire into the reasons of wrong behaviour: false admiration and vain fear (95. 37). One should eradicate wrong opinions and obtain correct ones on “poverty and riches, glory and shame, homeland and exile” (95. 54). Philosophy differs from other *artes* (*Epist.* 95. 56 f.): “Conduct (*actio*) will not be right unless the will (*voluntas*) to act is right; for this is the source of conduct. Nor, again, can the will be right without a right attitude of mind (*habitus animi rectus*)”. A perfect state of mind can only be achieved by discretion and correct judgement. Judgement needs proofs. Therefore, theory is necessary. *Decreta* are the “roots”, *praecepta* the “branches”. Theory implies a deliberate use of words: therefore, Seneca's use of language and style can only be understood in view of his theory.

Care for oneself: the language of inner life. The two last-mentioned aspects of Seneca's language reflect a basic problem of human existence: the tension between – and coexistence of – the care for oneself (or one's self) and the care for others: Seneca discovers an inner link between improving oneself and improving others.<sup>60</sup> Typical of Seneca's language are reflexive (and reflective) expressions such as: *se formare, se ad studia revocare, sibi applicare, suum fieri, in se recedere, ad se recurrere, secum morari, ad se properare*.<sup>61</sup> The fact

---

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *Epist.* 52. 9: “improving themselves and others” *meliores fiant faciantque meliores*; *De ira* 3. 39. 1: “For we wish not merely to be healed ourselves, but also to heal”; *Epist.* 6. 4: “I am glad to learn in order that I may teach”; especially explicit is *Epist.* 8. 1 f.: “My object in shutting myself up ... is to be able to help a greater number ... There are certain wholesome counsels (*compositiones*, ‘recipes’), ... these I am putting into writing. For I have found them helpful in ministering to my own sores”.

<sup>61</sup> M. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*. Transl. by R. Hurley (New York 1986) 46.

that there are Greek, especially Hellenistic, precedents<sup>62</sup> does not impair Seneca's merit: he has greatly enriched the Latin language, developing the language of 'inner life' (what Traina calls "interiorita").<sup>63</sup> For parallels and differences between his prose and poetry in this regard, see part II of my article.

**Rhetoric.** In his tragedies Seneca draws on the poetic language of the Augustan poets. Among Seneca's linguistic and stylistic models, Ovid takes a place of honour (for instance, in monologues<sup>64</sup> and messengers' reports),<sup>65</sup> followed by Virgil and Horace.<sup>66</sup> This is significant since Ovid and Seneca have common roots in the oratory of the Augustan age (as reflected for us in the writings of Seneca the Elder).<sup>67</sup> Parallels between Seneca's and his father's writings<sup>68</sup> and the latter's rhetorical and philosophical sources (including Seneca's teachers) prove that even when competing with his models – which include Greek and Latin<sup>69</sup> drama – Seneca does not neglect his contemporaries' taste for a passionate, purposeful and impulsive mode. The 'rhetorical' style of his tragedies is in harmony with his epoch: just as architects and painters of his day revel in atmospheric effects produced by the luster of precious material, authors, too, try to dazzle their audiences with brilliance. A passionate, 'dramatic'<sup>70</sup> syntax and style are typical of both his prose and his drama.<sup>71</sup> Both genres abound

<sup>62</sup> B. Inwood, *Reading Seneca. Stoic Philosophy at Rome* (Oxford 2005) 339 f.

<sup>63</sup> A. Traina (n. 1) 9–23; documentation 43–77; bibliography 131–157; instructive addenda: 193–204.

<sup>64</sup> See v. Albrecht (n. 22) 106–113.

<sup>65</sup> W.-L. Liebermann, *Studien zu Senecas Tragödien* (Meisenheim 1974).

<sup>66</sup> Basic for the vocabulary (and style) of the tragedies: Billerbeck (n. 1) 8; 88 (lit.): 87% of Seneca's words are attested before him in Ovid, 82% in Virgil, 71% in Horace. Of Ovid's works, Seneca prefers the *Metamorphoses*, of Virgil's, the *Aeneid* and (to a lesser degree) the *Georgics*, of Horace's, the *Odes* (which are a model for Seneca's choruses).

<sup>67</sup> Ovid in the *Hercules furens*: v. Albrecht (n. 22) 99–112.

<sup>68</sup> L. Annaei Senecae *Tragoediae*. Rec. et emend. F. Leo. I (Berolini 1878; repr. Berolini 1963) 147–159; C. (= K.) Preisendanz, "De L. Annaei Senecae rhetoris apud philosophum filium auctoritate", *Philologus* 67 (1908) 68–112.

<sup>69</sup> Old Latin influence is difficult to prove given the fragmentary state of our tradition: Billerbeck (n. 1) 141 (perhaps too pessimistic), and Ovid's *Medea* (which must have influenced Seneca) has not come down to us, but the parallels to *Heroides* 12 are telling. Billerbeck does not compare systematically Seneca's tragedies with his prose writings. The points of contact, however, are numerous.

<sup>70</sup> For an excellent study of Seneca's style (with careful account of scholarship): Traina (n. 1).

<sup>71</sup> Armisen-Marchetti (n. 1) 349 f.

in *sententiae*,<sup>72</sup> e. g. (*Epist.* 105. 8): "When there is an evil conscience, something may bring safety, but nothing can bring peace"<sup>73</sup> and (*Phaedra* 164): "Some women have transgressed with safety, but none with peace of mind".<sup>74</sup> Tellingly, the 'wise' speaker is the nurse. Similarly, the advice given to Atreus by his anonymous attendant (*Thyestes* 204–219) reminds the reader of Seneca's *De clementia* in several instances.<sup>75</sup> In tragedies, gnomic wisdom is traditionally conveyed by old servants or the chorus. However, no strictly didactic intention of the plays can be deduced from this.

Longer developments preceding a short ending. Pichon's<sup>76</sup> idea that Seneca is "putting philosophy into epigrams" can be developed. Actually some brilliant paradoxes found in Seneca's philosophical prose appear at the endings of some of Martial's epigrams.<sup>77</sup> According to a general principle of style (the so-called law of Behaghel) the second of two stylistic units is expected to be longer. Contrary to this expectation, in an epigram the preparatory part ('expectation') is longer than the striking solution ('revelation'). This disproportion, which (by means of contrast) enhances the impression of brevity, is part of an epigram's charm. In Seneca, the last sentence of the preserved text of the *Epistulae morales* can show that the same stylistic principle operates even within the final *sententia*: *Infelicissimos esse felices*. These three words are replaced with thirteen in Gummere's translation: "Those whom the world calls fortunate are really the most unfortunate of all". Such striving for explicitness perfectly renders the meaning, but gives

---

<sup>72</sup> For a list, see H. V. Canter, *Rhetorical Elements in the Tragedies of Seneca* (Univ. of Illinois 1925) 17; Th. B. Macaulay (in a letter of May 30, 1836): "His works are made up of mottoes. There is hardly a sentence which might not be quoted; but to read him straightforward is like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce".

<sup>73</sup> *Tutum aliqua res in mala conscientia praestat, nulla securum.*

<sup>74</sup> *Scelus aliqua tutum, nulla securum tulit.*

<sup>75</sup> *Thy.* 204 f. *fama populi*; *Thy.* 207–210 *Quos cogit metus / laudare, eosdem reddit inimicos metus; / at qui favoris gloriam veri petit, / animo magis quam voce laudari volet*; *Thy.* 213 *Rex velit honesta: nemo non eadem volet*; *Thy.* 215–217 *Ubi non est pudor / nec cura iuris sanctitas pietas fides / instabile regnum est*; *Thy.* 219 *nefas nocere vel malo fratri puta*; see the commentaries.

<sup>76</sup> R. Pichon, *Histoire de la littérature latine* (Paris 1908).

<sup>77</sup> On Seneca and Martial: G. Friedrich, "Zu Seneca und Martial", *Hermes* 45 (1910) 583–594; Traina (n. 1) 112 with add., cf. *Epist.* 2. 2 *nusquam est, qui ubique est* "Who is everywhere, is nowhere" ~ *Mart.* 7. 73. 6 *quisquis ubique habitat, Maxime, nusquam habitat*; *Epist.* 70. 8 "It is folly to die through fear of dying" *stultitia est timore mortis mori* ~ *Mart.* 2. 80. 2 *hic, rogo, non furor est, ne moriari, mori*?

no idea of Seneca's epigrammatic style (in the translation, Seneca's word-order is inverted, and the second member of the sentence is, in accordance with our habits, made longer than the first). However, even Seneca's word order is telling. *Infelicitissimos* raises the reader's expectations. Who are the most unfortunate? And the 'answer' is shorter than the 'question': The fortunate. This *sententia* is an epigram in a nutshell. Not only does a long letter end with a short sentence, but the intrinsic structure of this sentence repeats the structure of the text.

There is a rich literary and philosophical background to these stylistic procedures. Cato the Elder achieved effects of *brevitas* by unexpectedly placing a shorter element after a longer one, and Caesar stressed the fulminant quickness of his actions in the same way.<sup>78</sup> The enigmatic definition of "who is most unfortunate" is reminiscent of the type of Pythagorean questions and answers such as: "What is the best / wisest / most beautiful / most blissful thing of all?" (Iamblichus, *Vita Pyth.* 82). And there is, of course, the Stoic tradition of teaching by paradoxes.

A similar procedure is the *aprosdoketon*<sup>79</sup> such as (*Epist.* 83. 24): "When you are the last survivor of the revels; when you have vanquished every one by your magnificent show of prowess [*scil.* in drinking] and there is no man of so great capacity as you – you are vanquished by the cask".<sup>80</sup> Or (cf. *Epist.* 124. 22): "Why dress your hair with such unending attention? ... Yet you will see a mane of greater thickness tossing upon any horse you choose, and a mane of greater beauty bristling upon the neck of any lion. And even after training yourself for speed, you will be no match for the hare".<sup>81</sup> (Here Gummere's Loeb translation perfectly renders the surprising brevity of the final stroke.)

Style and self-persuasion. Rhetorical structures: Climax and use of synonyms; tricolon. Seneca intensifies an idea by splitting it up (*μερισμός*), by specifying and unfolding it under various aspects. In this method, the use of synonyms or almost-synonyms is paramount. Thus the first letter analyses our loss of time:<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> See v. Albrecht (n. 13) 37 (Cato); 85 f. (Caesar).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. G. Petrone, *La battuta a sorpresa negli oratori latini* (Palermo 1971).

<sup>80</sup> *Cum superstes toti convivio fueris, cum omnes viceris virtute magnifica et nemo vini tam capax fuerit, vinceris – a dolio.*

<sup>81</sup> *Quid capillum ingenti diligentia comis? ... In quolibet equo densior iactabitur iuba, horrebit in leonum cervice formosior. Cum te ad velocitatem paraveris, par lepusculo non eris.*

<sup>82</sup> V. Viparelli, *Il senso e il non senso del tempo in Seneca* (Napoli 2000) 64 rightly quotes *angustias temporis mei laxa* (*Epist.* 49. 10) and distinguishes between the linear course of time and its coming to a standstill in the philosopher's mind

“Certain moments are torn from us, some are gently removed, and others glide beyond our reach” (*eripiuntur... subducuntur ... effluunt* (*Epist.* 1. 1), which is a paraphrase of the tripartite<sup>83</sup> series: *auferebatur – subripiabatur – excidebat* (*ibid.*). The synonyms are arranged in the form of a climax (*gradatio*); in fact, the most shameful loss is the last one, which is caused by negligence. Here a misunderstanding has to be clarified. Seneca's abundance in synonyms is not a mere stylistic fancy – not even a “baroque” protestation against Caesar's elimination of synonyms – but an integral part of his philosophical teaching method. The next series – a gradation as well – finds a reason for our loss of time in misplaced activity or inactivity: “The largest portion of our life passes while we are doing ill, a goodly share while we are doing nothing and the whole while we are doing that which is not to the purpose” (*male agentibus ... nihil agentibus ... aliud agentibus: Epist.* 1. 1). Again, the sentence consists of three members (*cola*). Then a further gradation shows how to become aware of that permanent loss (*Epist.* 1. 2): “What man can you show me who places any value on his time?” *quem mihi dabis, qui aliquod pretium tempori ponat* (first degree: general statement), “who reckons the worth of each day” *qui diem aestimet* (second degree: the abstract notion of time is replaced with a concrete one: *diem*), “who understands that he is dying daily?” *qui intellegat se cotidie mori?* (third degree: the idea is personalized by self-reflection and intensified by paradoxical expression). It is not by chance that Seneca exhorts Lucilius, to “persuade himself” (*persuade hoc tibi: Epist.* 1. 1). The art of persuasion is called rhetoric, which is the application of stylistic means to obtain a definite aim. In his philosophical writings, Seneca shows how rhetoric can be used to persuade not only others, but oneself. For further examples, see part II of my article: *Linguistic differences and connections between Seneca's philosophical works and his tragedies.*

#### Excursus: Development of Seneca's Style.

Analyses of metrics, verse and sentence structure allow a – tentative – chronological arrangement of the tragedies in three groups. These conclusions are based on the assumption (true for Sophocles and Shakespeare) that an increase in strong sense-pauses within the line reflects greater flexibility and a later date. An early phase is represented by *Agamemnon* (32.4%), *Phaedra* (34.4%), and *Oedipus* (36.8%), whereas

---

(p. 97); the wise man's *otium* surpasses the limits of time and space (he is in contact with all the great philosophers).

<sup>83</sup> On *tricolon* in Seneca: Beck (n. 42).

*Medea* (47.2%), *Troades* (47.6%), and *Hercules furens* (49.0%) form an intermediate group, and *Thyestes* (54.5%) and *Phoenissae* (57.2%) are the latest plays.<sup>84</sup> Other observations seem to support this chronology: The first group has further features in common: *Oedipus* and *Agamemnon* are the only plays containing polymetric choruses. The plays of Group One account for eight of the nine places where a chorus follows an ode with a transition to the next act.<sup>85</sup> In the third group the shortening of final *-o*,<sup>86</sup> in nouns of the third declension, in some adverbs, and especially in the first person singular of present and future is much more frequent than previously. Therefore, the *Thyestes* and *Phoenissae* may have been composed considerably later than the other six plays (possibly in 60–62).<sup>87</sup> All the other tragedies were written before 54, the latest possible date for the *Hercules furens*.<sup>88</sup>

(to be continued)

Michael von Albrecht  
Universität Heidelberg

---

<sup>84</sup> C. Reitz, *Die Literatur im Zeitalter Neros* (Darmstadt 2006) 54; R. J. Tarrant (ed.), *Seneca's Thyestes* (Atlanta 1985) 11, based on Fitch (J. G. Fitch, "Sense-Pauses and Relative Dating in Seneca, Sophocles, and Shakespeare", *AJPh* 102 [1981] 289–307).

<sup>85</sup> Fitch (n. 84) 306.

<sup>86</sup> R. Hartenberger, *De o finali apud poetas latinos ab Ennio usque ad Iuvenalem*. Diss. (Bonn 1911).

<sup>87</sup> Tarrant (n. 84) 13.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

*Corrigenda ad vol. 14, fasc. 1*

**legendum:**

p. 6, n. 11	Aristarchus
7, l. 3	π<ε>ιστέον
7, l. 4	εἰ καὶ δοκεῖ
8, l. 4 <i>a fine</i>	Codex Angelic.
8, n. 23	see S. West in:
8, n. 27	A. R.
12, n. 4	<i>tome</i> [...] établi
13, l. 3	quarum utramque nihil
14, l. 2–4	gewöhnliche [...] enthält [...] Rücksicht
16, n. *, l. 4	Charalambos
16, n. 1, l. 3	Archaïsme
16, n. 2, l. 4	<i>Inscriptions</i>
19, n. 9, l. 2	<i>Athènes et Chypre à</i>
21, n. 20, l. 2	<i>d’Achoris à Karnak</i>
22, n. 26	archaïque
25, n. 41	nachlässig [...] glückliche
26, n. 55, l. 1	à l’étude
26, n. 55, l. 4	ΑΠΑΡΧΑΙ
33, n. 15, l. 7	in this same note
33, n. 16, l. 3 <i>a fine</i>	μὲν
43, n. 6	$\Rightarrow d^2 = (r+h) \times (h+x)$
51, l. 8 <i>a fine</i>	diminuant
55, l. 7	« vice
56, l. 9	le cas
91, n. 1, l. 3	πρακτικὴ
94, n. 2, l. 6–7	πλῆθος [...] Χριστός
102, n. 28, l. 2	αὐτὸν
103, n. 29, l. 20	οἱ
103, n. 29, l. 3 <i>a fine</i>	βεβαιούμενοι
104, n. 30, l. 4 <i>a fine</i>	<i>Refutatio</i>
108, l. 6	ἐναντίον
109, n. 47, l. 5	ἄγνωστον
112, n. 59, l. 5	что Ириней мог
113, n. 59, l. 6	etwa
144, n. 4, l. 5–6 <i>a fine</i>	изначально
145, n. 7, l. 4	Zürich
146, n. 9, l. 3	и “богословие”
147, n. 12	d’où [...] systèmes [...] siècles

*Corrigenda ad vol. 14, fasc. 1*

**legendum:**

p. 6, n. 11	Aristarchus
7, l. 3	π<ε>ιστέον
7, l. 4	εἰ καὶ δοκεῖ
8, l. 4 <i>a fine</i>	Codex Angelic.
8, n. 23	see S. West in:
8, n. 27	A. R.
12, n. 4	<i>tome</i> [...] établi
13, l. 3	quarum utramque nihil
14, l. 2–4	gewöhnliche [...] enthält [...] Rücksicht
16, n. *, l. 4	Charalambos
16, n. 1, l. 3	Archaïsme
16, n. 2, l. 4	<i>Inscriptions</i>
19, n. 9, l. 2	<i>Athènes et Chypre à</i>
21, n. 20, l. 2	<i>d’Achoris à Karnak</i>
22, n. 26	archaïque
25, n. 41	nachlässig [...] glückliche
26, n. 55, l. 1	à l’étude
26, n. 55, l. 4	ΑΠΑΡΧΑΙ
33, n. 15, l. 7	in this same note
33, n. 16, l. 3 <i>a fine</i>	μὲν
43, n. 6	$\Rightarrow d^2 = (r+h) \times (h+x)$
51, l. 8 <i>a fine</i>	diminuant
55, l. 7	« vice
56, l. 9	le cas
91, n. 1, l. 3	πρακτικὴ
94, n. 2, l. 6–7	πλῆθος [...] Χριστός
102, n. 28, l. 2	αὐτὸν
103, n. 29, l. 20	οἱ
103, n. 29, l. 3 <i>a fine</i>	βεβαιούμενοι
104, n. 30, l. 4 <i>a fine</i>	<i>Refutatio</i>
108, l. 6	ἐναντίον
109, n. 47, l. 5	ἄγνωστον
112, n. 59, l. 5	что Ириней мог
113, n. 59, l. 6	etwa
144, n. 4, l. 5–6 <i>a fine</i>	изначально
145, n. 7, l. 4	Zürich
146, n. 9, l. 3	и “богословие”
147, n. 12	d’où [...] systèmes [...] siècles