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SENECA'S LETTERS TO LUCILLIUS

EDMUND LEITES

In an important respect, Seneca is the first modern philosopher. He affirms that he pleases himself only inasmuch as he is morally worthy *and* that he values himself just because it is himself. No justification of his self-love is needed. Every man loves himself and Seneca is no exception. Obviously, neither attitude is original to Seneca. What is distinctively modern is that he stands behind both, although they are (in his experience) clearly contradictory. They wouldn't be if the self which Seneca loved (just because it was his) was none other than his capacity to recognize and live by universally valid moral values. He loves himself, however, in all his particularity, even down to just how warm or cold he likes to be (Letter 67).

Isn't Seneca known as the exponent of a Stoic ethic? Aren't the charming stories about his personal foibles no more than rhetorical and pedagogical devices to charm the reader through his admission that, like the reader, he is human—and isn't this meant to be preparation for the sterner Stoicism which Seneca never ceases to advocate? This customary reading cannot account for the *intensity* of the humanity present in Seneca's *Letters*, an altogether new thing in the history of ancient philosophy. He provides more than 'human interest' through the details of his personal life, which he acknowledges do not always fulfill the Stoic ethic. They are an expression of his love for himself in all his diversity. In this matter, Montaigne was to be the best reader of Seneca.

The means by which Seneca communicates his double commitment is subtle: not by the affirmation of opposing propositions, but by letters which (both singly and as an ensemble) move back and forth between the propositional assertion of Stoic morality and the assertion of his particular self through the open, intense, and convincing expression of his own feelings. The success of his expression depends upon his power as a writer: he is the master—and sometimes, it would appear, the inventor—of a

remarkable array of literary devices that make his emotions live on the page—including the skillful use of abrupt and startling changes of mood, as in his treatment of death. His belief that one has no good reason to fear death is hardly original. Seneca himself makes fun of its banality—he imagines his reader saying “Decanta in omnibus scholis fabulae istae sunt; iam mihi, cum ad contemnendam mortem ventum fuerit, Catonem narrabis” (Letter 24). This sympathetic portrayal of the reader’s irritation doesn’t prevent him from retelling, once again, Cato’s last moments. (“Quidni ego narrem ultima illa nocte Platonis librum legentem posito ad caput gladio?”) After Cato’s story, Seneca retells Scipio’s; pages follow in which the counsel against the fear of death is expressed in many different ways. The concluding paragraph of the letter, however, involves an abrupt change of tone: it is an anguished expression of Seneca’s hatred of *life*: “Quousque eadem? . . . Diem nox premit, dies noctem, aestas in autumnum desinit, autumnum hiemps instat, quae vere conpescitur; omnia sic transeunt ut reverantur. Nihil novi facio, nihil novi video, fit aliquando et huius rei nausia.”

There are many voices in these letters. Seneca is generous with himself in giving so many of them expression. His belief in himself in all his variety is expressed through the very language of the letters themselves: just as his love of the Stoic commitment to constancy is conveyed by his tendency toward a steady and stable tone, so his prose, which is often like the glittering sea, affirms his love of himself in all his changeability.

Seneca’s modern and (for his time) novel sense of self is, to some extent, the result of a new idea of the chief psychic task confronting each and every human being: he has transformed the Platonic demand for self-mastery into the modern task of self-possession. In Hesiod’s *Theogony*, the elements that move all things (including humans) were divine forces that flowed throughout the world. They moved around humans and through them, but they did not belong to them. Plato’s sense of the cosmic powers that activated all nature was not significantly different. As for Hesiod, Plato’s *eros* is not an expression of the self, but a cosmic force that is outside of man as well as in him. The same is clearly true of reason, which is no expression of the self, but a power which shapes the world as a whole.

Upholding this classical vision of the energies that motivate humanity, Plato fashioned a congruent idea of the chief psychic task of humanity: it was master of the forces that were at work within one's psyche. Mastery does not imply possession, nor the ambition to possess. Plato did not think that any human being could ever make the force of *eros* belong to him. That would be nonsense. It was a cosmic force, which could easily take a man over and make him crazy. Humanity's task was to channel *eros* toward its proper object. One could be master of forces one could not own. For some reason, the body and its desire must be mastered, not possessed. It, too, was alien and could not be otherwise. Even the rationality and morality which gave one the power to judge and master *eros* and the body were cosmic energies which one could make use of, but could not make one's own.

For Seneca to own oneself is the task of one's life. "Qui se habet, nihil perdidit. Sed quoto cuique habere contingit?" (Letter 42). On first examination, his idea of self-possession as a psychic task is baffling because, in his experience, all that move us *is* us and comes from us. Cosmic forces no longer course through our being. Even our rationality belongs to us. We own it. "De tuo gaude. Quid est autem hoc 'de tuo'? Te ipso et tui optima parte" (Letter 23). If everything that moves us belongs to us, how could there be a problem about self-possession? It would seem as if we could not avoid it. The matter becomes clearer when one recognizes that self-possession implies the existence of a self and that even if all our motives are ours, this does not guarantee the possession of a self. Only when the diversity of our motives are given a coherence and integrity, only when something makes that diversity, even in its diversity, one, is there *a* self. And when there is a self, then one *has* a self.

There are, for Seneca, two quite different modes of achieving self-possession. With respect to his love for himself in all his particularity, he achieves unity through the organized expression by *aesthetic* means of all that he is. Montaigne wrote for himself, and Seneca does as well. He writes to his correspondent Lucilius, he writes to us, and he writes to himself. "Mecum . . . loquor" (Letter 10). He dares trust himself with the creation of himself. Although the aesthetic form of self-possession that Seneca achieves depends upon the resources of art, such as the juxtaposi-

tion of moods, it is not 'literary,' if that is taken to mean 'fictional.' The unity achieved is a real unity, not only one that exists on the page or in the words of the speaker. It is experienced by its creator—and properly so—as expressing who he really is. Art is essential to this form of self-possession.

From the perspective of morality, Seneca seeks self-possession through the achievement of a unity created by constancy. All that he does, feels, thinks and says will be the expression of one and the same steady moral purpose, which he believes to be universally valid. This would achieve more than self-mastery or the rule of conscience, because what he will create, when successful, is a morally expressive unity: "Maximum hoc est et officium sapientiae et indicium, ut verbis opera concordent, ut ipse ubique par sibi idemque sit" (Letter 20; also see Letter 35).

Seneca is a Stoic and he is more than that. For the first time in the history of Western philosophy, aesthetic unity, the form necessary for self-possession in one's difference and particularity, is affirmed alongside (and in obvious tension with) the equally sincere call for moral self-possession, a unity formed with what Seneca believes to be a universally valid body of truths. *Both* forms of self-possession are necessary for Seneca. Even if it were possible to achieve, once and for all, self-possession through moral unity, it would still be the case that in each and every human, more than moral purpose would be present. Desire may be shaped to express moral ends, but it cannot in all respects be identical with them. Aesthetic unity will always be necessary for possession of oneself in one's difference from oneself. On almost every page of his *Letters* Seneca brought this truth to life.

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Biographical Note

The life of Seneca is best approached through the account of Tacitus (in the *Annals*), who took great care to be fair to a man who was not only an exceptional philosopher, but (for a time) exceptionally wealthy and exceptionally powerful. Suetonius (in the *Lives of the Caesars*) and later, Dio Cassius (writing in the third century), were much less sympathetic, making much of common

criticism that there was a deep conflict between Seneca's life and his philosophy. I believe this view to be largely mistaken, since it depends on the belief that Seneca was no more than a Stoic, whereas I believe he was a good deal more than that. He expressed, through the complexity of his prose, counter-Stoic doctrines at the same time that he promoted in straightforwardly propositional form, conventional Stoicism. Today's treatments of Seneca, although usually judicious, characteristically lack a passionate feeling for their subject, tending to make their treatments of the man rather antiquarian. Still, the references they supply are useful. See Miriam T. Griffin, *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976) and G. M. Ross, "Seneca's Philosophical Influence" in *Seneca*, edited by C.D.N. Costa (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 116-65.

A more philosophically profitable way of approaching Seneca would be to read those authors who have grasped the complex and richly contradictory nature of his *Letters*. Montaigne did, as did Ralph Waldo Emerson. An understanding of Seneca is not, however, so much to be gained by paying heed to their comments on Seneca (as in Montaigne's *Essays*, I,xxvi ("De l'instruction des enfans") and II,x ("Des livres")), but by the development of an overall sense of the similar strategies of thought and expression.

Nonetheless, there is one book which, while not focussing specifically on Seneca, is vitally necessary for an understanding of the psychic and philosophical challenges Seneca faced, and that is: Michael Foucault, *Le souci de soi (Histoire de la sexualité, 3)*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984.