

Duarte, Ricardo

Portraits of aging and old age in Seneca's Moral Epistles

Graeco-Latina Brunensia. 2020, vol. 25, iss. 2, pp. 73-85

ISSN 1803-7402 (print); ISSN 2336-4424 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/GLB2020-2-6>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/143316>

License: [CC BY-SA 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

Portraits of Aging and Old Age in Seneca's *Moral Epistles*

Ricardo Duarte
(University of Lisbon)

Abstract

In the *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, written near the end of his life, Seneca frequently allies meditation on death – a theme that, as a Stoic, had always deserved his special attention – with reflections on the passage of time, the meaning of human existence, and the meaning of life in its different phases: childhood and youth, adulthood and old age. In this paper, I will study Seneca's most significant portraits of aging and old age, and articulate them via the literary anthropology that characterizes the *Epistulae* and his other works in general.

Keywords

time; existence; life; age; old age; aging; death; Stoicism

A preliminary version of this article was delivered at „Age, Aging and Old Age in Greco-Roman Antiquity“, Gothenburg (Sweden), 2017. This article was written as part of my postdoctoral research on Seneca, funded by the FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (SFRH/BPD/117758/2016).

So much for man, – a substance that flows away
and falls, exposed to every influence...
(Seneca, *Ep.* 58.24)¹

You must suffer pain, and thirst, and hunger,
and old age too,
if a longer stay among men shall be granted you...
(Seneca, *Ep.* 91.18)

Ancient Greek and Roman writers were, in general, very sensitive to the themes of the transience of human life and fugacity of time.² As a Stoic, Seneca was remarkably attuned to these themes, hence their presence throughout his works.³ As a matter of fact, in the context of the literary anthropology intrinsic to Seneca's substantial body of work (both prose and theater), two major themes emerge, perhaps the two greatest themes of humanity: time and death.⁴ The two are intimately associated, embodying the *meditatio mortis* so dear to Seneca, and on which he vehemently insists, and the *lex mortalitatis* which Inwood considers “a basic principle of ethics for Seneca.”⁵

I agree with Ker, when he states that two words figure emblematically as the kernel of Seneca's greatest teachings, which time and again offer readers diverse images of himself, or others, to deal with the fugacity of life and the inescapable certainty of death: *Cotidie morimur*, “We die daily” (Sen. *Ep.* 24.20).⁶ But in *De Breuitate uitae* the main theme is precisely the use of time. Seneca argues that the brevity of life should not be a matter

1 Translation by R. M. Gummere in the Loeb edition (Gummere 1968–1971; here, and throughout the paper).

2 See, e.g., Goldschmidt (2006); Levi (1951: pp. 209–216); Oaklander (2008).

3 See, e.g., Mazzoli (1970, 1989). The following quotation is representative of Seneca's thoughts on such subjects: “The period which lies between our first day and our last is shifting and uncertain: if you reckon it by [...] its speed, it is scanty even to a greybeard. Everything is slippery, treacherous, and more shifting than any weather. All things are tossed about and shift into their opposites at the bidding of Fortune; amid such a turmoil of mortal affairs nothing but death is surely in store for anyone” (*Hoc quod inter primum diem et ultimum iacet, uarium incertumque est: si [...] aestimes [...] uelocitatem, etiam seni angustum. Nihil non lubricum et fallax et omni tempestate mobilius. Iactantur cuncta et in contrarium transeunt iubente fortuna, et in tanta uoluntate rerum humanarum nihil cuiquam nisi mors certum est, Ep.* 99.9).

4 See, e.g., Grimal (1968). Time, death, and life as a preparation for death (*meditatio mortis*) are the main pillars of Stoic ethics and they figure as the background and theoretical framework of this article. All the portraits of aging and old age that I expose below are analyzed in the light of that theoretical framework and update it. Given the considerable amount of bibliography concerning Stoicism and Seneca the philosopher, I don't feel the need to consider such matters in a more detailed manner than that provided in the two first pages of this article, in which I briefly, but thoroughly, present the more prominent precepts of the Stoic ethics tradition regarding life, death, and time.

5 Inwood (2005: p. 241). Cf. Ker (2009: pp. 74–75): “Hence [Seneca's] characteristic framing of individual prose books or choral odes as *meditatio mortis* or *cogitatio mortalitatis*, his use of the ghost prologue and mid-play katabasis as devices for shaping dramatic space and time in the tragedies, and his use of a *memento mori* in his rhetorical theory: if you wish your *sermo* and *vita* to be in harmony, he advises, simply ‘Look to death!’ (*respice ad mortem, Ep.* 114.27).”

6 Ker (2009: p. 3 n. 5).

of regret, for it is long enough for each of us to carry out our duty, namely, the pursuit of virtue (*Breu.* 1);⁷ and from 2 to 9, he demonstrates that we are also the ones who shorten our lives, wasting our time in an infinite variety of futile occupations, and live without a care (*tamquam semper uicturi uiuitis*, *Breu.* 3.4). Thus, after long years of life, we recognize that we have only truly lived a few days (*Breu.* 2.2). In addition, everyone complains of running out of time, although philosophical contemplation allows man to overcome the limits of temporality through the concrete experience of memories of the past and the prediction of the future (*Breu.* 14.1–3).

“Time” (χρόνος, *tempus*) was considered by the Stoics as an incorporeal, together with the “sayable, enunciated” (λεκτόν, *dictum*), the “void” (κενόν, *inane*) and “space” (τόπος, *locus*) (Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 10.218). Williams points out that, for Chrysippus, only the present is real, “in the sense that it ‘belongs’ (ὑπάρχει) to us in a way that the past and the future do not (they ὑφίστανται ‘subsist’),” and that Seneca, “like other later Stoics, moves away from [the notion of] time ‘viewed primarily as a problem in physics’ to time itself as ‘a moral problem.’”⁸

Williams also points out that both Epicureans and Stoics drew attention to the importance of the idea of *carpe diem*, albeit from different perspectives.⁹ Thus, the interest of *De Breuitate uitae* relates to the change of behaviours it intends to promote, “as Seneca creates an inner world of the personal, a self-regard which has its own stimuli and evaluative structure independent of one’s public persona and the performance of one’s public duties.”¹⁰

The distinction between time actually lived and time spent on non-living (*Breu.* 1–9), together with the idea that the *sapiens* overcomes the limits of time through philosophical contemplation (*Breu.* 14.1–2), leads to an existential conception of time, as a reality that refers to a subjective experience. This conception culminates in the *Epistulae Morales*, in which it is explicitly stated that the extension of time is a qualitative, not a quantitative, fact which depends on each and every one of us, on the *animus* with which we live (cf., e.g., *Ep.* 1).¹¹ On the relationship between the *De Breuitate uitae* and the *Epistulae Morales*, Edwards says:

7 Cf. Edwards (2014: p. 330): “Seneca insists repeatedly that the length of one’s life is not significant (*epist.* 77.20).” See also Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 197): “It is a topos for both Stoics and Epicureans that *eudaimonia* cannot be quantified in terms of time [... However], an awareness of the flow of time is never absent in Seneca.”

8 Williams (2003: p. 21), quoting Rist (1972: p. 287).

9 Williams (2003: p. 21, n. 9): “But whereas for the Epicurean this liberation from the cares of the past and from the anxiety about the future amounts to ‘a relaxation, a pure joy of existing’, the Stoic insists on ‘the effort needed to pay attention to oneself, the joyous acceptance of the present moment imposed on us by fate’. In other words the Epicurean ‘enjoys the present moment, whereas the Stoic wills it intensely; for the one, it is a pleasure, for the other, a duty’. By concentrating on the present the Stoic lives in a state of vigilance and presence of mind, a self-consciousness which frees us from the passions and composes life by always acting in accordance with reason” (Williams quotes Hadot 1995: pp. 69, 230). On the differences between Horace and Seneca regarding time, see, e.g., Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 187, n. 7).

10 Williams (2003: pp. 24–25, n. 9).

11 Cf. Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 185 n. 7): “It is no coincidence that the first letter to Lucilius begins with the topic of time being stolen and lost. Everything, Seneca argues, is in someone else’s possession – only time is in one’s own control; making correct use of one’s time means to possess oneself (Sen. *Ep.* 1)”; and at 203:

The preoccupations of *De brevitare uitae* surface repeatedly in the *Epistulae morales*, the collection of letters written in the early 60s AD, which turned out to be Seneca's final work, composed in the ominous shadow of Nero's displeasure – written, it might seem, in borrowed time. Time, death, and the relationship between them are concerns with which Seneca opens the first of his *Epistulae morales*.¹²

In his argument throughout the *De Brevitate uitae*, Seneca uses evidence regarding the fleeting nature of time (e.g. *Breu.* 9.2 or 19.3), the contradictions of human behavior (e.g. *Breu.* 9.1), the yearning for the attainment of wisdom which should guide man, even if only at the end of one's life (*Breu.* 18). For instance, life should be spent learning to live, or rather, learning to die (*Breu.* 20.5). Only the *sapiens*, the man who is sure to have made good use of time (however short it may have been), can approach death *certo gradu* (*Breu.* 11.2).

However, Seneca was not a *sapiens*, not even in his old age and with the profoundest wisdom achieved as a result of his rich life experience, as he himself admits in the *Epistles* written in his last few years (cf., e.g., *Ep.* 87.4). Notwithstanding, Seneca, as seen in the *Epistulae*, may be the version of himself which comes closest to that ideal, representing something as rare as a phoenix, for rare among men, too, was his attitude that one must fully experience old age, gathering its benefits, and his calm acceptance of death as the natural end to old age.

In addition, due to his lifelong commitment to following philosophy and practicing self-improvement, striving to overcome the trials set by Destiny to test him, Seneca wisely voiced his opinion on several subjects, many of them occurring to him as a result of his daily experiences. These were, in general, related to the meaning of human existence, the meaning of life and also death.

According to Seneca, neither time nor death should be faced as enemies, feared adversaries in a battlefield which man was doomed always to leave defeated.¹³ And although he followed this ideal throughout his entire life – as his philosophical works show –, it was during his last years that Seneca applied himself with special effort to relieve old age and death of their negative connotations, thus also alleviating the burden of human existence and daily life. The pretext was the letters he wrote, which would, in time, have a real recipient – his friend Lucilius.

Being born, living, aging, dying. Here is the circle of life, dominated by time, time which leaves its marks upon the body, which changes and – after a certain point – gradu-

“Despite its fleetingness, Seneca views time as a possession. Characterising it as *res fugax ac lubrica* is only intended as a relative and not an absolute qualification: it emphasises the difficulty in adopting the right relationship towards time.” See also Armisen-Marchetti (1995).

12 Edwards (2014: p. 324, n. 7). See also Delpeyroux (2002).

13 Cf. Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 206, n. 7): “Seneca, when dealing with the topic of time, takes pains to convey a sense of constant danger and threat, [...] using] metaphors of fighting, war, and death. Seneca's injunction not to fragment time or to let life elapse without using it is illustrated through the image of someone quickening speed with an enemy at his back or the cavalry on his heels. The basic situation is emphatically depicted: one is constantly hard-pressed – hence one has to escape in a swift run (*Ep.* 32.3).”

ally and irreversibly deteriorate, as life flows like a river.¹⁴ When men cross the threshold of what we define as old age, those marks become ever more evident, such that old age is considered “an incurable disease” (*insanabilis morbus*, *Ep.* 108.28). And although in some people, such as Seneca (e.g. *Ep.* 26.2) or his schoolmate Claranus (*Ep.* 66.1), the spirit may remain sound with all the strength and vitality of youth, one’s real age is exposed and proven by the clear and unequivocal signs of the deleterious passing of time over the body, the “petty body” (*corpusculo*, *Ep.* 58.29).¹⁵

Let us begin with Seneca himself as an example. Having experienced the same life phases as all men – birth, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood – he now finds himself old,¹⁶ or better yet, he is beyond old age, and he counts himself among “those who are nearing the end” (*extrema tangentis*, *Ep.* 26.1) for he is not merely tired, as is expected of the elderly, but “worn-out” (*inter decrepitos*, *Ep.* 26.1). He is ready to depart (*Ep.* 61.2).

Yet, despite his body’s transformation, the elderly Seneca is the same man who once cried as a baby, played as an infant, experienced his first major bodily changes as an adolescent (cf. *Ep.* 121.16). It was but a moment ago that he sat in the school of master Sotion, began his career as a lawyer, was forced to set this career aside, such is the infinite swiftness of time (*Ep.* 49.2). Seneca, quoting Vergil, compares that swiftness with a voyage at sea, where “Lands and towns are left astern” (*Terraeque urbesque recedunt*, *A.* 3.72; cf. Seneca, *Ep.* 70.2).

In revisiting Pompeii, Seneca remembers his adolescence, all his accomplishments, which seem to have taken place just the previous day – a mere illusion, as he is now nearing the end of life, the end most men fear, death, which Seneca compares to a harbor, “the harbour where we must some day put in, which we may never refuse to enter” (*portus est, aliquando petendus, numquam recusandus*, *Ep.* 70.3).

14 Cf., e.g., Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 193, n. 7): “The image of the river is one of the most common tropes for the course of life”; and at 202: “One of the most remarkable features of the reflection on time in [Seneca’s] letters to Lucilius is the lack of any other dimension of time apart from its flow. The situation of ‘being in time’ is the specific and unavoidable *condicio humana*, which is why it is not judged negatively per se.” Cf., also, Seneca’s *Ep.* 58.22–23: “None of us is the same man in old age that he was in youth; nor the same on the morrow as on the day preceding. Our bodies are hurried along like flowing waters; every visible object accompanies time in its flight; of the things which we see, nothing is fixed. Even I myself as I comment on this change, am changed myself. This is just what Heraclitus says: ‘We go down twice into the same river, and yet into a different river’” (*Nemo nostrum idem est in senectute, qui fuit iuuenis; nemo nostrum est idem mane, qui fuit pridie. Corpora nostra rapiuntur fluminum more. Quicquid uides, currit cum tempore. Nihil ex iis, quae uidemus, manet. Ego ipse, dum loquor mutari ista, mutatus sum. Hoc est, quod ait Heraclitus: ‘In idem flumen bis descendimus et non descendimus’*).

15 Cf. *Ep.* 26.2: “My mind is strong and rejoices that it has but slight connexion with the body. It has laid aside the greater part of its load” (*Viget animus et gaudet non multum sibi esse cum corpore. Magnam partem oneris sui posuit*).

16 Cf. *Ep.* 49.3: “But this point of time, infinitesimal as it is, nature has mocked by making it seem outwardly of longer duration; she has taken one portion thereof and made it infancy, another childhood, another youth, another the gradual slope, so to speak, from youth to old age, and old age itself is still another. How many steps for how short a climb!” (*Sed et hoc minimum specie quadam longioris spatii natura derisit; aliud ex hoc infantiam fecit, aliud pueritiam, aliud adulescentiam, aliud inclinationem quandam ab adulescentia ad senectutem, aliud ipsam senectutem. In quam angusto quodam quot gradus posuit!*).

Seneca agrees that the first few years of life are the best, justifying his point of view with a quotation of Vergil's *Georgics*: "Each choicest day of hapless human life / flies first" (*Optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi / prima fugit*, 3.66–68; Seneca, *Ep.* 108.26). It is in our younger years that we are more predisposed to acquire and assimilate knowledge, the spirit is most easily formed, and the body, free from the toll of disease, exercises more vigorously (cf. *Ep.* 108.27–28). Yet "quick-flying time" is relentless (*temporis perniciosissimi celeritatem*, *Ep.* 108.27), spinning out life with intensity, we are "whirled along" (cf. *immo uoluntur*, *Ep.* 71.1). When we least expect it and still imagine ourselves in our youth, "old age weighs upon us and [...] hangs over our heads" (*senectus premit et [...] supra caput est*, *Ep.* 108.28).

In many circumstances, is it the external evidence which surrounds us that reminds men of their old age, when we stubbornly try to cloak or ignore the signs imprinted on our bodies. The same happens to Seneca, upon a visit to one of his properties, when he must face a house in ruins, which could be the result of the steward's negligence, but is mostly due simply to the fact that the house is old (*Ep.* 12). As old as Seneca, in fact, as the house was built in the year of his birth. How could the house be anything but old, "if stones of my own age are already crumbling?" (*si tam putria sunt aetatis meae saxa*, *Ep.* 12.1), asks Seneca.

The trees on the property also mirror Seneca's age. The plane trees no longer have any leaves, the branches are gnarled and shriveled, the trunks are wan and dirty, the trees themselves seem to have been left unattended by the steward. But how could they be lush and healthy if they had been planted by Seneca, presumably as a young man? Just like him, "those trees were old" (*illas uetulas esse*, *Ep.* 12.2).

Lastly, a third element of this visit forces Seneca to confront the reality of his old age: Felicio, the steward's son and one of Seneca's favorite childhood companions, whom he used to bring little images during the *Saturnalia*, is different, unrecognizable: "His teeth are just dropping out" (*dentes illi cum maxime cadunt*, *Ep.* 12.3). Seneca is going through the same metamorphosis. He is Felicio's companion in his last years, as he had been in his first.¹⁷ In visiting his property, Seneca becomes indebted to it: his country place becomes a mirror of the philosopher's old age.¹⁸

Throughout the *Epistulae*, Seneca describes some of the symptoms of the old age eroding his body and assisting his creation of portraits of aging and old age. The memory dulls, becoming "slack and nerveless" (*segnis ac lenta*, *Ep.* 74.1). His limbs can no longer tolerate extensive exercise, becoming tired after little movement (*Ep.* 83.3–4), which in Seneca's view is one of the glories of old age, allowing time to be used for nobler purposes and steered towards spiritual pursuits. His teeth start falling out, as happened to

17 Cf. Ker (2009: pp. 333–334, n. 5): "Within this frame, Seneca proceeds through a series of three specific *argumenta* ('signs,' or perhaps 'dramas') embedded in what Michele Ronnick has called 'a landscape of himself, past, present, and future': the decrepit condition of the villa (§1), of the plane trees (§2), and of the ageing home-born slave Felicio, whom Seneca at first does not even recognize (§3). The sequence of signs is an implicit *scala naturae*, proceeding from stone to tree to human being." Ker quotes from Ronnick (1999: p. 222); cf. Devallet (2003: pp. 511–517).

18 Cf., e.g., Vogt-Spira (2017: p. 191, n. 7): "Decaying buildings and decaying bodies – the villa gives expression to the course of time."

Felicio before him and also to his slave Pharius, one of his “pacemakers” (*progymnastas*), who, despite being younger than Seneca, is now suffering the same fate (*Ep.* 83.4). The body become less nimble and free with each passing day, to the point where Seneca feels that his age “is not coming down; it is falling outright” (*iam enim aetas nostra non descendit, sed cadit, Ep.* 83.4).

The body, deprived of past resistance, can no longer tolerate cold baths. Seneca, in his own words “the former cold-water enthusiast” (*ille tantus psychrolutes, Ep.* 83.5) who used to mark the beginning of a new year by plunging into the Virgo aqueduct, is forced by age to change and take his baths in the Tiber, and now, in his golden years, can only tolerate bathing in a sun-warmed tub; soon, he feels, he will be reduced to hot baths (*Ep.* 83.5). The meals taken in his old age are frugal and quickly finished, “without a table; no need to wash the hands after such a meal” (*sine mensa prandium, post quod non sunt lauandae manus, Ep.* 83.6). He scarcely gets any sleep and every moment stolen from rest is devoted to the reflection that occupies most of his days and nights (*Ep.* 83.6).

We can read in some of Maecenas’ verses, quoted by Seneca in *Ep.* 101.11, a summary of the effects that old age has upon the human body:

Fashion me with a palsied hand,
Weak of foot, and a cripple;
Build upon me a crook-backed hump;
Shake my teeth till they rattle;
All is well, if my life remains...¹⁹

Seneca quotes these lines as part of his critique of men who do not know how to age, have not learned how to live and, as such, don’t know how to die.²⁰ Such men see death as such a tremendous tragedy that they would rather have a long life filled with physical – and often also moral – indignities and imagine death as far away, than a shorter but dignified life. As Seneca claims also in *Epistula* 101, it is not the length but the quality of life that matters, “and often this living nobly means that you cannot live long” (*saepe autem in hoc est bene, ne diu, Ep.* 101.15).²¹ In another passage, *Ep.* 122.7, Seneca criticizes men who act *contra naturam*, seeking to perpetuate a youthful appearance.

Regardless, that old age erodes it does not mean we should neglect the body entirely. One should care for one’s body, as well as one’s old age, if one knows that such action is “pleasing, useful, or desirable in the eyes of a person whom one holds dear” (*alicui*

19 Maecenas, fr. 1 Lunderstedt: *Debilem facito manu, debilem pede coxo, / Tuber adstrue gibberum, lubricos quate dentes; / Vita dum superest, benest.*

20 Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 61.2: “Before I became old I tried to live well; now that I am old, I shall try to die well; but dying well means dying gladly” (*Ante senectutem curavi, ut bene uiuerem, in senectute, ut bene moriar; bene autem mori est libenter mori.*)

21 Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 4.4: “No man can have a peaceful life who thinks too much about lengthening it, or believes that living through many consulships is a great blessing” (*Nulli potest secure uita contingere, qui de producenda nimis cogitat, qui inter magna bona multos consules numerat*); and *Ep.* 58.32: “Frugal living can bring one to old age; and to my mind old age is not to be refused any more than it is to be craved” (*Potest frugalitas producere senectutem, quam ut non puto concupiscendam, ita ne recusandam quidem.*)

tuorum esse dulce, utile, optabile, Ep. 104.4). This is the reason why Seneca, having grown old and being in the last phase of his life, which should allow him to carelessly disregard his health, still feels compelled by his romantic relationship with Paulina, and for her sake, to watch over his well-being as an adolescent would. Also, an illustrious old friend of Seneca and Lucilius mentioned in *Ep.* 98.15–16 is said to remain alive, despite an ulcer which causes him pain, solely for the sake of those who benefit from his presence.

In his portrayal of old age, Seneca draws attention to the fact that most men live and grow old badly, negligently and wasting time. Note, for example, what he says in *Ep.* 1.1: “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” (*maxima pars uitae elabitur male agentibus, magna nihil agentibus, tota uita aliud agentibus*). Indeed, most of our life is spent in agony, tears, disease and suffering, pain and danger; and yet, in physical terms, half of our life is spent asleep. As such, even a particularly long life thus offers scarcely more useful time (*Ep.* 99.10–11). It is important in life to do good which will abide (*Ep.* 27.3), because, with time, the beauty and strength of the body will disappear and only spiritual improvement will endure, when “upright, good, and great” (*Ep.* 31.11).

Despite the toothless mouths, the fragile and feeble limbs, the treacherous memory, the chilled body, the hunched back, the difficulty of movement, Seneca recognizes glory in old age, when life “is on the downward slope, but has not yet reached the abrupt decline” (*deuexa iam, non tamen praeceps*), when one has almost reached “the edge of the roof” (*in extrema tegula, Ep.* 12.5). Throughout the *Epistulae* we find broad brushstrokes portraits of an ideal old age, the majority portraits of Seneca’s own old age.

Old age is a source of pleasure, if we know how to value it properly, as fruits are always more appetizing once they are ripe, the last stage of childhood has the most charm and the last glass is the most pleasant for those who appreciate wine (*Ep.* 12.4).

When Seneca reaches old age, the conventional pursuits of business and profit are no longer of interest to him (*Ep.* 77.3). He is drawn more to spiritual pursuits. Calling old age a “time of bloom” (*florem suum*), Seneca claims that no other stage of life is more conducive to serious and profound reflection, mostly due to the body, which no longer allows boldness of action and renders undesirable everything one can no longer do (*Ep.* 26.3). In *Ep.* 67.2, Seneca gives thanks to old age, which keeps him in bed and prevents him from doing what his own will, sometimes faltering, should urge him not to do. Seneca’s conversations, in that stage of his life, become conversations with books, for even an old man has something to learn (*Ep.* 76.3). And if the body’s feebleness allows an old man to continue visiting the theater, the circus, watching gladiatorial fights, then there is no shame in that same man visiting a school, as Seneca himself does, by attending Metronax’s lectures (*Ep.* 76.1–2). One should continue to learn until the end of one’s life (*Ep.* 76.3) and, most importantly, learn how to die.

Old age is propitious to *ascesis*, benefiting from earned life experience – a “good which improves with the years” (*id bonum cura, quod uetustate fit melius, Ep.* 15.5). In late life, when they have “gained the victory over themselves by many trials and by long and oft-repeated regret for past mistakes” (*quae se multis experimentis, longa ac frequenti rerum*

paenitentia edomuit, *Ep.* 68.14), men must prove they have threaded an honest path and exhibit their own wisdom without quoting another's, "for it is disgraceful even for an old man, or one who has sighted old age, to have a note-book knowledge" (*Turpe est enim seni aut prospicienti senectutem ex commentario sapere*, *Ep.* 33.7).²²

Thus, instead of becoming a man of leisure after retiring from public life in the year 62, Seneca dedicated himself to philosophy on a daily basis. Setting aside business and gatherings of men, Seneca worked "for later generations" (*posterorum negotium ago*, *Ep.* 8.2), trying to carve the "right path" (*rectum iter*) which he claims to have found late in life (*Ep.* 8.3). And yet he cannot refrain from pointing it out to others, for Seneca, as a "spiritual advisor" (see *Ep.* 34.1), feels stronger in his old age when he realizes the progress his friend Lucilius is making on his own path to wisdom (*Ep.* 34.1).

In contrast, those who live not in leisure but laziness, for there is a great difference between the two, are not taking advantage of old age. Such is the case of Vatia, a praetorian millionaire who has retired from public life to a *uilla* (*Ep.* 55.3–5). His retirement, however, was different from Seneca's, and different from the noble motivations that should lead a *proficiens* to take this path. Vatia had retired due to the failure of his many ambitions, and his refusal to watch others succeed where he had once failed, living now "for his belly, his sleep, and his lust" (*uentri, somno, libidini*, *Ep.* 55.5).

Vatia's values were the complete opposite of what Seneca believed, he who thought old age should be the sum of a life guided towards philosophy and moral growth, as starting these studies in old age is as ridiculous and shameful as an old man in elementary school learning his first letters (*Ep.* 36.4). Moreover, restrained habits and the avoidance of excess could guarantee the attainment of old age, as it did for Plato (*Ep.* 58.30). Old age is, or should be, free from vice and desires. These should be set aside earlier in life (*Ep.* 12.5). The greater needs should already have been satisfied (*Ep.* 12.5). May the vice, the unruly pleasures, and shortcomings die before we do, proclaims Seneca in *Ep.* 27.2 and *Ep.* 61.1.²³

As for the supposed proximity between old age and death, Seneca argues that one should no more fear death in old age than in any other stage of life, for death is ahead of both the old and the young. Death can happen at any time (*Ep.* 12.6), as we die daily, and each passing day we are deprived of a part of our life (*Ep.* 24.20). Yet both young and old fear death, a fear which becomes more childish the older we are (*Ep.* 22.15). In many cases, however, old age is particularly severe and unforgiving, turning the life of men into a mere shadow of what it used to be. Long life leaves many with diminished capacities and almost as useless as "a house that is crumbling and tottering" (*ex aedificio putri ac ruenti*, *Ep.* 58.35). Some men, overly connected to life, will still try to absorb the

22 Cf. *Ep.* 68.14: "This is indeed the time to have acquired this good; he who has attained wisdom in his old age, has attained it by his years" (*Hoc est huius boni tempus; quisquis senex ad sapientiam peruenit, annis peruenit*).

23 Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 32.3: "Remembering continually what a noble thing it is to round out your life before death comes, and then await in peace the remaining portion of your time, claiming nothing for yourself, since you are in possession of the happy life; for such a life is not made happier for being longer" (*Considera, quam pulchra res sit consummare uitam ante mortem, deinde expectare securum reliquam temporis sui partem, nihil sibi, in possessione beatae uitae positum, quae beatior non fit, si longior*).

pleasures of life, sluggishly waiting for death in a cowardly manner (*Ep.* 58.32), just as he who drains the wine jar dry and sucks up even the dregs (*Ep.* 58.32).

According to Seneca, if old age compromises the mind and its faculties, if it affects the intelligence to the point of indignity, if it sucks life out of men, leaving them only existence, then suicide can be seriously considered (e.g. *Ep.* 58.35), as defended by Stoicism.²⁴ On this point, the portrait offered by Seneca in *Ep.* 30 of the Epicurean Aufidius Bassus in his old age is quite significant. Not a healthy man in his younger years, Bassus is especially overwhelmed in his old age, which is unforgiving of his fragile body. Bassus has long resisted his lack of physical well-being and robustness. As an elderly man, however, he capitulates. Many are his years, and death approaches swiftly.

To describe Bassus' body, Seneca (re)uses extremely expressive images, illustrating his fondness of figures of speech (such as comparison, metaphor and simile) to enhance the Stoic parenesis (*Ep.* 30.2). Bassus' body is compared to a ship that springs a leak and will eventually crumble completely, though a fissure or two can be fixed; and also to a ruined building where every crack begins to spread, and whilst one is being repaired, others get worse.²⁵

The possibility of abandoning life was more appealing to Bassus as he did not fear death at all (e.g. *Ep.* 30.10 and 30.14). He took from philosophy the serenity to face old age and his body's degradation, as well as the courage to face the prospect that the day he would leave life was fast approaching (*Ep.* 30.3): "he contemplates his own end with the courage and countenance which you would regard as undue indifference in a man who so contemplated another's" (*et eo animo uultuque finem suum spectat, quo alienum spectare nimis securi putares*).²⁶ Still, Bassus prefers to wait for the "natural" end to find his release from suffering and decrepitude, which is a justifiable decision by Stoic standards, as Bassus was still in possession of all his mind's faculties (*Ep.* 30.3 and 30.13).²⁷

A different case is presented by Tullius Marcellinus, "a quiet soul [who] became old prematurely" (*adulescens quietus et cito senex, Ep.* 77.5), who suffered from a disease that was curable, but had for a long time kept him prostrate and required continuous care. Having reflected upon the possibility of ending his life, a "Stoic friend" (*amicus noster*

24 Cf., e.g., Griffin (1992: p. 377): "Much casuistry was employed in deciding how severe the circumstances had to be and what counted as compensating advantages [for committing suicide]." Edwards (2014: p. 338, n. 7) writes: "Seneca is by no means an enthusiastic advocate of suicide under all circumstances." Much has been written about the ancient philosophers', and Seneca's, thoughts on suicide – cf., e.g., Edwards (2014: p. 338, n. 7); Griffin (1986a, 1986b, 1992); Gris  (1982); Hill (2004); Hooff (1990); and Rist (1989).

25 Cf. Ker (2009: p. 121, n. 5): "Bassus with the simile of 'a crumbling building' (*tamquam in putri aedificio*, §2), echoing the 'crumbling stones' (*putria saxa*) of Seneca's own villa mentioned in an earlier letter (*Ep.* 12.1) and thus identifying Bassus' old age with the *senectus* of Seneca himself."

26 Cf. Ker (2009: p. 122, n. 5): "While Bassus has been looking on his own death as calmly as if it were someone else's, Seneca has in turn been looking on Bassus' measured death as if it were a rehearsal of his own patiently awaited end."

27 Cf. Edwards (2014: p. 331, n. 7): "Examples of courageous ends have a key role to play [...] Seneca explores in detail instances of individuals who encounter death from disease with great bravery. His friend Bassus, for example, overwhelmed by the infirmities of old age, is praised at length for seeing death coming and welcoming it."

Stoicus, *Ep.* 77.6) assisted him with great dignity, admonishing him to see that life, in itself, was not the most important thing: “all your slaves live, and so do all animals” (*omnes serui tui uiuunt, omnia animalia*, *Ep.* 77.6); the most important thing is to learn how to die “honorably, sensibly, bravely” (*honeste, prudenter, fortiter*, *Ep.* 77.6).²⁸ The same friend cautioned Marcellinus that one need not feel particularly brave or miserable to want death, as boredom could also lead to the desire to die.²⁹ Thus counseled, Marcellinus decided to commit suicide without violence or bloodshed: after a few days fasting, he fainted in the steam of the hot water he asked to be poured over his body. Seneca does not consider Marcellinus’ death difficult or wretched (*non difficilem nec miserum*, *Ep.* 77.10), on the contrary it was “gentle” (cf. *mollissime*, *Ep.* 77.10): “[Marcellinus] glided out of life” (*uita elapsus est*, *Ep.* 77.10).

Cases like Bassus and Marcellinus raise two questions: Is it worth being old? How long is it worth living? Seneca has strong opinions in this regard. In *Ep.* 93.7, for example, he reminds us that age is an external factor and if it is out of our hands to determine how many years we live, deciding how to live is entirely up to us. That said, Seneca states that the ideal length of life is that which allows us to reach wisdom (*Ep.* 93.8); as long as life is not immoral, it will always be complete; it is irrelevant whether life finishes early or later (e.g. *Ep.* 77.4); and a meaningless existence, shrouded in shadows, is worthless (*Ep.* 93.7). Reaching old age by means of undignified, immoral, and cowardly attitudes is also reproachful, as Seneca reminds us in *Ep.* 77.15, in reference to the story of a young Spartan, who chooses death by suicide to the fate of slavery. In conclusion, for Seneca, in life as in theater, “it matters not how long the action is spun out, but how good the acting is” (*Quomodo fabula, sic uita non quam diu, sed quam bene acta sit*, *Ep.* 77.20).³⁰

For Seneca, a man who has lived eighty years in idleness, never striving to be a good citizen, a good friend, a good son, has not lived, “he has merely tarried awhile in life. Nor has he died late in life; he has simply been a long time dying” (*in uita moratus est, nec sero mortuus est, sed diu*, *Ep.* 93.3). Such a man “has existed eighty years, unless perchance you mean by ‘he has lived’ what we mean when we say that a tree ‘lives’” (*Immo octoginta annis fuit, nisi forte sic uixisse eum dicis, quomodo dicuntur arbores uiuere*, *Ep.* 93.4). A book can be useful and appreciated, despite having few lines, whereas the long life of some people resembles the worthless *Annals* of Tanusius (*Ep.* 93.12; cf. *Ep.* 99.31).³¹

28 Cf. Ker (2009: p. 118, n. 5): “Even if we are not tempted to identify this friend with Seneca himself, the friend clearly emerges as a dramaturge who helps Marcellinus to act out the successful death scene.”

29 Cf. Griffin (1992: pp. 384–385, n. 25): “Of the suicide of Tullius Marcellinus where *fastidium uitae* plays a part (though elsewhere abused as a motive), Seneca says *saepe enim talia exempla necessitas exigit. Saepe debemus mori nec volumus, morimur nec volumus* (*Ep.* 77.16–17). That is, the example strengthens us in the face of death in any form.”

30 Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 85.23: “A lives for many years and B for fewer; no matter, if only A’s many years have brought as much happiness as B’s few years. He whom you maintain to be ‘less happy’ is not happy; the word admits of no diminution” (*Hic pluribus annis uixit, hic paucioribus; nihil interest, si tam illum multi anni beatum fecerunt quam hunc pauci. Ille, quem tu minus beatum uocas, non est beatus; non potest nomen inminui*).

31 Which Seneca might have described as *cacata carta*, “papyrus defiled with excrement” (cf. the *annales Vohusi, cacata carta* of Catullus, 36.1).

In conclusion, we can see that for Seneca, as a Stoic, age was irrelevant and there was little or no value in a long life spent in idleness and entangled in vice, whereas a short life can be great if morally dignified and irreproachable. Through his portraits of aging and old age, not just of Seneca himself, but also of those closest to him, of all things surrounding him and the places he visits, we see how relentless are the effects of the passing of time upon those whom Fortune grants a long life.

Time carves more or less obvious marks in those of long life, more or less painful depending on the extent of the body's degradation. If this degradation becomes so undignified and belittling that it undermines the value of human life, there is always an open door, a dignified exit: voluntary death.

Yet so long as old age still allows men the full use of their intellectual abilities and the perfect experience of philosophy, there is no reason not to wait for the end that nature will bring upon the body, and one should enjoy the many glories that Seneca recognizes in the final stage, which can only be fully enjoyed in the autumn of life. And when death does at last arrive, let us embrace it with the serenity of those who, having had philosophy as companion, are still, in their old age, vigorous and light-hearted, although toothless mouths may want to tell a different tale...

Bibliography

- Armisen-Marchetti, M. (1995). Sénèque et l'appropriation du temps. *Latomus*, 54, 545–567.
- Delpyroux, M.-F. (2002). Temps, philosophie et amitié dans les *Lettres à Lucilius*. *Epistulae antiquae*, 2, 203–221.
- Devallet, G. (2003). Sénèque et la vieillesse: *realia et animalia* devant la fuite du temps (*Lettres à Lucilius*, I 12). In B. Bakhouch (Ed.), *Ancienneté chez les anciens* (Vol. 2; pp. 512–517). Montpellier: Publications Montpellier 3.
- Edwards, C. (2014). Ethics V: Death and time. In G. Damschen, & A. Heil (Eds.), *Brill's Companion to Seneca* (pp. 323–342). Brill: Leiden and Boston.
- Goldschmidt, V. (2006). *Le système stoïcien et l'idée de temps*. Paris: Vrin.
- Griffin, M. (1986a). Philosophy, Cato, and Roman suicide: I. *Greece & Rome*, 33, 64–77.
- Griffin, M. (1986b). Philosophy, Cato, and Roman suicide: II. *Greece & Rome*, 33, 192–202.
- Griffin, M. (1992). *Seneca: A Philosopher in Politics* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Grimal, P. (1968). Place et rôle du temps dans la philosophie de Sénèque. *Revue des études anciennes*, 70, 92–109.
- Grisé, Y. (1982). *Le suicide dans la Rome antique*. Paris: Les Belles Lettres.
- Gummere, R. M. (Transl.). (1968–1971). *Seneca ad Lucilium: Epistulae Morales* (10 vols.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a Way of life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Hill, T. (2004). *Ambitiosa Mors: Suicide and the Self in Roman Thought and Literature*. New York: Routledge.
- Hooff, A. (1990). *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Routledge.

- Inwood, B. (2005). *Reading Seneca: Stoic Philosophy at Rome*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ker, J. (2009). *The Deaths of Seneca*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levi, A. (1951). Il concetto del tempo nelle filosofie dell'età ellenistica. *Rivista critica di storia della filosofia*, 6, 209–216.
- Mazzoli, G. (1970). *Seneca e la poesia*. Milan: Ceschina.
- Mazzoli, G. (1989). Le Epistulae morales di Seneca. Valore letterario e filosofico. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.36(3), 1823–1877.
- Oaklander, L. (Ed.). (2008). *The Philosophy of Time: Critical Concepts in Philosophy* (4 vols.). London: Routledge.
- Rist, J. (1972). *Epicurus: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rist, J. (1989). Seneca and Stoic orthodoxy. *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II.36(3), 1993–2012.
- Ronnick, M. (1999). Concerning the plane trees in Seneca's twelfth epistle. In S. N. Byrne, & E. P. Cueva (Eds.), *In Veritatis Amicitiaeque Causa: Essays in Honor of Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark* (pp. 219–229). Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci.
- Vogt-Spira, G. (2017). Time in Horace and Seneca. In M. Stöckinger, K. Winter, & A. Zanker (Eds.), *Horace and Seneca: Interactions, Intertexts, Interpretations* (pp. 185–209). Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Williams, G. (2003). *Seneca: De Otio, De Brevitate Vitae*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ricardo Duarte, PhD / ricardoduarte@letras.ulisboa.pt

Centre for Classical Studies

University of Lisbon, School of Arts and Humanities

Alameda da Universidade, 1600–214 Lisboa, Portugal



This work can be used in accordance with the Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 International license terms and conditions (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>). This does not apply to works or elements (such as image or photographs) that are used in the work under a contractual license or exception or limitation to relevant rights.

