



LETTERS FROM A STOIC

ADVISORY EDITOR: BETTY RADICE

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA, statesman, philosopher, advocate and man of letters, was born at Cordoba in Spain around 4 B.C. Despite his relatively undistinguished background and ever-recurrent ill health, he rose rapidly to prominence at Rome, pursuing the double career in the courts and political life for which he had been trained. He began also quickly to acquire celebrity as an author of tragedies and of polished essays, moral, literary and scientific. Sentenced to death by successive emperors (Caligula in A.D.

37 and Claudius in A.D. 41), he spent eight years in exile on the island of Corsica, allegedly for an affair with Caligula's sister. Recalled in A.D. 49, he was made praetor, and was appointed tutor to the boy who was to become, in A.D. 54, the emperor Nero. On Nero's succession Seneca acted for some eight years as an unofficial chief minister. The early part of this reign was remembered as a period of sound imperial government, for which, according to our sources, the main credit must be given to Seneca.

His control over an increasingly cruel emperor declined as enemies turned Nero against him with representations that his popularity made him a danger, or with accusations of immorality or excessive wealth ill assorting with the noble Stoic principles he professed. Retiring from public life he devoted his last three years to philosophy and writing, particularly the *Letters from a Stoic*. In A.D. 65, following the discovery of a plot against the emperor, which might have resulted in Seneca's elevation to the throne, he and many others were compelled by Nero to commit suicide. His fame as an essayist and dramatist lasted until two or three centuries ago when, unaccountably, he passed into literary oblivion.

ROBIN CAMPBELL lives in Islington, London. An exiled Scot, now a barrister, he decided that Seneca was overdue for discovery while at Wadham College, Oxford, where he was an Open Classical Scholar and gained a First in Honour Mods. He served in Kenya and Uganda with African troops as a subaltern in a Highland Regiment, and after a year at Cambridge learning another African language (Chinyanja), he returned to Africa for three years as a District Officer. This was followed after Zambia's independence by a year as a Magistrate, trying witch-doctors, hearing appeals from tribal courts over a vast area and revising this

translation at intervals of leisure in the bush. His practice at the bar in Gray's Inn tends to be concerned with action by local authorities. He holds strong views on the importance and difficulties of good translation.

SENECA

LETTERS FROM A STOIC

Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium

SELECTED AND

TRANSLATED WITH AN

INTRODUCTION

BY ROBIN CAMPBELL

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Putnam Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014,
USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria
3124, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
M4V 3B2

Penguin Books India (P) Ltd, 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New
Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, Cnr Rosedale and Airborne Roads, Albany,
Auckland, New Zealand

Penguin Books (South Africa)(Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank
2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL,
England

www.penguin.com

First published 1969

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INTRODUCTION

SENECA'S LIFE

LUCIUS ANNAEUS SENECA was born at Cordoba, then the leading town in Roman Spain, at about the same time as Christ. [1](#) His father, Marcus

[Annaeus Seneca, was an imperial procurator² who became an authority on rhetoric, the art of public speaking and debate.³ He was the father not only of our Seneca, who speaks of his 'old-fashioned strictness',⁴ but also of](#)

Novatus, later known as Gallio, the governor of Achaia who declined to exercise jurisdiction over St Paul (Acts XVIII, 11–17), and of Mela, less ambitious than his brothers but an able financier (and father of the brilliant young poet Lucan).

Seneca suffered severely from ill health, particularly asthma, throughout his life; he tells us that at one time the only thing which held him back from committing suicide was the thought of his father's inability to bear the

[loss.⁵ He spent a period of his early life in Egypt \(where the husband of a](#)

devoted aunt named Marcia was the viceroy of the emperor Tiberius from A.D. 16 to 31), there acquiring experience in matters of administration and finance. He also studied the geography and ethnology of Egypt and India⁶

and developed a lasting interest in natural science, speculative rather than empirical (although Pliny speaks of him as an authority on geology, marine life and meteorology, and others have admired his remarks on, for example, evolution or the explanation of rings round the sun). His interest was drawn at an early age to Pythagorean mysticism and various cults of eastern origin then gaining adherents in Rome, before his final acceptance, in large part, of the Stoic philosophy.

After training for the bar he took successfully to public life, becoming quaestor in spite of the handicaps of his health, his foreign background and

comparative lack of family or other connexions. When Caligula succeeded Tiberius in A.D. 37, Seneca had become a leading speaker in the Senate, and so aroused the jealousy⁷ [of the new emperor that according to Dio](#)

Cassius he ordered his execution and was only induced to let him off by a woman close to the imperial throne who said that Seneca was 'suffering from advanced tuberculosis and it would not be long before he died'. ⁸ [This](#)

incident apparently resulted in his temporary retirement from political affairs.

In A.D. 41, in the first year of the reign of Caligula's successor, Claudius, Seneca again came under sentence of death – commuted to banishment –

for reasons which we do not know. The pretext was adultery with Julia Livilla, the late emperor's [sister; the more likely explanation⁹ is that the](#)

new ruler's consort, the notorious Messalina, considered him dangerous.

His exile on the island of Corsica does not seem to have been endured as stoically as it might have been. The encouraging spirit of an essay of consolation sent to his dearly loved mother Helvia is entirely absent in another addressed to Polybius, an ex-slave who had become a trusted

servant of the emperor, which contains some abject flattery and was probably never meant to be published. He had by now suffered the loss not only of his father but of a son, and his first wife died while he was away.

The only solace for him in these eight long years of loneliness and near despair was the reception given to the poems, tragedies and essays to friends which he continued composing during his banishment.

His fortunes turned dramatically in A.D. 49. Messalina had been executed and the emperor's new wife, Agrippina, had Seneca recalled to Rome, appointed to the high office of praetor and made tutor to her twelve-year-old son Lucius Domitius Ahenobarbus (the boy who was shortly to become the emperor Nero). Agrippina's motives, according to Tacitus, apart from

the instruction of her son, were a confidence that because of his 'literary fame' the move would gain them popularity, and a belief that he would prove a reliable ally and a useful adviser to herself and Nero in their plans for future power. [10](#)

There is no evidence that Seneca was connected with the poisoning of Claudius in A.D. 54. But he wrote the speeches which the seventeen-year-old Nero delivered after his accession, and was probably the author of a witty, if to us a little tasteless, attack on the death ruler's memory (the *Apocolocyntosis* or 'Pumpkinification', an imaginary tale of the rebuffs received by the recently deceased emperor when he presents himself at the portals of Heaven and his application for admission is debated by the Gods). Nero did make a formal speech in honour of his predecessor, which was said to display 'a great deal of polish' and to be a good example of Seneca's 'attractive style, well tuned to the ears of his time'. [11](#)

The new regime opened well and 'Nero's first five years' were later spoken of as a period of unequalled good government, the emperor Trajan even calling them the finest period in the history of imperial Rome. [12 For this](#)

Rome was indebted to Seneca and an army officer named Burrus. These two, 'the most influential as well as the most enlightened of the men who surrounded Nero' (Dio), [13 'whose wide experience was common](#)

knowledge' (Tacitus), [14](#) prevented the hot-headed young man from carrying out a lot of murders on his accession and aimed at channelling some of his energies into 'permissible pleasures'.[15](#) Only briefly alarmed

by the poisoning of Britannicus and acting throughout in complete harmony they succeeded in keeping public business out of Agrippina's hands and in their own. Tacitus ascribes the secret of the influence of Seneca to 'his tuition of Nero in public speaking, and his engaging manners and high

principles', that of Burrus to 'his military responsibilities and austerity of character'. [16](#)

The two of them 'took over total power, and exercised it, to the utmost of their ability, in the best and justest way conceivable, thus each alike arousing all men' s approval' (Dio).[17](#) While Nero amused himself they set

about the problems of government; we notice – to give instances of their activity – legal and financial reforms including the reduction of indirect taxation and steps to prevent speculation and extortion by provincial governors, and the prosecution of a successful war in Armenia to settle the empire's eastern frontier. Seneca's geographical interests appear in the dispatch of an expedition 'to investigate the source of the Nile'. Yet another of his interests was shorthand, the Roman system of which he is said to have completely revised.

Neither he nor Burrus appears to have held any standing legal or constitutional office that could be said to give them the authority they wielded during these years. Seneca, 'the real master of the world', [18](#) seems

simply to have been the moving force behind the throne. It is probably safe to say that Nero (unlike Aristotle's celebrated pupil at a similar age, Alexander the Great) was still under the influence of a teacher of undoubted personal charm, and was quite content to leave to him the direction of affairs in which he had little real interest. Once the young emperor began to listen to other advisers and increasingly to indulge his more violent and vindictive impulses this happy situation was doomed.

In A.D. 58 Seneca was being attacked by people like Publius Suillius

[Rufus.19](#) Accusations seem to have ranged in gravity from sleeping with the emperor's mother (obviously the man had failed to learn his lesson from his 'thoroughly deserved' banishment for 'seducing imperial princesses')

and the introduction of the emperor to paederasty, to the uselessness of his studies and the affectedness of his oratorical style. But the campaign against him generally centred on the apparent contrast – it has been a stock criticism of Seneca right down the centuries – between his philosophical teachings and his practice. Instances of this hypocrisy, according to Suillius, were the philosopher's denunciations of tyranny, which did not stop him from being tutor to a tyrant; of flattery, ill according with the attitude he had adopted, especially from exile, towards ex-slaves who headed departments in Claudius' administration; of extravagance, in spite of (allegedly) giving banquets served at five hundred identical tables of citrus wood with ivory legs; and, above all, of wealth. 'What kind of wisdom,' asked Suillius,

'what philosophical teachings, had led him to acquire three hundred million sesterces within the space of four years in royal favour? The childless and their legacies had been, if he might so put it, enticed into Seneca's net, whilst all Italy and the provinces were being sucked dry by his practice of lending money at unlimited rates of interest.'

Seneca was indeed already celebrated for his riches. Juvenal mentions 'the great Gardens of the immensely wealthy Seneca'. [20 Agrippina, says Dio,](#)

[had acquired for him 'untold wealth from all sources'.21 The agricultural](#)

writer Columella mentions the remarkable productivity of his wine growing estates, the best in Italy, [at Mentana.22 The reply,](#) if any, which Seneca gave to his attackers' criticisms of his wealth, was probably that contained in an essay *On the Happy Life* sent to his brother Gallio. What counts, he says, is one's attitude to wealth, which is the wise man's servant and the fool's master; he, like any good Stoic, could lose all he had at any moment without being a whit less happy. This is the core of a long reply to the charge, which he states with complete frankness, that 'philosophers do not practise what they preach'. His everyday life did not lend countenance to

[such attacks \(we have at least his own accounts²³](#) of his plain diet and life-long teetotalism, his hard bed, cold baths and daily runs); and on this occasion he came to no harm from his enemies.

In A.D. 59 Nero had his mother put to death, the murder being carried out in cold blood after the calamitous failure of an attempt to stage an accident at sea. There is reason to believe that Seneca and Burrus had no knowledge of or part in the planning of this crime, but as the facts became known did their best to lessen its impact on public opinion. Seneca certainly drafted the letter sent to the Senate ‘explaining’ how her death was the result of the exposure of a dangerous plot of hers against the emperor’s life. Dio would have us believe that Seneca averted a general massacre by saying to Nero,

‘However many people you slaughter you cannot kill your successor.’²⁴

[Tacitus²⁵ tells us that the death \(‘probably murder’\)](#) of Burrus in A.D. 62

‘broke Seneca’s power’. Enemies gained the ear of Nero with tales of Seneca’s popularity and growing wealth; the first was represented as being dangerous to the throne, the second as overshadowing the possessions of the emperor himself (whose abilities as an artist and a speaker were also, it was said, being disparaged by his old instructor). Nero, they said, was now grown up and it was time for him to ‘shake off his tutor’. Seneca, warned of this by friends, realized his danger and decided to ask the emperor for permission to retire from public life. The request was granted and the parting was made amicable.

For the last three years of his life, Seneca devoted himself to philosophy and writing, including the *Epistulae Morales* to Lucilius Junior, a native of Pompeii, a hard-working higher civil servant (procurator in Sicily at the time) who appears to have dabbled in literature and philosophy. Spending his time moving around southern Italy with Paulina, his second wife,

Seneca now rarely visited Rome, and even, to disarm suspicion or for greater safety, gave (says Dio) his entire fortune to the emperor. Tacitus mentions a story of an attempt on his life by poisoning, averted either because a slave gave the plot away or because the philosopher was, in fear

of just such an attack, living on ‘an extremely simple diet of fruits growing wild and running water’. [26](#)

Then in A.D. 65 came the disastrous conspiracy against the emperor by Piso and others, quite possibly including Seneca. There was a report of a sub-conspiracy to kill Piso as well and make Seneca emperor – ‘being a man who seemed to be marked out for supreme power by the good qualities

[for which he was so famous’.](#)[27 Many people lost their lives on the](#)

discovery of the plot. Seneca, like many others, was asked to commit suicide, the then prevailing method of imperial execution. Tacitus’

description of his death is not quickly forgotten. [28 His brothers and Lucan](#)

followed him, all by their own hands, in the course of Nero’s frenzied purge of enemies real and imagined.

According to some, a true Stoic, like Cato under the Republic, would have stayed on in political life to the bitter end. But after the loss of all his influence over Nero, the Spaniard could hardly have hoped to be of useful service any longer to the Roman world, and (in an age in which many lived in recurrent dread of a capricious emperor’s message demanding, obliquely or otherwise, the recipient’s suicide) the alternative to his retirement was undoubtedly death. Certain other Stoics, indeed, stood up to emperors and were rewarded for their opposition to misrule with martyrdom. Seneca chose to spend what time was left to him in philosophy, and the reader may be left to decide, in fairness not forgetting his chronic ill health, whether his

‘lack of moral courage outside the study’ in this or earlier events detracts from his achievements. Surprisingly, perhaps, the satirist of the century,

Juvenal, does not pick on the difference between this public figure’s conduct and his philosophical professions, of which a variety of later writers have made play. [29](#) ‘Sir, are you so grossly ignorant of human nature,’ asked Dr Johnson, ‘as not to know that a man may be very sincere in good principles without having good practice?’ Seneca, all the same, may

well be history's most notable example of a man who failed to live up to his principles.

This does not prevent him from being the outstanding figure of his age.

'Seneca, in those days unsurpassed both in the field of letters and in power (power which afterwards grew too great and recoiled upon his own head), was the last man to be impressed by things which did not count,' said his contemporary Pliny. [30 Money](#), power or achievements in public life or letters are – despite the interest of the little we know of his career – not the things with which Seneca would want to be connected by people coming across his name today. That he did not expect to be forgotten we know (in one letter he actually promises Lucilius immortality through having corresponded with him); but what he would have liked to be remembered for would have been the value of the ideas which, so he tells Lucilius in his eighth letter, he was committing to writing in the hope that they might be

'of use to later generations'.

SENECA AND PHILOSOPHY

Stoicism, for centuries the most influential philosophy in the Graeco-Roman world, had a long history before Seneca. Founded by Zeno (born of Phoenician descent in Cyprus c. 336/5 B.C.) who had taught or lectured in a well-known *stoa* (a colonnade or porch) – hence the name – in Athens, it had been developed and modified by a succession of thinkers whose opinions on various logical, ethical or cosmological questions showed some

fair divergencies. As a moral creed, however, it was based throughout on the following framework of belief.

The Stoics saw the world as a single great community in which all men are brothers, ruled by a supreme providence which could be spoken of, almost according to choice or context, under a variety of names or descriptions including the divine reason, creative reason, nature, the spirit or purpose of the universe, destiny, a personal god, even (by way of concession to traditional religion) 'the gods'. It is man's duty to live in conformity with the divine will, and this means, firstly, bringing his life into line with

‘nature’s laws’, and secondly, resigning himself completely and uncomplainingly to whatever fate may send him. Only by living thus, and not setting too high a value on things which can at any moment be taken away from him, can he discover that true, unshakeable peace and contentment to which ambition, luxury and above all avarice are among the greatest obstacles.

Living ‘in accordance with nature’ means not only questioning convention and training ourselves to do without all except the necessities (plain food, water, basic clothing and shelter) but developing the inborn gift of reason which marks us off as different from the animal world. We are meant to set free or perfect this rational element, this particle of the universal reason, the

‘divine spark’ in our human make-up, so that it may campaign against and conquer pain, grief, superstition and the fear of death. It will show us that

‘there’s nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so’, discipline the pleasures and the passions, and generally subordinate the body and emotions to the mind and soul.

In this way we shall arrive at the true end of man, happiness, through having attained the one and only good thing in life, the ideal or goal called

arete in Greek and in Latin *virtus* – for which the English word ‘virtue’ is so unsatisfactory a translation. This, the *summum bonum* or ‘supreme ideal’, is usually summarized in ancient philosophy as a combination of four qualities: wisdom (or moral insight), courage, self-control and justice (or upright dealing). It enables a man to be ‘self-sufficient’, immune to suffering, superior to the wounds and upsets of life (often personalized as Fortuna, the goddess of fortune). Even a slave thus armed can be called

‘free’, or indeed titled ‘a king’ since even a king cannot touch him. Another example of these ‘paradoxes’ for which the Stoics were celebrated is one directed at the vanity of worldly possessions: ‘the shortest route to wealth is

[the contempt of wealth.](#)³¹

This ethic, together with its backing in a system of physics and logic, had first been given shape in the minds of thinkers who, although Greek-speaking, were for the most part not of European descent, coming from places in Asia Minor or the Levant like Tarsus, Cyprus, and Babylon. This does not seem to have reduced the appeal it made to educated Romans when, around the middle of the second century B.C., it first came to their notice. The duties it inculcated – courage and endurance, self-control and self-reliance, upright conduct and just dealing, simple and unluxurious habits, rationality, obedience to the state – were self-evident to many Romans, corresponding quite closely to the traditional idea of *virtus*. The development of the *jus naturae* by the Roman jurists and Posidonius’

identification of the Stoic world community or *cosmopolis* with the Roman Empire made its acceptance even easier. At a later date the Stoic view of the ruler (this term including governors, magistrates and administrative [officials](#))³² as a man whose actions could be criticized, and even as a minister or servant, was to be disliked by emperors, some of whom replied by expelling ‘the philosophers’. But Stoics were usually far from hostile to

monarchy as such, however openly they declared that rank counted for nothing against the duty of all men, whatever their station, to play their part in life well.

Despite its wide acceptance in educated circles, early Stoicism had a forbidding aspect which went far to explain its failure to influence the masses. There was something unreal or fictional about the *sapiens*, the wise man or philosopher. This ideal figure seemed, from the way the Stoic lecturers talked, to have somehow become perfect in some sudden transformation long ago; gradual self-improvement was hardly discussed.

The target it set seemed too high for ordinary men. It stifled and repressed ordinary human emotions in striving after *apatheia*, immunity to feeling; Cato, the great Stoic saint, is reported to have expressed regret at having kissed his wife in a moment of danger. It held that in certain circumstances a man’s self-respect might invite, as an act of supreme nobility, his suicide.

In pursuing the ideal of *autarkeia*, self-sufficiency, it seemed to make the perfect man a person detached and aloof from his fellows, superior to the

world he lived in. Altogether the impression it conveyed, for all its idealism and sincerity, could be cold, dogmatic and unrealistic. Seneca's contribution to ancient philosophy lay in the humanization of this creed, continuing a process begun long before in Rhodes and Rome by Panaetius and Posidonius.

Although Seneca wrote for a relatively narrow circle of educated persons (usually addressing his compositions to a particular friend or relative as if he were that person's special spiritual adviser) his letters and essays show a Stoicism more closely reconciled with the facts and frailty of human nature.

The ideal of *apatheia* is much modified. Self-sufficient though he is, the *sapiens* can now have friends and can grieve, within limits, at the loss of one. It has become his duty to be kind and forgiving towards others, indeed

to 'live for the other person'. [33 In his way of living he should avoid being](#)

ostentatiously different from those he tries to win from moral ignorance. He has to battle like the rest against his failings, in a long and painful progress towards perfection in which all can do with help from above or the inspiration of others' example. Seneca himself, we observe, occasionally makes immodest statements concerning his own progress, but is capable of humility, as in one description of himself as 'a long way from being a tolerable, let alone a perfect human being'. [34](#)

In statements of man's kinship with a beneficent, even loving god and of a belief in conscience as the divinely inspired 'inner light of the spirit', his attitudes are religious beyond anything in Roman state religion, in his day little more than a withered survival of formal worship paid to a host of ancient gods and goddesses. Christian writers have not been slow to recognize the remarkably close parallels between isolated sentences in Seneca's [writings and verses of the Bible](#).³⁵ On the other hand the word

'God' or 'the gods' was used by the philosophers more as a time-honoured and convenient expression than as standing for any indispensable or even surely identifiable component of the Stoic system. And the tendency of Stoicism was always to exalt man's importance in the universe rather than to abase him before a higher authority. The hope of immortality was

occasionally held out but Seneca does not play on it. To him as to most Stoics virtue was to be looked on as its own reward and vice as its own punishment. The religious hunger of the masses of his day was to be met not by philosophy but by the cults of Isis and Mithras and Christianity.

For the ancient world, then, apart from reviving philosophy in Latin literature, he ‘spiritualized and humanized’ [36 Stoicism](#). What of Seneca and modern philosophy? The latter, at least in the universities of the English-

speaking world, has for some time been set on a course which he would certainly have condemned; he would not have understood the attention it pays to ordinary language, and some of his letters (for example letter XLVIII) make it clear that it would have come in for a share of his impatience with philosophers (not excluding Stoics) who in his eyes degraded philosophy by wasting their time on verbal puzzles or logical hairsplitting. But more than this, he would have denounced the opinion to which most philosophers, tacitly or otherwise, have come round in the last half-century, that it is no part of the business of philosophy to turn people into better persons, as tantamount to desertion or *lèse-majesté*. His tremendous faith in philosophy as a mistress was grounded on a belief that her end was the practical one of curing souls, of bringing peace and order to the feverish minds of men pursuing the wrong aims in life. ‘What we say should be of use, not just entertaining.’ [37](#) Even speculation on the nature or meaning of the universe was of secondary importance, something which the philosopher might or might not, as he chose, take up in leisure moments. A philosopher’s words should (as a Quaker might put it) ‘speak to our condition’. Fielding’s observation that few people in the position of being

‘overloaded with prosperity or adversity’ could be too wise or too foolish not to gain from reading Seneca might have gratified him not merely as an indication that his writings were proving ‘of use’ to later generations, but also as showing that a philosopher could still be regarded as someone to be turned to for advice or consolation. To Seneca, as Letter XC and other letters plainly show, the philosopher and the wise man were the same person.

Whether or not his letters may still be turned to for their pointers to the contented life, they cannot be read without noticing how far in advance of

their time are many of his ideas – on the shows in the arena, for example, or the treatment of slaves. His implicit belief in the equality and brotherhood of man despite all barriers of race or class or rank, was one, resurrected from the days of the early Stoics, which led directly to great improvements in the legal position of slaves; besides explaining the then remarkable attitude towards slaves expressed in Letter XLVII, the belief was also the germ of the notion of natural law, the law which was thought to transcend national boundaries and form a basis for the validity of international law.

These elements of Stoicism made their not so small or indirect contribution to the French and American revolutions.

SENECA AND LITERATURE

His letters and other writings

‘Seneca,’ Quintilian tells us, ‘turned his hand to practically everything which can be made the subject of study – speeches, poems, letters, dialogues all surviving.’ Much of this is lost, including all his speeches (political and forensic), a biography of his father, and essays or treatises on marriage, superstition and a variety of other subjects, mainly scientific.

The works remaining to us (apart from brief poems or epigrams whose attribution to Seneca is sometimes doubtful) are of two main kinds. There are, first, the philosophical letters and essays, including treatises with such titles as *The Happy Life*, *The Shortness of Life*, *Providence*, *Anger*, *Clemency*, *Problems in Natural Science* and literary *consolationes* to persons in bereavement. And secondly there are the tragedies, probably never staged and intended only for reading or recitation among a relatively

[small circle.38](#)

The one hundred and twenty four letters to Lucilius comprise something entirely new in literature. For in these, which were his most conspicuous

and immediate literary success, Seneca if anyone is the founder of the Essay. As Francis Bacon put it to Prince Henry in the dedication of his own

Essays: ‘The word is late, but the thing is auncient. For Senecaes Epistles to Lucilius, yf one marke them well, are but Essaies, that is, dispersed Meditations, thoughe conveyed in the forme of Epistles.’ The *Epistulae Morales* are essays in disguise. It has been said [39 that they were real letters](#)

edited for publication. It seems most likely that they were intended from the first for publication, possibly preceded by an interval of private circulation.

No replies have come down to us.

The atmosphere varies from that of lively, not to say colloquial, conversation to that of the serious treatise; it is occasionally raised to higher [levels](#),⁴⁰ but generally remains informal. The ‘teaching’ is generously eclectic; the first thirty letters each contain some quotation from or reference to writings of the main rival philosophical school, the Epicureans.

The introduction of imaginary queries or objections (often scathing in tone) from the correspondent or another interjector and the frequent and urgent exhortation of the listener to self-improvement suggest the atmosphere of the diatribe, while confidences about the writer’s own character and the not uncommon choice of consolation or friendship as a theme serve to keep up the air of the letter. Personal happenings or surroundings are regularly made the occasion of, or the preliminary to, serious reflections in the abstract.

There are also biting condemnations of ways of life around the writer, particularly among the bored and pleasure-seeking Roman aristocracy.

Room is found too for culture, in an assimilable form, in balanced

[discussions of time-honoured philosophical or ethical problems](#),⁴¹ or in the development of thoughts on, for example, poetry, or physical phenomena, or style.

*

His style

Style, with Seneca, is of considerable importance. Notwithstanding his own condemnation [42 of people who give less attention to what they have to say.](#)

than to *how* they will say it, he is a signal example of a writer to whom form mattered as much as content. In writers like him (in what has commonly been called the Silver Age of Latin literature), constant striving after terseness and originality of expression gave rise to an arresting and not easily digested style.

There were reasons for the development of this ‘pointed’ style. With the passing of the Republic and succession of a series of suspicious emperors there had been a diminution both in the range of subject-matter which was safe and in the practical value of a training in rhetoric for a career in public life. The leisured Roman (now increasingly over-leisured) turned his training to literary rather than political ends; and the means to the prime new end of stylistic brilliance were those of rhetoric. All this was encouraged by the fashion of giving public readings of one’s work, in which success almost came to be measured by the ability of each and every sentence to win applause. Carried over, too, from the schools of rhetoric was a liking for sometimes daringly poetic words, especially from Virgil, and artificial forms of expression more typical of verse than prose.

Going with the overriding aim of pithiness or epigrammatic brevity (contrasting so greatly with the style of Cicero a century before) was an indulgence in colloquialisms. Seneca’s use of popular turns of phrase and everyday expressions (a practice rare in Roman authors not writing for the comic stage or on technical subjects) and deliberate cultivation of the easy, conversational manner are somehow reconciled with elements of style, even

in the Letters, which to us seem highly wrought and polished. The exploitation of such figures as antithesis, alliteration, homeoteleuta and all manner of other plays upon words, paradox and oxymoron, apposition and asyndeton, the use of cases and prepositions in uncommon connotations, all contribute to the twin aims of brevity and sparkle.

The result may read more naturally in Latin than it ever could in English,

[but is none the less apt to leave the reader ‘dazzled and fatigued’.](#)⁴³ All the

wealth and ingenuity of epigram and illustration does not prevent us from feeling that the sentences often simply ‘repeat the same thought, clothed in constantly different guises, over and over again’, as Fronto complained in the century following. And this reluctance, as it appears, to say what one has to say and then have done with it instead of continuing the restless manufacture of yet bolder, more hard-hitting or more finished sentences or proverbs, sometimes arouses the impatience of more modern readers. There is Macaulay’s celebrated statement in a letter to a friend: ‘I cannot bear Seneca... 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.](#)’ [Quintilian](#)⁴⁴ considered that Seneca, whom by and large he respected and admired, weakened the force of his teaching by his manner of writing, and others have wondered whether his style is not unworthy of his subject.

It is interesting to hear Quintilian speaking of his struggle to win his students away from such models as Seneca (who, he said, ‘practically alone among authors was to be found on the shelves of every young man at that time’). As an academician who stood for orthodoxy and a return to the older or Ciceronian manner, he could not bring himself to give the seal of his approval to an author whose writing showed, in his opinion, ‘a degree of corruption all the more dangerous through the very attractiveness of the

faults in which it abounds’, and who had actually voiced the heresy: ‘There are no fixed rules of style.’^{[45](#)}

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His influence and appeal

While scholars and schoolmasters in the century following continued to condemn^{[46](#)} Seneca, [early Christians were taking to this kindred spirit](#)

among pagan writers, so many of whose ideas and attitudes they felt able to adopt or share. Anthologies were made of him and he was frequently quoted by such writers as Jerome, Lactantius and Augustine. Tertullian called him *saepe noster*, ‘often one of us’. The extant set of letters