Seneca's concern with time—its role, its place, its significance in man's life—is apparent throughout his philosophical works. Pierre Grimal speaks of Seneca's insistence upon «une méditation sur le temps», especially for human beings pursuing «la voie de la philosophie».

In Seneca, the theme of time has, to be sure, an ethical rather than a metaphysical significance—i.e., Seneca is not so much concerned with the scientific aspects of time as with man's appropriate use of this precious commodity. His aim is to teach his fellow-men how to utilize time properly and, by so doing, how to live well and progress toward virtue and wisdom.

He writes with intensity:

mors me sequitur, fugit vita.
Adversus hacc me doce aliquid...

2 Pedro Cerezo Galán, «Tiempo y libertad en Séneca», in Estudios sobre Séneca, Madrid, 1966, p. 195; Alberto Grilli, «L'uomo e il tempo», in Seneca: letture critiche, edited by Alfonso Traina, Milán, 1976, pp. 57-58; P. Grimal, (above, note 1), 98. Seneca does indeed ask questions about the essence and nature of time (Ep., 88, 33); these, however, are broad quaestiones which the sapiens or proficiens might investigate in order to expand his knowledge regarding deity and nature.


4 Ep., 49, 9. Hereafter, quoted passages from Senecan texts will be identified, within parentheses, in the body of this paper. Throughout, we have used the following standard texts.
(Death pursues me, life escapes me.
Teach me something that will help!...)

And elsewhere, ever realizing the dangers that surround man and mindful of the fickleness of Fortune, he asserts:

nullum [diem] non tamquem ultimum
aspexi.

(1 have regarded every day as if it were my last.)

Afflicted with ill-health throughout his life and harassed by the tyranny of mad emperors, Seneca repeatedly reflected on the passing of time, the brevity of life, the harbor of death. In fact, he became more and more acutely sensitive to such themes in his last years, 60-65 A.D. His thoughts on these topics, designed to strengthen himself and to provide solace for others, are particularly passionate and poetic, replete with the pathos of Vergil’s «sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt».

In the Dialogue devoted to the theme of life’s brevity, he touchingly exclaims:

Nemo restituet annos, nemo iterum
te tibi reddet. Ibit qua coepit ætas nec
cursum suum aut revocabit aut supprimet; nihil tumultuabitur,
nihil admovebit velocitatis suae:


5 He often refers to his own general ill health (Epp., 61.1, 65.1 and 67.2), but also mentions a number of specific illnesses: fever (Ep., 104.1, asthma (Ep., 54.1-3, 6) and catarrh (Ep., 78.1-4); it is usually believed that Seneca also suffered from tuberculosis.

6 Henry Bardon stresses the fact that the capricious villainies of the early emperors after Augustus, their hostility against the nobility and the intelligentsia, and their increased employment of delatores and spies cause acute insecurity in Seneca’s era. Such prevalent precariously even caused Seneca to initiate what Bardon terms the «litterature d’introspection», and inaugurates during this period a feeling of anguish about time and a sense of the instability of the present and of temporal affairs. Vid. Bardon’s, Les empereurs et les lettres latines d’Auguste à Hadrien (rev. ed.), Paris, 1978, esp. pp. 182-187.

7 The masses of men are surely sick, in need of a physician (De Cons. Sup., 13.1-3; De Ira, 2.10.7-8) and he himself must serve as the reformer of vice (De Ira, 2.10.7; De Vita Beata, 26.5), and he himself may be equally counted among the sick (De Vita Beata, 17.3-4; 18.1-2; Ad Helv., 5.2).

(De Brev. Vit., 8.4-5) 

(No one will restore the years, no one will return you again to yourself. Life will go where it began and will neither recall nor repress its course; no uproar will there be, no warning of its speed. Silently will it glide on... just as it was released on its first day, so will it run; nowhere will it turn aside, nowhere will it delay.)

Ad in the Ad Marciam, addressing the mother on the loss of her son, he paradoxically remarks:

(Ad Marc., 23.3-4) 

(Whatever has attained the height of perfection is approaching its end. Virtue perfected is snatched away and removed from our sight, and things which have matured early are short-lived. The brighter a fire has glowed, the more rapidly it is extinguished.)

Such disturbing statements are directly related to Seneca’s sensitivity concerning time’s rapid pace. Indeed, Seneca was tinglingly aware of time’s existential flight, and responds to it with an Angst and foreboding unusual before the late Renaissance and the nineteenth century. Hence Villy Sørensen’s assertion is surprising:

9 Cerc on the topic of life and time, Seneca’s memorable idea of its insecurity and slipperiness, Ep., 99.9.

10 Robert Herrick, in his advice «To the virgins, to make much of time» (1648), similarly stresses the paradox that the brightest light is nearest to darkness:

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun, the higher he’s a getting, the sooner will his race be run, the nearer he’s to setting.
... in the ancient world time passed
more slowly than it does now, and
to Seneca time was longer than it
is to us 11.

For the fact is, that this topic of the rapidity and rapacity of time rouses in Seneca — moreso than in almost any other ancient — strong feelings, stimulating him to create powerful passages of pathos, poetry, and paradox.

... quid enim non 'modo' est, si
recorderis? Modo apud Sotionem
philosophum puer sedi, modo causas
agere coepi, modo desii velle agere;
modo desii posse. Infinita est
velocitas temporis, quae magis apparat
respicientibus.

(For what is not 'just yesterday', if
you are reminiscing? It was just
yesterday that I sat as a boy in
the school of the philosopher Sotion,
just yesterday that I began to plead
cases, just yesterday that I lost
the desire to plead, just yesterday
that I lost the ability to plead.
Infinite is time's velocity which
appears greater still to those
looking back.)

Ad brevissimum tempus editi, cito
cessuri loco venienti inpactum hoc
prospicimus hospitium. De nostris
actatibus loquor, quas incredibili
celeritate convolvit? Computa urbium
saecula: videbis quam non diu
steterint etiam quae vetustate
gloriantur. Omnia humana brevia et
caduca sunt et infiniti temporis
nullam partem occupantia. Terram
hanc cum uribus populisque et
fluminibus et ambitu maris puncti
loco ponimus ad universa referentes:
minorem portionem actas nostra quam
puncti habet, si omni temporis
compararetur...

(Ad marc., 21.1-2)

(Born for the briefest time, soon to
yield to one's replacement, we regard
this as a stopover at an inn.

---

Am I speaking about our life, which whirls along with incredible velocity? Compute the age of cities: you will see how even those which boast their antiquity have not stood for a long time. All human affairs are short-lived and perishable, comprising no portion of infinite time. When compared with the universe, we reckon this earth with its cities, its populace, its rivers, its surrounding sea as minute; if life be compared to all of time, its portion is less than minute.)

On this subject Seneca found Vergil most moving. More than once he cites and expounds upon the immortal verses of that «greatest of bards», who, as if divinely inspired, cries out:

Optima quaeque dies miseris mortalibus aevi
prima fugit...¹²
(For wretched mortals, the best days of life flee first...)

So dominantly did this concept occupy Senecan thought that he made it the topic of the opening letter of his magnum opus, the Epistulae Morales. Composed late in his life, when he was in his sixties, out of favor with Nero, and in fact alive—from moment to moment—as if by the Emperor’s capricious and dangerous reprieve, the Letters are inescapably aware of temporal affairs. The first letter of that work presents in capsule form a theme developed earlier and at great length in the De Brevitate Vitae—the theme of life’s brevity, time’s velocity, and consequently man’s urgent need to employ wisely and carefully every moment of his life. In this first epistle, he addresses his friend Lucilius on De temporis pretio atque usu, urging him not to waste time, not to allow others to snatch from him so fleeting and slippery a commodity, not to expend uselessly the one possession that can never be replaced.

vindica te tibi... omnes horas
conplectere...

(Ep., 1.1-2)

(Make a legal claim¹³ upon yourself... clasp every hour.)

As a result of this perception of Time’s incredible rapidity, Seneca repeatedly urges the saving and the seizure of time. He agrees with the old

¹³ Seneca’s repeated use of business and legal terminology, when calling for «an accounting» of one’s life is discussed more fully below.
A. Lydia Motto y John R. Clark

precept, «Tempori parce» \(^{14}\), and urges that man «collect and save... time» \(^{15}\). Indeed, such advice is frequently infused with emphasis and urgency: live immediately («protinus vive!») \(^{16}\); grasp the moment; seize it (occupo, adprendo) \(^{17}\).

This theme Seneca stresses throughout his writings. He attacks the masses of men as chronic wasters of time, ironically dubbing them again and the occupati.

Nihil minus est hominis occupati
quam vivere: nullius rei difficilior
scientia est.

(De Brev. Vit., 7.3)

(Nothing is of less concern to the
homo occupatus than living. Nothing
is more difficult to learn.)

Such men spend the major portion of their day in superfluous, unnecessary chores, and may well be described as «out of breath for no purpose, always busy about nothing». Their life of idle folly may be compared to the aimless wandering of ants.

Sine proposito vagantur quaerentes
denotia nec quae destinaverunt agunt
sed in quae incurrerunt...

(De Tranq. An., 12.3)

(They wander without any plan looking
for activities and they do, not
what they have determined to do, but
whatever they have chanced to come
upon.)

This giddy restlessness leads them to waste precious time. They spend hours at marriages, funerals, law courts \(^{18}\); they are consumed by social engagements, avarice, lust, wrath, self-inflicted diseases \(^{19}\). Since time is an incorporeal thing, not visibly seen, a commodity on which no price is stamped, they use it lavishly as if it cost nothing \(^{20}\).

Seneca includes among these busy wastrels human beings of all classes, of all occupations. No one is spared—not even those who think they are leading a life of leisure.

\(^{14}\) Ep., 88.39.
\(^{15}\) Ep., 1.1.
\(^{18}\) De Tranq. An., 12.4.
Quacris fortasse quos occupatos
vocem? Non est quod me solos putes
dicere quos a basilica inmissi demum
canes eictunt, quos aut in sua vides
turba speciosius elidi aut in aliena
contemptius, quos officia domibus suis
evocant ut alienis foribus inlidan,
quos hasta praetoris infami lucro et
quandoque suppuraturo exercet. Quorundam
etium occupatum est...

(You ask, perhaps, whom I call the
occupati? There is no reason why you
should think that I mean only those
whom watch-dogs expel from the court-house,
those whom you see either
ostentatiously crushed in their own
mob or scornfully oppressed by somebody
else’s crowd, those whom obligations
summon from their homes to knock upon
the doors of others, or those whom the
auctioneer’s gavel busies in quest of
infamous filthy lucre. I also mean
that some men’s leisure is busy-ness...)

Thus, in his arraignment of the occupati, Seneca also includes the so-called leisure class, the relaxed, the retired, if they, like the others, waste their time in busy idleness («desidiosa occupatio») 21. He employs business imagery to shock the Romans and to awaken them to the fact that the «business» of life is Living, or, to phrase it more accurately, in the Stoic sense, Living Well.

The man whose life is devoted to true leisure, whose life is well-spent, well-arranged, well-invested 22 has ample time for great accomplishments; none of his time is wasted, or subtracted, scattered, or neglected; instead, such a leisurely life in its entirety, gains revenue, earns income 23. For Seneca insists:

...mihi crede, satius est vitae
suae rationem quam frumenti publici
nosse.

(De Brev. Vit., 18.3)

(...believe me, it is better to keep
an account of one’s own life than
tallies of the public grain.)

22 «si tota bene collocaretur (De Brev. Vit., 1.3).
23 «tota, ut ita dicam, in reeditu est» (De Brev. Vit., 11.2).
The average man, however, like a spendthrift, squanders time, thereby shortening the span of years alloted to him 24.

Adstricti sunt in continendo patrimonio, simul ad iacturam temporis ventum est, profusissimi in eo cuius unius honesta avaritia est.

(In retaining their wealth, men are stingy; but at the same time, when it comes to the loss of time, the single instance in which avarice is honorable, they are most extravagant.)

Tamquam semper victuri vivitis, numquam vobis fragilitas vestra succurrat, non observatis quantum iam temporis transierit; velut ex pleno et abundanti perditis...

(You live as if you were going to live forever; your fragility never occurs to you; do not notice how much time has already passed. You squander it as if it were drawn from a full and abundant supply...)

Furthermore, this topic, about the profligate loss of time and its bad business practice, is rendered more intimate and cogent because Seneca is moved to treat the subject personally, to explore himself. Thus he notes that in old age, men must especially store up the little time remaining. He says of the mind:

...in ipso fine... Quicquid amissum est, id diligenti usu praesentis vitae recolliget...

(In the very end... by diligent use of one's present life, the mind will recover whatever has been lost.)

25 Confer the business imagery in Ep., 1.3: «Et tanta stultitia mortalium est, ut quae minima et vilissima sunt, certe reparation, imputari sibi, cum impetravere, patiantur: nemo se iudicet quicquam dehere, qui tempus accepit, cum interim hoc unum est, quod ne gratis quidem potest reddere.» (Italics ours.)
And Seneca knew well enough how one's last years seem more pressing:

Non solebat mihi tam velox tempus
videri: nunc incredibilis cursus
apparet, sive quia admoveri lineas
sentio, sive quia adtendere coepi
et conputare damnum meum.

(Time was not wont to seem so swift
to me; now its pace appears
incredible, whether because I feel
that its boundary lines are closing
in on me, or because I have begun
to be attentive and to compute
my loss.)

Hence, with some irony and even grim humor, Seneca examines his own account-books of temporal affairs:

Interrogabis fortasse quid ego
faciam qui tibi ista praecipio.
Fatebor ingenue: quod apud luxuriosum
sed diligentem evenit, ratio mihi
constat inpensae. Non possum dicere
nihil perdere, sed quid perdam et
quare et quemadmodum dicam; causas
paupertatis meae reddam. Sed evenit
mihi quod plerisque non suo vitio ad
inopiam redactis: omnes ignoscunt,
nemo succurrit.

(Perhaos you will ask what I, who
teach you these things, do? I will
frankly confess: my account balances,
as happens in the case of the extravagant
but diligent man. I cannot say
that I lose nothing, but I shall tell
you what I lose and why and how; I
shall give you explanations of my
poverty. But what happens to me
happens to many who are reduced to want
through no fault of their own: every-one
forgives them; no one offers
them relief.)

Wittily and paradoxically, in this passage, Seneca the millionaire poses for a moment as poor, humble, destitute, a small business man who just about manages to balance his account. But there is an ironic twist. Though diligent, he is also extravagant. He does waste time. Sometimes he earns a compensating profit, but this by no means vindicates him of careless — and uneven — dealings. (No one would trust the banker who lost money every Tuesday and Thursday!) He can, he says, give reasons
for his faux-pas but knowing that excuses would not inspire in his readers too much confidence, he bypasses an explanation for his losses. To be sure, being older, this metaphorical C.P.A. is «naturally» reduced to slender means; he has little time left. All the more is the surprise on our part that, even with so little in his stock, he still manages to mislay portions of his wares. We certainly pity the shopkeeper who has trouble tending his store; but given his weak business sense, we are hardly tempted to come to his aid or to invest in his enterprise.

What is brilliantly insightful is Seneca's awareness that few lecturers and teachers practice what they preach. Most preachers adopt a haughty posture that implies that they themselves are above confession. Seneca, however, concedes without the least hesitation that all men except the ideal Stoic sapiens are flawed and lack control. Thus he humorously inculcates himself—and includes himself among the pathetic wastrels of time in the opening letter of the Epistulae Morales. Indeed, he obtains more drama and tension by making it clear at the outset that he is a lecturer, a guide, who recognizes that his own learning is defective and that he is running out of time

Patently, Seneca's maturity and sophistication are in evidence when the millionaire businessman can laugh at his own book-keeping, when the serious philosopher can render himself the butt of this own jokes. Nonetheless, Seneca employs this extremity of comedy to stress a very serious point: Few men ever take the time to reckon up the time they debauch and squander. Seneca himself is uniquely conscious of this devastation and uncannily sensitized to time's rampant rush and overflow. He clearly resembles modern man—Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Sartre, Faulkner, Woody Allen—in having such an awareness, and particularly so in the grotesque mixture of comedy and terror he devises in his nervous and absurd attempt to face the terrible music.

26 "HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME/HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME" are poignant words from T. S. Eliot's vision of a decadent society whose time is virtually up—appropriate lines that express Seneca's own sense of the imminence of a foreclosure upon one's lease on life. See Eliot's, «The waste land», 1922, II, lines 168-169.

27 Vide De Cons. Sup., 17.2: «...nemo risum praebuit qui ex se cepit», and consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «Senecan irony», in CB, 45, 1968, pp. 6-7 and 9-11.