

«Tempus omnia rapit»: Seneca on the rapacity of time

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*But at my back I always hear
Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.*

MARVELL,
«To His Coy Mistress»

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»¹. In Seneca, the theme of time has, to be sure, an ethical rather than a metaphysical significance² —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 wisdom³.

He writes with intensity:

*mors me sequitur, fugit vita.
Adversus haec me doce aliquid...*⁴

¹ Pierre Grimal, «Place et rôle du temps dans la philosophie de Sénèque», in *REA*, 60, 1968, pp. 92, 93 and 98.

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: lecture critique*, 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.

³ Even in the *Natural questions*, a work devoted to the study of nature and cosmology, Seneca places much emphasis upon ethics. Consult Anna Lydia Motto, *Seneca*, New York, 1973, p. 53, and Walter C. Summers, *The Silver Age of latin literature from Tiberius to Trajan*, London, 1920, pp. 200-201. Seneca adheres largely to Stoic ideas about time; on Stoic theory about time and its emphasis upon ethical action, consult the standard treatment, by Victor Goldschmidt, *Le système stoïcien et l'idée de temps*, Paris, 1953.

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 tamquam ultimum
aspexi.

(*Ep.*, 93.6)

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

Afflicted with ill-health throughout his life⁵ and harassed by the tyranny of mad emperors⁶, 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 others⁷, are particularly passionate and poetic, replete with the pathos of Vergil's «*sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt*»⁸. 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 aetas nec
cursum suum aut revocabit aut supprimet; nihil tumultuabitur,
nihil admonebit velocitatis suae:

when referring to Senecan writings: L. Annaei Senecae, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, ed. L. D. Reynolds (2 vols.), Oxford, 196); *Dialogorum Libri Duodecim*, ed. L. D. Reynolds, Oxford, 1977; *Naturales quaestiones*, ed. Thomas H. Corcoran (2 vols.), Cambridge, Massachusetts-London, 1971; and *Tragoediae*, ed. Ioannes Carolus Giardina (2 vols.), Bologna, 1966.

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 precariousness 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. Sap.*, 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).

⁸ *Aeneid*, 1.462. Concerning Seneca's powerful predilection for the poet, consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «Philosophy and Poetry: Seneca and Vergil», in *CO*, 56, 1978, pp. 3-5.

tacita labetur... ..sicut missa
est a primo die curret, nusquam
devertetur, nusquam remorabitur.

(*De Brev. Vit.*, 8.4-5)⁹

(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:

Quidquid ad summum pervenit ab exitu
prope est; eripit se aufertque ex
oculis perfecta virtus, nec ultimum
tempus expectant quae in primo
maturuerunt. Ignis quo clarior fulsit
citius extinguitur...

(*Ad Marc.*, 23.3-4)¹⁰

(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 Confer 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 apparet respicientibus.

(*Ep.*, 49.2)

(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 in pactum hoc prospicimus hospitium. De nostris aetatibus loquor, quas incredibili celeritate convoluit? 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 urbibus populisque et fluminibus et ambitu maris puncti loco ponimus ad universa referentes: minorem portionem aetas nostra quam puncti habet, si omni tempori comparetur...

(*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.

¹¹ Seneca, *The humanist at the court of Nero*, trans. W. Glyn Jones, Chicago, 1984, p. 9.

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
 complectere...

(*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

¹² *Georgics*, 3.66-67, quoted in *De Brev. Vit.*, 9.2; this same passage is again quoted in *Ep.*, 108.24.

¹³ Seneca's repeated use of business and legal terminology, when calling for «an accounting» of one's life is discussed more fully below.

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
negotia nec quae destinauerunt 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 courts¹⁸; they are consumed by social engagements, avarice, lust, wrath, self-inflicted diseases¹⁹. 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 nothing²⁰.

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.

¹⁶ *De Brev. Vit.*, 9.1.

¹⁷ *occupo* (*De Brev. Vit.*, 9.2), *adprendo* (*De Brev. Vit.*, 6.4).

¹⁸ *De Tranq. An.*, 12.4.

¹⁹ *De Brev. Vit.*, 7.1-2.

²⁰ *De Brev. Vit.*, 8.1-3.

Quaeris fortasse quos occupatos
vocem? Non est quod me solos putes
dicere quos a basilica inmissi demum
canes eiciunt, quos aut in sua vides
turba speciosius elidi aut in aliena
contemptius, quos officia domibus suis
evocant ut alienis foribus inlidant,
quos hasta praetoris infami lucro et
quandoque suppuraturo exercet. Quorundam
etium occupatum est...

(*De Brev. Vit.*, 12.1-2)

(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. Vir.*, 18.3)

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

²¹ Seneca distinguishes between the life of real (and useful) leisure, *vita otiosa*, and the *vita ignava* or *vita desidiosa*; consult Anna Lydia Motto and John R. Clark, «*Hic situs est: Seneca on the deadliness of idleness*», in *CW*, 72, 1978-79, p. 210.

²² «*si tota bene collocaretur*» (*De Brev. Vit.*, 1.3).

²³ «*tota, ut ita dicam, in reditu est*» (*De Brev. Vit.*, 11.2).

The average man, however, like a spendthrift, squanders time, thereby shortening the span of years allotted to him²⁴.

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

(*De Brev. Vit.*, 3.1)²⁵

(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
succurrit, non observatis quantum
iam temporis transierit; velut ex
pleno et abundanti perditis...

(*De Brev. Vit.*, 3.4)

(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...

(*N. Q.*, 3 Praef., 2-3)

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

²⁴ Vide *De Brev. Vit.*, 3.2.

²⁵ Confer the business imagery in *Ep.*, 1.3: «Et tanta stultitia mortalium est, ut quae minima et vilissima sunt, certe *reparabilia*, *imputari* sibi, cum impetravere, patiantur: nemo se iudicet quicquam *debere*, qui tempus accepit, cum interim hoc unum est, quod ne gratus quidem potest *reddere*.» (Italics ours.)

And Seneca knows 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 addendere coepi
et computare damnum meum.

(*Ep.*, 49.4)

(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.

(*Ep.*, 1.4)

(Perhaps 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 incriminates 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 time²⁶.

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 his own jokes²⁷. 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. Sap.*, 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.