

Chapter 2.

In the first chapter we saw that the opening book of the *N.Q.* leads philosophy back into the cave whence Plato freed it and there confronts the mortality of not only the human body but the entire world. Acceptance of one's own and others' mortality is a common theme in Stoicism, as in other Hellenistic philosophies. In several works, Seneca confronts mortality in a familiar manner: by drawing on the store of consolatory tropes which Roman popular philosophy had amassed. Seneca wrote three formal consolations, an essay on the brevity of life, and several letters which dwelt on the themes of bereavement and death.¹⁵⁴

In those works he emphasises the uselessness (*e.g. ad Pol. 2, Ep. 99.2*), selfishness (*e.g. ad Pol. 9, Ep. 63.2*) and unseemliness (*e.g. ad Pol. 6, 7, Ep. 63.1, 12-3, Ep. 99.2*) of grief. He calls forth *exempla* of those who have borne grief with fortitude (*e.g. ad Marc. 2-4, 13-16, Ad Pol. 14-16, Ad Helv. 7-10 12-3, 16*), reminds the sufferer of the inconstancy of fortune (*e.g. ad Marc. 9-11, 23, ad Pol. 1, 4, Ep. 63.15-6*), and suggests that they take consolation in life's other pleasures (*e.g. ad Pol. 6, 12, Ep. 63.11, ad Helv. 18*) and in pleasant memories (*e.g. ad Pol. 10, Ep. 63.2-3, Ep. 99.5*). He argues that is

¹⁵⁴The relevant works are the Consolations to his aunt Marcia, to Polybius and to his mother Helvia (the latter on the occasion of his own exile rather than a bereavement) and Letters 63 and 99. *De Brevitate Vitae* and *De Providentia* also contain remarks on how death should be regarded.

On Seneca's consolatory literature see Fantham 2007, Ficca 1999, Ker 2009 Chapter 4, Williams 2006b and Wilson 1997 (on consolation in the Epistles). On consolatory literature in the Roman and Classical traditions, see the essays in Alonso del Real 2001 (edited volume on consolatory literature), Baltussen 2009 (discussion of Plutarch's consolation to his wife), Claassen 1996 (on Dio's imaginary dialogue with Cicero) and 1999 (a history of the consolatory tradition), Erskine 2005 (on Cicero), Graver 2002 (a commentary on Cicero *Tusc.* 3 and 4), Fern 1941 (on consolatory literature in general), Ochs 1993 Chapter 6 (on consolatory literature in general), Wilcox 2005 (on consolation in Cicero's letters), Scourfield 1993 (on Jerome's letter of consolation to Heliodorus). All these provide further bibliography. Hadot's comments in the context of philosophy as "spiritual exercise" are also relevant: 1987 13-15.

On the consolation on exile: Degl'Innocenti Pierini 1999 11-22, Lotito 2001 86-97, Williams 2006b.

the quality not the length of life that matters: we can all “lengthen” our lives by spending more of them truly living, and it is not right to complain about the foreshortening of a friend or family member’s life (e.g. *ad Marc.* 12, 22, *Ep.* 99.11-12, *De Brevitate Vitae passim*).¹⁵⁵ One helpful tactic against grief is meditation upon death: one’s own or that of a family member. By anticipating bereavement in advance one can steel oneself against its sting. This was a familiar piece of Stoic advice.¹⁵⁶ One got used to the idea of death, by introducing it, in thought, into one’s everyday life (e.g. *ad Marc.* 9.1-5).

The Stoic orthodoxy of these consolations varies. At times Seneca seems more concerned to give conventional consolations than philosophical insight (even comforting his aunt with the thought that men may have a happy afterlife, hardly a philosophically rigorous argument: *ad Marc.* 26). Even where there is a grain of Stoic truth, Seneca often takes a moderate position, allowing for example that some grief will be felt at the death of a loved one, but urging restraint in its duration and expression. Yet Stoicism urged the total expurgation of emotion. The mismatch is not particularly surprising. Committing to Stoicism is a long and difficult process and Seneca frequently deems an intermediary compromise position necessary for ultimate progression to the good. And in no matter was a hardline approach more likely to turn off potential beneficiaries of Stoicism than personal bereavement.¹⁵⁷ Seneca’s consolations deployed choice bits of Stoic wisdom to bring around non-Stoics to the acceptance of mortality, and the choosiness of the deployment stands out as a compromise.

¹⁵⁵ See Armisen-Marchetti 1995a.

¹⁵⁶ See Armisen-Marchetti 2008 on the *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* in Seneca, and Newman 1989 for the practice in Imperial Stoicism.

¹⁵⁷ Manning 1974 points out that Seneca’s consolatory strategy of moderating rather than eliminating emotion is Peripatetic (71). In examining why Seneca should have adopted it, he dismisses suggestions that Seneca was philosophically ignorant, that he changed his mind over the course of his career, or that he was simply too weak to commit to Stoicism, and argues instead that it was a practical strategy: the elimination of emotion was not to be expected in the non-philosophically trained bereaved, although moderation “does not represent his final position” (73). As will become clear, I follow his conclusions in this chapter.

Yet paradoxically, still more compromised are Seneca's apparently more orthodox pronouncements on grief. When Seneca attempts a consolation which is more hardline, he scarcely gives the impression of greater philosophical rigour. *Epistle* 99, addressed to Marullus and forwarded to Lucilius, self-defensively abandons tact and browbeats its addressee into seeing his grief for the death of his young son as laughable. As Wilson notes, Seneca's tone seems unreasonable ("[t]he letter is an impassioned attack on a passion," Wilson 1997 66), and is in fact so jarring that it is tempting to read the letter as deliberately exposing the violence inherent in consolation.¹⁵⁸ And despite the harshness of Seneca's tactics in the letter, it nonetheless advocates compromise (for example at *Ep.* 99.16, where Seneca recommends indulging such emotion as comes naturally, but not artificially extending grief).

This chapter explores parts of Seneca's corpus which drive home the fact of man's mortality for the reader. But what makes the pieces discussed herein interesting is the fact that the mention of death seems in these cases not intended to diminish its force, but actually to underscore its horror and pain. I will be asking why Seneca would do this. Is it in contradiction to the comfort he offers the bereaved in his consolations, and indeed to his Stoic convictions more generally?¹⁵⁹ Or is consolation only one Stoic therapeutic approach to death?

This very question was treated in a 2008 article by Olberding. Examining images of violent death throughout Seneca's corpus, she concludes that their philosophical function is to induce the reader to empathise with the sufferer, so that he does not

¹⁵⁸ Wilson makes this point: "Epistle 99 revisits the theme of grief broached in *Epistle* 63 but with this disconcerting departure: it turns back on itself to question the value of some forms of consolation as well" (1997 50).

¹⁵⁹ See my introduction for a general discussion of critical positions on the relationship between Seneca's tragedies and his philosophy.

accept death merely as an abstraction but as something that really will happen to him.¹⁶⁰

As will become clear, I agree with Olberding that Seneca sees complacency as a dangerous potential unintended consequence of consolation, and that the shocking nature of Seneca's imagery works to combat this. My argument here builds on Olberding's in order to identify the position of terror as well as of complacency within Seneca's philosophical framework.¹⁶¹

Acceptance of mortality is a part of the larger project of attaining the viewpoint from which the universe sees itself. An individual's death is absorbed into the grand scheme of things, wherein nothing is ever lost, or gained, but the cosmos merely unfolds in its preordained manner. But insofar as this viewpoint is to be attained through the philosophical study of the cosmos, a paradox is raised, as we saw in the previous chapter. In Book 3 of the *N.Q.*, Seneca concludes that death and even the end of the universe are part of the grander cosmic cycle: from the cosmic viewpoint an individual's life and death has no special place in the whole, and thus the perspective of the individual and the attachment to life ought to be transcended. But he draws this

¹⁶⁰ Olberding 2008 133 and *passim*. She points out that although death was frequently displayed in Roman society, in gladiatorial shows, the nature of display puts a distance between audience and actors which Seneca sought to diminish (134-48).

¹⁶¹ Olberding 2008 argues that in Seneca's Rome "there [was] perhaps no greater ignominy than to admit fear of death" (138) and follows the analysis of Gorer (see Olberding's citation on 138 and her bibliography) on 1950s horror comics in holding that at Rome, death entertainments "operate[d] as a "substitute gratification," a way to manage fear without directly acknowledging it" (139). Olberding compares the public spectacles' "pornography" of death to Seneca's "erotica" of death, the distinction being that the latter "generally ... feature[s] the somatic while simultaneously evoking something of its wider felt significance, an erotica of death entails an acute attention to the sufferings of the body that embeds these in a narrative complexity regarding the subjective distress they engender. Its "pleasure" consists not in abandonment to the physical, but in an enriched connection between the physical and its meanings for the subject. A death erotica is not the enemy of reflection, but its spur, stimulating the imaginative powers of the reader in the direction of her own end by requiring her close regard of the body and its acute fragility" (139). While it is plausible that Seneca's preoccupation with death responds to a repressed fascination in Roman society, *contra* Olberding I argue that Seneca seeks at the same time to uproot death from its placement in his audience's libidinous inner narratives as he embeds it therein. In Olberding's language, I will conclude that Seneca is interested not only in the conversion of libidinal energy into an erotic narrative but also in the surplus desire which cannot be contained in any narrative, but which compels the individual to repeat the erotic narrative again and again, tirelessly.

conclusion from a natural scientific study which, he is at pains to point out, is shaped by his own life and which draws its nourishment from his impending death. His individual existence and perspective is the scientific enquiry's necessary ground.

A similar point is made in Book 6 of the *N.Q.*, the book on earthquakes to which we will return frequently in this chapter. Seneca exalts a particular scientist, Callisthenes, and denounces Alexander the Great for his murder. Of the killing, Seneca says it is Alexander's eternal crime, which no virtue, no success in war, will redeem (*N.Q.* 6.23.2). If anyone should say he killed many thousands of Persians, or King Darius, or that he extended an empire, it will be answered, "and he killed Callisthenes" (*N.Q.* 6.23.3).

On the one hand this attitude is understandable, Alexander's imperial forays may have been great, but they were not good in the Stoic sense, whereas the work of the scientist was at least concerned with the good. And as several commentators have noted, given the circumstances of Seneca's death shortly after this was written, coupled with the vehemence of his condemnation of Alexander, it is difficult to escape the sense that Seneca is thinking of his own position in relation to Nero.¹⁶²

But the sense that the murder is greater than any other venture suggests that it is not being put into perspective, slotted into the grand patchwork which the cosmic viewpoint surveys. This, surely, is flawed from a philosophical perspective. Furthermore, Seneca suggests that it was precisely Callisthenes' martyrdom which demonstrates his philosophical credentials. The value of Callisthenes' genius is bound up in his mortality: his qualifications are as follows: *fuit enim illi nobile ingenium et furibundi regis impatiens* ("for he had a noble nature and did not submit to a wrathful king," *N.Q.* 6.23.2), and the crime of killing him outweighed great imperial ventures.

¹⁶² So Lana 1955 15. For bibliography on the passage see Williams 2006 144 n.32.

As at the beginning of *N.Q.* 3, it is suggested that the authority of the investigator comes from his death. As Seneca approaches death, his task becomes more urgent, and it takes life from his impending end. In just the same way, Callisthenes' investigations are validated by his murder.

Seneca does not merely insist upon death's indifference, but is interested in the point at which the individual is elided, in death, or in philosophical enlightenment. We have already seen how accepting and embracing death as the principle of life is necessary for clear philosophical and scientific vision. Death and knowledge have an intimate relation. This chapter looks more closely at that relation for a clue as to why Seneca sometimes chooses to portray death in ways counter to his consolatory picture of it. Again, we find that the underground is death's domain: the hidden depths where one must seek knowledge both of the world and of the human body, to which the earth is continually analogized. This positioning of death at the heart of life reminds us that death is both a part of the life cycle and its governing principle. The individual who retains his own partial perspective but looks into the *rerum natura* and sees not only what is living, but also the principles which govern life, principles which have more to do with death than with life, is a figure of fascination for Seneca, and seems to have an uncanny vision beyond the grave. The following discussions will look at Seneca's accounts of individuals facing death, and the incursion into their lives of their own mortality.

Thyestes.¹⁶³

¹⁶³ On the *Thyestes* see Hine 1981, Calder 1983, Picone 1984, Tarrant 1985, Giancotti 1988-9, Boyle 1993, Schiesaro 1994, Leigh 1996, Schiesaro 2003, Volk 2006.

In the tragedy *Thyestes* the distinction between the underworld and the world of the living is collapsed by restless ghosts and unspeakable crime. The imagery of the underground, and of earthquakes, is picked up by Seneca in his later prose descriptions, and despite generic differences, the same set of associations persists. The play opens with Tantalus arising from the underworld, called forth by a Fury as a kind of unwilling Muse, to inspire the house to greater misdeeds than his own. Tantalus' crimes are the ultimate source for the house of Atreus, and from the start Seneca emphasises the link between Tantalus' sumptuary punishment, and Atreus' sumptuary crime.

The precise dating of the *Thyestes* is uncertain, though according to Fitch it should be one of the later tragic compositions.¹⁶⁴ The story of the over-weaning king who, mad with jealousy and power, killed his nephews and fed them to their father seems to have been a popular subject among Roman tragedians.¹⁶⁵ In the play, the denizens of the underworld, and later those of the upper world, take on the characteristics of the underworld itself. The closeness of life and death, and their simultaneous rootedness in the earth itself is an important message of the imagery of this play.

In the play's opening lines, Tantalus asks, *quis inferorum sede ab infausta extrahit / avido fugaces ore captantem cibos?* (*Thy.* 1-2, "who dragged me from the accursed lair of the spirits, me snatching at fleeting food with my hungry mouth?"). The first line establishes Tantalus as drawn out of the underworld, the second reminds us of the punishment he suffered there: bound beneath a tree whose fruit dangled before his face, but always receded just out of reach as he tried to take a bite. But in the context of the

¹⁶⁴ See Fitch 1981; his chronology is generally accepted.

¹⁶⁵ Known Roman *Thyestes* plays are by Ennius (*Thyestes*, 169 BCE), Accius (*Atreus*, before 130 BCE), Cassius of Parma (*Thyestes*, 40s or 30s BCE), Varius Rufus (*Thyestes*, 29 BC), Sempronius Gracchus (*Thyestes*, teens BCE), Mamercus Aemilius Scaurus (*Atreus*, before 34 CE), Pomponius Secundus (*Atreus*, before 60 CE), and Curius Maternus (*Thyestes*, sometime in Vespasian's reign). There is also an unreliable attribution of a *Thyestes* to Pacuvius. Erasmo 2004, 179 n.79.

underworld, Tantalus' greedy, gulping mouth reminds us of gaping and swallowing underground chasms. A few lines later, Tantalus asks if a worse punishment has been found than those of Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion, "or the punishments of Tityos, who stretched out in a huge cave, fed black birds from his dug out wounds" (*Thy.* 9-10, *aut poena Tityi, qui specu vasto patens / vulneribus atras pascit effossis aves*). Tityus is depicted as gaping like a cave, his wound (as Fitch translates in his Loeb edition) quarried by birds. Similarly in the first choral ode Tantalus' mouth sounds like a cave, especially given the counterfactual image of birds overhead: *stat lassus vacuo guttere Tantalus. / impendet capiti plurima noxio / Phineis avibus praeda fugacior* (*Thy.* 152-4, "Tantalus stands exhausted with an empty throat. Much bounty hangs over his poisonous head, more fleeting than the Phineian birds").

Conversely, the underworld itself becomes like the unfortunates imprisoned in it, in being afraid (and Tantalus trembles like the ground in an earthquake): Tantalus asks, what new punishment has been found, "which sad Acheron fears, at whose horror we too tremble" (*Thy.* 17-18, *quod maestus Acheron paveat, ad cuius metum / nos quoque tremamus*). Thus, from the start, the identification of the earth with the gulping human body is established, and it will be picked up throughout the play.

Another image from Tantalus, the dead man who has risen from the underground, suggests a different way in which the earth and the human body are implicated: *iam nostra / subit e stirpe turba quae suum vincat genus* (*Thy.* 18-19, "now a crowd arises from our root which will defeat its own race"). The mention of rising up from the root brings to mind roots growing into the ground, and the earth as the giver of life. We perhaps imagine men having their birth from the earth, like plants. But that the lines are spoken by a man who has arisen from the earth, a dead man, reminds us how unnatural this image is: humans are not born from the underground (except metaphorically, in that

they emerge from the womb) but they are buried after their death. The idea that humation might be the planting of a seed, and that the dead may rise again, is deeply disturbing; but it suggests too the natural cycle of life – the old die to give way to the young. The natural cycle of regeneration is associated with death.

The image of crime as arising and growing is continued by the Fury who goads Tantalus, resolving the contradictory sense that earth is the place which gives life and place of death (*semper oriatur novum, / nec unum in uno, dumque punitur scelus, / crescat, Thy.* 30-32, “it arises always new, and not as one replacing another, and while crime is punished, it grows;” these lines are also suggestive of another complex of imagery in the play, that of the constellations). Clearly, the implication of birth and death is important in a play whose principle horror is the father who eats his own children, and so this double valence of the earth seems to reify the perversion of family relations: *fratrem expavescat frater et natum parens / natusque patrem; liberi pereant male, / peiusque tamen nascantur* (*Thy.* 40-42, “may brother fear brother and the parent the child and the child the father; may children die terribly, and yet be worse born”).

In this play, the earth, or even the entire universe, shakes as a sympathetic reaction to the horror of Atreus’ crimes. The house will physically crumble in response to its being undermined by such great impieties: *superbis fratribus regna excidant / repetantque profugos; dubia violentae domus / fortuna reges inter incertos labet* (the Fury, at *Thy.* 32-34, “let kingdoms fall to proud brothers, and may they seek exile; and let the ambivalent fortune of a violent house slide between uncertain kings”). But the earthquake imagery does not merely serve to evoke disaster and loss of stability (though it does this). It also has the very specific effect of suggesting a dissolution of the divide between the world and the underworld. The house is swallowed into the earth, and rumblings within the earth bring the underworld to the surface. The earthquake is the physical manifestation

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