



## Visualizing Pain: Psychotherapy, Emotion, and Embodied Cognition in Seneca's Letters

Although Seneca often expresses a disdain for the body, vividly detailed evocations of bodily experience feature frequently in his writing. In particular, he presents the repeated imagining of anticipated pain and suffering (*praemeditatio futurorum malorum*) as an important psychotherapeutic technique. This strategy should be seen in the context of Stoic theories of perception and the embodied nature of emotion (theories that resonate in significant respects with findings in cognitive neuroscience). Yet Seneca's approach is also profoundly colored by a perception of the relationship between imagination and emotion which lies at the heart of ancient rhetorical theory. While anticipating future misfortunes is sometimes presented as a means to dull anxiety, a method of cultivating stereotypically Stoic impassivity by rooting out negative emotions, Seneca also highlights the power of the vividly imagined scene of suffering to stimulate an ardent love of virtue, a positive emotion which plays a crucial role in the moral progress of the Stoic student.

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The embodied nature of the human condition occupies a paradoxical place in Seneca's Stoicism. At times he expresses an almost Platonic disdain for the domain of physical experience; the body is to be subjugated, if possible ignored, its needs minimized. As he instructs his addressee at *Epistulae morales* 15.2: *quantum potes, circumscribe corpus tuum et animo locum laxa*, "Limit the body as much as you

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can, and give scope to the mind.”<sup>1</sup> Yet often Seneca is to be found mobilizing bodily experiences, represented in the most detailed and vivid terms, in his project to bring about a transformation in the psychic state of his addressee, or some other reader—or indeed himself.

The letters (of which 124 survive), addressed to a single individual, Lucilius, offer a course in Stoic self-transformation.<sup>2</sup> Reflecting the putative philosophical progress of his addressee in later letters, Seneca gives increased space to more complex and theoretical Stoic doctrines. But even in the later letters, he emphasizes a wide range of practical techniques for effecting self-improvement. These include daily self-scrutiny, which has received considerable attention following the work of Foucault.<sup>3</sup> My focus here is on another of these practices, perhaps equally distinctive: the imagining of grippingly evoked scenes of suffering as a technique to realign one’s mental disposition, to get rid of negative emotions. Such scenes frequently concern bodily experience. While they are also to be found in his other writings, this strategy features strikingly in Seneca’s letters, his most substantial work, composed in his last years.

Already in Letter 4 the practice of *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*, the mental anticipation of possible future misfortunes, is advocated (4.5), here explicitly as a means of accustoming oneself to the prospect of death.<sup>4</sup> The fear of death, introduced in Letter 4 as an anxiety which dogs human existence, recurs as a challenge to be overcome in numerous letters;<sup>5</sup> as Seneca puts it much later in the collection, *illa uero maxima ex omni mortalium populo turba miserorum, quam expectatio mortis exagitat undique impendens*, “The largest group of wretched people among the whole population of mortals are those whom the expectation of death torments, threatening them from all directions” (74.3). The conquest of *metus mortis* (“fear of death”) is a key goal of his epistolary project (71.37).<sup>6</sup> A concern with the fear of death is of course not particular to Stoic philosophy.<sup>7</sup> Indeed Seneca (*Marc.* 23.2) notes that Plato puts in the mouth of Socrates the

1. Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 71.6. Translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

2. For an introduction to recent scholarship on the *Epistulae morales*, see Edwards 2019 and Graver 2016.

3. On self-scrutiny, see Foucault 1986: 57–62; Hadot 1995; Edwards 1997; Ker 2009.

4. On Seneca’s treatment of *praemeditatio* and its intellectual context, see Manning 1976; Armisen-Marchetti 2008.

5. See also notably *Ep.* 22, 24, 26, 30, 54, 70. Seneca himself, once Nero’s tutor and close adviser, had fallen out with the emperor (following the death of the praetorian prefect Burrus in 62 CE) by the time he wrote the letters. In 59 CE, Nero had ordered the death of his mother Agrippina. In 65 CE, in the aftermath of the Pisonian conspiracy, he instructed Seneca to take his own life (*Tac. Ann.* 15.60–64). Seneca, elderly, in poor health and on the wrong side of the emperor, had pressing reasons to develop mental resilience in the face of anticipated misfortune.

6. Among his other works only *De breuitate uitae* is so insistently concerned with this topic. See, e.g., *Brev.* 15.1.

7. Epicurean concern with the fear of death (which has a somewhat different focus) is manifest, for instance, in Lucretius’ *De rerum natura*, particularly book 3. See Warren 2004 and Edwards 2007: 78–85.

claim that the proper practice of philosophy is preparation for death.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, systematic examples of *meditatio* to serve this or other ends are not found in earlier Greek literature;<sup>9</sup> it is only in the work of Seneca, indeed, that the death of Socrates comes to prominence as a focus of meditation.<sup>10</sup>

The technique of *praemeditatio* itself is discussed in Book 3 of Cicero's *Tusculan Disputations*, where it is attributed to the Cyrenaics.<sup>11</sup> Other Stoics besides Seneca advocate the practice of anticipating future misfortunes. Instances are to be found in Marcus Aurelius (e.g., 10.36) and in Epictetus (e.g., *Diss.* 2.1.38).<sup>12</sup> It is particularly in Seneca's writing, though, that the *futura mala* (including pain and death) are conceived in such strikingly visual and detailed form. The *proficiens* is exhorted to confront an anxiety while reminding him- or herself that virtue is the only thing that matters, as for instance at Letter 24.2: *si uis omnem sollicitudinem exuere, quidquid uereris ne eueniat, euenturum utique propone, et quodcumque est illud malum tecum ipse metire ac timorem tuum taxa*, "If you want to do away with all worry, assume that what you fear may happen will certainly happen and whatever that trouble is, take its measure within you and scrutinize your fear." Imagine yourself going through this experience—and think about how you ought to respond to it.

We might draw a comparison with the role of exposure-based or de-catastrophizing imagery techniques in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) as it is practiced today.<sup>13</sup> In this context, regular rehearsal of what one fears may happen is designed to build resilience, allowing the patient to identify and adjust irrational features in their own responses to an adverse situation. Indeed, modern psychotherapeutic practice is widely acknowledged to have been significantly influenced by Stoic writings. A. E. Ellis, who originally developed Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (including the use of Rational Emotive Imagery), was familiar with Seneca's writings and often cited the works of Epictetus, treating a quotation from the *Handbook* (§5) as a kind of slogan for REBT: "Men are disturbed not by things but by the views which they take of them."<sup>14</sup> Aaron Beck, much influenced by Ellis,

8. See *Phd.* 64a, 67d, 81a μελέτη θανάτου. While there are major differences between the ways bodily death (and the mind-body relationship) is conceived in Plato's works and in Stoic thought, it was alleged of the Early Stoics (*SVF* 3.768 = *Excerpta philo. Cod. Coislin* 387 *Anecd. Par.* 4:403), οἱ Στωικοὶ φιλόσοφοι ... τὴν φιλοσοφίαν ὑπέλαβον μελέτην εἶναι τοῦ φυσικοῦ θανάτου, "The Stoic philosophers maintained that philosophy is preparation for physical death."

9. As Ker notes (2010: 190–94).

10. The death of Socrates features at 7.6, 13.14, 67.7–13, 70.9, 98.12.

11. It serves as a strategy to alleviate *aegritudo* on the grounds that anticipated evils are less distressing than unexpected ones (*Tusc.* 3.28–32). See Graver 2002: 96–99. Cf. Sen. *De ira* 3.37–43. A similar exercise is advocated by Galen, *Avoiding Distress (Peri alupias)*, chs. 52 and 77.

12. ἄλλοι μελετάτῳσαν δίκας, ἄλλοι προβλήματα, ἄλλοι συλλογισμούς. σὺ ἀποθήσκεις, σὺ δεδέσθαι, σὺ στρεβλοῦσθαι, σὺ ἐξορίζεσθαι, "Let others practise lawsuits, others problems, others syllogisms; for your part, practice how to die, how to be in chains, how to be tortured, how to be an exile." Epicureans, by contrast, specifically advised against anticipating future misfortunes (*Cic. Tusc.* 3.33–35).

13. Robertson 2016: 386. Sorabji 2000: 153–68 explores some parallels. See also Evans 2012 and Sellars 2019.

14. Robertson 2016: 379, 386; cf. Still and Dryden 2012: xii–xiii, 203.

was the pioneer of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. His writings, too, repeatedly invoke the Stoics.<sup>15</sup> Recent years have seen a strong resurgence of interest in the practical application of Stoic writings themselves.<sup>16</sup> “Modern Stoicism” harnesses the therapeutic practices articulated in Stoic texts, in the service of managing anxiety and developing the ability to withstand difficulties.<sup>17</sup> Practitioners of psychotherapy thus recognize the value of the Stoics’ psychological insight.

There are good reasons, then, for seeing these Stoic therapeutic techniques as effective. But I want to come at Seneca’s advocacy of the vividly conceived *exemplum* and the *praemeditatio* (of which the *exemplum* is often part) from a rather different angle. Seneca’s recognition of the efficacy of these techniques is crucially related, I want to argue, to Stoic theories of *phantasia* and to the way such theories take account of inputs both sensory and cognitive. At work in Seneca’s representation of the power of *exempla* and the *praemeditatio* in action is an acknowledgement, indeed an exploitation, of the embodied nature of cognition, notwithstanding Seneca’s apparent disdain for the body. Might insights from modern neuroscience in relation to embodied cognition cast further light on the operation of Senecan psychotherapeutic techniques?<sup>18</sup>

#### EMOTION, COGNITION, AND THE PRACTICE OF *PRAEMEDITATIO*

The particular role of emotions (*pathē* in Greek, *affectus* or *motus animi* in Latin) in Stoic doctrine was already a source of controversy in antiquity. Seneca makes clear (*Ep.* 116.1) that what he terms *affectus* (translated sometimes as “emotions,” sometimes as “passions”) are in no degree to be tolerated.<sup>19</sup> The Stoics were criticized in antiquity for advocating an impassivity which left no room for human attachments.<sup>20</sup> Certainly there are times when Seneca seems primarily concerned with avoiding mental disturbance to attain immunity from emotional turbulence, *securitas*, a goal which is apparently to be pursued through the extirpation of certain affective responses.<sup>21</sup>

15. Robertson 2016: 382.

16. See Evans 2012; Robertson 2016.

17. Via, for instance, Stoic Week and Stoicon (<https://modernStoicism.com>). Several leading scholars of ancient philosophy are currently involved, notably Chris Gill and John Sellars.

18. Evans touches on this briefly (2012: 8) in relation to the application of Stoic techniques. Insights from cognitive science have opened up exciting new approaches to classical texts in recent years; see, e.g., Butler and Purves 2013; Cairns 2019; and Budelmann and Earnshaw forthcoming. Further work in this area is listed on the Cognitive Classics website: <https://cognitiveclassics.blogs.sas.ac.uk>.

19. Cf. Sen. *Ep.* 75.12: *affectus sunt motus animi improbabiles*, “Passions are reprehensible movements of the spirit.”

20. Seneca reacts to such criticism at *Ep.* 9.1–2. Criticism along similar lines characterizes some modern scholarship. On Nussbaum’s interpretation of the Stoic position (1994, esp. ch. 10), extirpating anger must also entail extirpating love. Reydams-Schils (2005, esp. ch. 2) highlights rather the importance of family and community to the Stoic model of what is natural for humans.

21. Graver argues that on the Stoic view we should seek to eliminate negative emotions “not because we wish to be unresponsive but because we wish to avoid believing what is false” (2007: 5). Yet Seneca at least seems particularly focused on tackling mental turbulence as an end in itself. See, e.g., *De ira* 2.12.6 *felicitis animi immota tranquillitas*; *Tranq.* 2.3–5.

Margaret Graver argues persuasively in her *Stoicism and Emotion* (primarily focused on the theories of Zeno and Chrysippus) that, despite the common caricature of the Stoics as determined to repress emotions of all kinds, we should see them rather as concerned to understand and address the consequences of negative emotions, with a particular focus on fear, anger, distress, and desire.<sup>22</sup> These negative emotions are to be distinguished, she underlines, from other affective responses, such as reverence, certain forms of friendship, some kinds of joy, and certain varieties of longing, which are recognized as positive (and are termed *eupatheiai* rather than *pathē*).<sup>23</sup> We shall return later to some potential examples of positive emotions in Seneca's writing.

A distinctive understanding of what is truly valuable underlies Stoic analysis of negative emotions and how they are to be overcome. According to Stoic thought, virtue is the only true good; all other things, all things which are outside our own control (including our own bodies), are merely indifferent, since they do not ultimately constrain our ability to live virtuously.<sup>24</sup> Things which appear to be evils—illness, exile, poverty, even death itself—are not so; they cannot truly harm us, since they affect aspects of our lives which are not truly important, in that they do not compromise our capacity for virtue.<sup>25</sup> Thus a key facet of virtue is the development and maintenance of correct judgement, the understanding that what seem evils (and to be feared) are in fact indifferents (although we should note that virtue is to be exercised in making choices between preferred and dispreferred indifferents).<sup>26</sup> When such understanding is achieved, we cease to be troubled by the fears and anxieties which make human life miserable; we achieve *securitas*, immunity from emotional turbulence. But this approach to the world does not come naturally; it is one which must be learned, as Seneca often reminds his reader.<sup>27</sup> How is this mindset to be achieved? *Aduersus haec quae incidere possunt etiam potentissimis, adhortare te et indura*, “Encourage and toughen your spirit against the misfortunes which may afflict even the most powerful,” Seneca advises early on in the letters (4.6). The practice of *meditatio* aims to combat common errors of judgement.

Stoic *meditatio* involves an active and regular rehearsal of future evils.<sup>28</sup> Seneca insists that repetition—daily repetition—is critical to the success of *meditatio*; *hoc cotidie meditare*, “Think on this every day,” Seneca exhorts, for instance, as he

22. Diog. Laert. 7.110 lists the four categories as distress (*lupē*), fear (*phobos*), desire (*epithumia*), and pleasure (*hēdonē*). Cf. Cic. *Fin.* 3.35, also discussing the issue of translation. Anger, a particular concern in Seneca's writing, would constitute an aspect of distress.

23. See Diog. Laert. 7.116. For Graver (2007: 52) *eupatheiai* are essentially corrected versions of ordinary human feelings, with the crucial difference that they are concerned with integral rather than external goods.

24. See, e.g., Sen. *Ep.* 74.24, 92.24. Cf. Diog. Laert. 7.102.

25. See, e.g., Diog. Laert. 7.101–103 = Long and Sedley 1987 [hereafter LS], 58A.

26. See Cic. *Fin.* 3.50–60. Graver 2007, ch. 3, analyzes Stoic accounts of emotional judgement.

27. Cf., e.g., *Ep.* 90.44–46, 95.5, 123.16 *discenda uirtus est*, “virtue must be learned.”

28. Newman 1989: 1478.

reminds his addressee of the inevitability of death (4.5).<sup>29</sup> As R. J. Newman comments, “Meditation does not simply look forward to what may come and passively wait for it; instead, it goes out to examine the possible attacks of Fortune.”<sup>30</sup> Newman’s discussion suggestively highlights the role of repeated verbal formulae and of *sententiae* (pithy or paradoxical phrases) in daily meditation.<sup>31</sup> These are certainly of huge importance in Seneca’s scheme. But my focus is on a different weapon in Seneca’s arsenal: the *imago*, the vividly imagined scene, and the specific ways in which such images may be deployed to psychic ends.

Stoic theories of perception are of critical importance here.<sup>32</sup> The concept of *phantasia*, as it is deployed in Stoic thought, is characterized by Brad Inwood as “a representational image in the mind.”<sup>33</sup> A *phantasia* may be generated either by perception or by internal mental activity, according to Diogenes Laertius’ account of Stoic teaching (*Lives* 7.51).<sup>34</sup> Our memories, for instance, are stores of *phantasiai*.<sup>35</sup> Such representations have a physical effect on the mind, leaving an impress like that of a seal on wax.<sup>36</sup> These representations are, however, to be distinguished from our responses to them. We choose whether or not to assent to representations.<sup>37</sup> The Stoics viewed the passions (negative emotions) as cognitive,<sup>38</sup> regarding them as evaluative judgements, assents (misguided assents) to certain propositional appearances, *phantasiai* (the process is set out at Seneca, *De ira*

29. Newman 1989.

30. Newman 1989: 1486.

31. On the role of *sententiae* in Roman education more generally, see Bloomer 2011: 139–69.

32. On Stoic theories of perception, see von Staden 1978; Watson 1988, ch. 3. Although for Stoics (in contrast to Plato) the senses are all we have to go on in terms of information about the world, our own responses to this information are often erroneous and need to be rigorously scrutinized and disciplined. On the role of these theories in generating a notion of unitary consciousness, which is a distinctive feature of Stoic philosophy of mind, see Long 1991.

33. Inwood 1985: 56.

34. The latter is caused by the *hēgemonikon*, the “commanding part” of the soul.

35. LS 39A4 (= Diog. Laert. 7.49–51), 39F (= Plut. *On Common Conceptions* 1084F–1085A), 53P (= Stob. 2.86,17–87,6), 62C8 (= Cic. *De fato* 42, using *uisum* for *phantasia*).

36. Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 15.20.2 (*SVF* 1.141). See Ioppolo 1990; Graver 2007: 24–26 (she translates *phantasiai* as “impressions”). Stoics viewed the mind as corporeal (e.g., LS 53B = Hierocles 1.5–33, 4.38–53). Seneca observes of the *animus* “mind” (*Ep.* 106.5), *et hoc corpus est*, “this, too, is corporeal” (see Inwood 2007 ad loc.).

37. See Diog. Laert. 7.111. Epictetus, for instance, typically characterizes a Stoic’s purpose as “making correct use of representations” (*Epict. Diss.* 1.1.7, 2.1.4; see Long 1991: 103). He terms our power to assent or not *prohairesis* (*Epict. Diss.* 3.1.40). The innovative nature of the Stoic focus on assent in relation to ideas of individual personal identity is stressed by Taylor 1989: 137. See also Long 1991.

38. This was apparently the view of Chrysippus, which Galen differentiates from that of Zeno (*The Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato* 4.2.1–6, 4.3.2–5 = LS 65D, 65K), criticizing Chrysippus for inconsistency in his definition of *pathē* (on whether there was a significant difference, see Sorabji 1998; Gill 2005; Price 2005; Graver 2007). On Graver’s view (2007: 33) Chrysippus was merely elucidating what Zeno had already implied. Nussbaum (2001), taking the view that for the Stoics every instance of emotion is essentially a judgment concerning some present or potential state of affairs, explores the extent to which Stoic accounts fit with recent work on emotions in psychology and cognitive neuroscience.

2.4.1–2).<sup>39</sup> But they also regarded the passions as simultaneously (or almost simultaneously) physical. They are described in terms of the contraction (*ekklisis*) or expansion (*eparsis*) of the soul,<sup>40</sup> or as a movement of the soul (*kinēsis psuchēs*).<sup>41</sup>

As erroneous judgments, the passions involve the ascription of real value to external goods, items in the world that an agent does not control, including his or her own body.<sup>42</sup> How are such errors to be corrected? As A. A. Long puts it: “A committed Stoic will . . . use representations as the means of testing and training his character. He can represent imaginary situations by which to check his reactions to things or to confront those of his beliefs and desires which are not yet fully in tune with his ethical principles.”<sup>43</sup>

The would-be philosopher needs to train herself in this manner not to act on first impressions, not to make hasty judgements in assenting to the apparent propositional content of images. That is to say phenomena, which might at first seem terrifying, on careful reflection turn out to be indifferent, things which should not prompt an emotional response, as we remind ourselves that virtue is the only thing that matters and virtue may be exercised in relation to any set of circumstances.<sup>44</sup> This training not to act on first impressions bears a strong resemblance, we might note, to the practice of cognitive distancing, advocated within CBT.<sup>45</sup> Our preconceptions must be tackled through reason, but, as in CBT, it is essential that this be reinforced through practice.

#### VISUALIZING PAIN

Seneca advocates the *praemeditatio*, the rehearsal of feared events, early on in his series of letters, as we have seen. However, the first instance in the letters of a graphically imagined scene focused on the experience of pain serves an importantly different end.<sup>46</sup> Seneca’s handling of this material already makes clear the potent effect of the visual. Letter 14 begins by conceding that we all have an inborn affection for our bodies (14.1), but proceeds to address our tendency to be too

39. Graver 2007, ch. 4 (“Feelings Without Assent”), discussing Seneca’s treatment in *De ira* of this process at 93–101.

40. Andronicus, *On Passions* 1 = *SVF* 3.391 = LS 65B. Cf. Chrysippus’ position, discussed in n.38 above.

41. LS 65A = Stob. 2.88.8. Perhaps to be related to this is the approach of Galen, who describes emotions in terms of their physical correlates, as for instance in *Avoiding Distress*, ch. 7 (4, 6–8 BJP). See Singer 2017.

42. Cf. Epict. *Diss.* bk. 5 *ap.* Gell. 19.1, discussed by Graver 2007: 85–86. Seneca (*Ep.* 9.4, 18) offers a disconcertingly stark exploration of the implications of this position, while differentiating Stoic teaching from that of the Cynics (9.3).

43. Long 1991: 117; cf. Diog. Laert. 7.45–46, 111–14.

44. Cf. Epictetus, *Handbook* 5.

45. That is, developing the ability to treat one’s own thoughts or beliefs as constructions of reality rather than reality itself. See Robertson 2016: 383–85.

46. While *Ep.* 7 is also concerned with the spectacle of suffering, the focus there is on the failure of the spectators to identify with the *noxii*, the condemned men, whose pain is being offered as a form of entertainment in the arena. See Edwards 2019: 82–93.

attached to, too caught up in, bodily experience.<sup>47</sup> Seneca addresses our anxieties about vulnerability in general, noting our tendency to fear want and illness (14.3) but focusing particularly, in this letter, on our fear of pain which is deliberately inflicted. The graphic description of physical suffering here anticipates the examples of *praemeditatio* Seneca will later articulate in haunting detail. At this point, however, his reader is warned to recognize his own vulnerability and avoid exposing himself to perils he is not yet prepared for:

cogita... carcerem et cruces et eculeos et uncum et adactum per medium hominem qui per os emergeret stipitem et distracta in diuersum actis curribus membra, illam tunicam alimentis ignium et inlitam et textam, et quidquid aliud praeter haec commenta saeuitia est. non est itaque mirum, si maximus huius rei timor est cuius et uarietas magna et apparatus terribilis est. nam quemadmodum plus agit tortor quo plura instrumenta doloris exposuit (specie enim uincuntur qui patientiae restitissent), ita ex iis quae animos nostros subigunt et domant plura proficient quae habent quod ostendant.

Sen. *Ep.* 14.5–6

Imagine ... the prison and the cross and the rack and the hook and the stake, which is driven straight through a man until it sticks out of his throat, and human limbs which are torn apart by chariots driven in opposite directions, and the terrifying shirt smeared and interwoven with flammable matter, and whatever else besides these is devised by cruelty! It is not then surprising if our greatest terror is of a fate like this; it comes in many forms and its equipment is terrifying. For just as the torturer achieves more in proportion to the number of instruments which he puts on display—indeed the sight overcomes those who would have patiently suffered the pain—similarly, of all the forces which constrain and dominate our minds, the most effective ones are those which make a display.

Seneca dwells on these sufferings in vivid detail; he also emphasizes, quite strikingly, the role of the visual in affecting our responses, in intensifying our anticipation of what may happen to us. The potential of such mental images to disturb is underlined (*plura proficient quae habent quod ostendant; specie ... uincuntur*). It is the visible aspect of these deliberately inflicted sufferings which causes them to inspire much greater fear than, for instance, the suffering associated with illness. But Seneca's point in this letter is primarily deterrent rather than prophylactic. We should avoid bringing ourselves to the notice of the powerful, he advises, in order not to run the risk of arousing this most potent anxiety (14.7–8).<sup>48</sup> Certainly there are important similarities between this vignette and the scenarios Seneca later

47. Followed up in *Ep.* 15. On Book 2 generally, see Soldo forthcoming.

48. Here, as at a number of other points (for instance *Ep.* 19–21), Seneca is ostensibly advising his addressee Lucilius (in post as procurator in Sicily) to withdraw from public life (Griffin 1992: 347–48).

suggests we should actively rehearse in order to build our resilience. But in Letter 14 the disposition of the (anonymous) subject of torture is unimportant. The focus is on the response of the spectator, who imagines all too vividly the pain experienced.

A key feature of the *praemeditatio*, by contrast, is the reflection on elaborated examples of model individuals who endure with equanimity different kinds of suffering. There is, of course, a strong connection with the Roman discourse of exemplarity.<sup>49</sup> For Seneca, the particular impact of the example takes its force from the vividness with which it is presented. In Letter 6, he stresses the potency of examples in the following terms: *in rem praesentem uenias oportet, primum quia homines **amplius oculis quam auribus credunt**; deinde quia longum iter est per praecepta, breue et efficax per exempla*, “You must go to the scene of the action, first, because people give greater credit to their eyes than to their ears, and second because the journey is long if one follows precepts but short and to the point if one follows models” (6.5).<sup>50</sup> We should, of course, bear in mind that this advice is offered at a relatively early point in the sequence of letters; later letters will make more complex demands on their addressee. All the same, we should recognize that for Seneca, vision is the most powerful medium of communication; *exempla* as he understands them, even when communicated verbally, have a visual impact. We shall return below to the particular significance of the phrase *in rem praesentem* in this characterization of the impact of *exempla*.<sup>51</sup>

Seneca frequently invokes specific instances of apparently dreadful events befalling particular historical individuals; we are to contemplate, imagining the scene in strongly visual terms, the fortitude with which Socrates, Mucius Scaevola, or Cato met the challenge of extreme physical suffering. This practice is first fleshed out in Letter 24. This letter opens with what is presented as a response to Lucilius’ anxiety about an imminent lawsuit. Lucilius, Seneca alleges, is expecting reassuring advice from Seneca: *existimas me suasurum, ut meliora tibi ipse proponas et adquiescas spei blandae*, “You think I am going to persuade you to imagine a better outcome and to reassure yourself with comforting hope.”<sup>52</sup> Instead, Seneca advises (at 24.2, quoted earlier) that Lucilius would be better off imagining the worst. To assist him in stabilizing his response, Seneca proposes that Lucilius should contemplate historical examples of fortitude. Other instances (such as that of Socrates

49. See Roller 2004 and 2018 (ch. 8 focuses particularly on Seneca); Langlands 2018 (particularly ch. 4, “The Experience of Learning from Exempla”). She notes (87–88) the cognitive role of *exempla* in communicating what virtue is. For Seneca’s use of historical *exempla*, see also Mayer 1991 and Maso 1999.

50. Cf. *Rhet. Her.* 4.62 (quoted below).

51. On the transformative effect of *exempla*, see Dressler 2012, esp. (on this passage) 164–69.

52. Reassurance is sometimes Seneca’s emphasis in earlier letters, where he advises his addressee not to be too anxious over what may happen in the future, e.g., *Ep.* 13.4. Indeed, as Armisen-Marchetti notes (2008: 107–109), Seneca occasionally seems to take this position in later letters, though we should note that his concern here is with the uncontrolled (rather than the trained) imagination. See also Manning 1976 on *Ep.* 98.

enduring execution in 24.4) are mentioned in passing, but vignettes of Mucius Scaevola and the Younger Cato are embellished with graphic detail. Scaevola, having failed to kill the Etruscan king, chooses to burn off his own hand (the flesh drips into the flames, 24.5), while Cato the Younger shows spectacular persistence in taking his own life, ripping out his own entrails, after doctors have sewn up the wound inflicted in his first attempt (24.6–8).<sup>53</sup> *Imagines* in the letters are usually developed in relation to named individuals, some historical (Socrates and Cato figure with particular frequency), some contemporary (such as Seneca's friend Bassus, discussed below), though sometimes exemplars are anonymous (at 24.14 Seneca invokes the example of a slave-woman enduring the pain of childbirth).<sup>54</sup> Visual impact is often underlined. In later letters, familiar examples may sometimes be reduced to an iconic phrase, a single arresting image we should summon into our minds when needed. In Letter 66, Seneca invokes the shrivelled stump of Mucius' hand, *truncam illam et retorridam manum Mucii* (66.51), while elsewhere Cato's self-inflicted wound is made to stand for Cato's virtue: *Catonis scissum manu sua uulnus* (67.7).<sup>55</sup> Again and again, Seneca exhorts his readers to linger over these gruesome images with imperatives such as *cogita*,<sup>56</sup> or variants of the phrase *propone tibi*, "Imagine for yourself."<sup>57</sup>

Letter 30 reiterates the claim that *securitas* comes from being prepared to meet death (30.8), offering as a more low-key exemplary figure Aufidius Bassus, a distinguished elderly man whose body is now failing. Bassus has completely resigned himself to the prospect of dying: *eo animo uultuque finem suum spectat, quo alienum spectare nimis secure putares*, "He contemplates his own end with the courage and countenance which you would regard as excessive indifference in a man who so contemplated another's" (30.3). The experience of talking with Bassus, who is on the brink of a death for which he is fully prepared and who discusses his situation so calmly, has, Seneca claims, a particularly potent effect. Bassus has expressed thoughts whose content is already familiar to Seneca; he is not offering new ideas. Yet in his mouth they gain new efficacy: *libenter haec, mi Lucili, audio non tamquam noua, sed tamquam in rem praesentem perductus*, "I am glad to hear such words, my dear Lucilius—not as new to me, but as leading me into the presence of an actual fact" (30.15, cf. §7). This scene is less obviously visual in its emphasis, although Bassus is presented as playing the role of spectator in relation to his own deathbed. We should note the recurrence of the phrase *in rem praesentem* (this time in relation to words heard rather than, as at 6.5, something

53. See further Edwards 2019: 139–43.

54. Specifically female experience plays a very limited role in the letters, however.

55. Cf. Socrates' cup of hemlock (13.14) and Horatius Cocles described as *imaginem uirtutis* (120.8). See Langlands 2018, esp. chs. 7 and 10 on different treatments of Mucius.

56. E.g., *Ep.* 14.6, 91.7–8.

57. E.g., *Ep.* 24.2 (quoted above), 74.7 *hanc imaginem animo tuo propone*. Cf. *Ben.* 6.30.2. For aural imagining, see *Ep.* 56.1: *propone nunc tibi omnia genera uocum, quae in odium possunt aures adducere*.

seen), which we shall explore shortly. Lucilius, too, of course (and anyone else) may have this experience of immediacy reading Seneca's description.

Seneca's addressee, as he develops a more robust and theoretically informed understanding of Stoic doctrine, is becoming equipped to focus in more detail on preparation for every kind of suffering. This is not just a matter of imagining heroes of the past withstanding suffering but of imagining ourselves doing so too, as Letter 24 already suggests; the meditation on *exempla*, the admiration we feel for their endurance, helps us to imagine ourselves in similar circumstances. Critics have sometimes taken the *Epistulae morales* to task for their repetitious nature. But Seneca makes clear that repetition is essential to the efficacy of Stoic doctrine and practice. Stoic thinking must be deeply embedded, as he comments in Letter 71, in a discussion of Stoic value theory:

haec, nisi alte descendit et diu sedit et animum non coloravit, sed infecit,  
nihil ex his, quae promiserat, praestat.

Sen. *Ep.* 71.32

This system, unless it has penetrated deeply and sunk in for a long time, and has not just tinged but thoroughly permeated the soul, does not actualize any of its promises.<sup>58</sup>

The metaphor of dyeing highlights the physical impact of Stoic training on the soul. Marcus Aurelius, too (*To Himself* 5.16), uses the analogy of dyeing to conceptualize the impact of *phantasiai* on the soul.<sup>59</sup>

The concerns of Seneca's Letter 71 are developed further in Letter 76, whose final section (§§33–35) focuses on the wise person's assiduous practice of *praemeditatio*. Seneca observes, again in strongly visual terms: "If a man can behold the flash of a sword with unflinching eyes, if he knows that it makes no difference to him whether his soul takes wing through his mouth or through a wound in his throat, you may call him happy" (76.33).<sup>60</sup> Under such circumstances, we may bolster our spirits with the words of Aeneas to the Sibyl: *omnia praecepi atque animo mecum ipse peregi*, "Within my soul I have anticipated and thought through all matters" (*Aen.* 6.105).<sup>61</sup> Through repeatedly dwelling on what might appear to be misfortunes, Seneca argues, we too may become accustomed to them, and thus

58. Conversely Seneca several times describes vices as having dyed the soul—and therefore being all the more difficult to root out; cf., e.g., *Ep.* 59.9 *non enim inquinati sumus, sed infecti*. For an analysis of the arguments in *Ep.* 71, see Inwood 2007 ad loc.

59. On Marcus' distinctive use of the term *phantasia*, see Sellars 2020. Galen, drawing on Stoic thinking, writes about the deep stain of *pathē* (*Affections and Errors of the Soul* 1.5, V.25 K. = 18 De Boer). I am grateful to Peter Singer for drawing these passages to my attention. See further Singer forthcoming.

60. *Si rectis oculis gladios micantes uidet et si scit sua nihil interesse, utrum anima per os an per iugulum exeat beatum uoca.*

61. Virgil is the author most frequently quoted in the letters. Here, as often elsewhere, the would-be philosopher is invited to imagine himself as an epic hero (see Edwards 2018).

able to resist their effect. “A large part of the evil stems from its novelty. . . . The wise man gets himself used to future evils,” he comments at *Ep.* 76.34–35: *magna . . . pars est apud imperitos mali nouitas. . . ideo sapiens assuescit futuris malis.*<sup>62</sup> A firm grasp of Stoic values enables one to see how it is possible to be happy even in the face of extreme bodily suffering.<sup>63</sup> But this insight must be underwritten by practice.

Letter 78 offers a detailed *meditatio* exercise tailored to the current needs of Seneca’s correspondent Lucilius, apparently ill in bed:

memoriam in ea, quae maxime miratus es, sparge. tunc tibi fortissimus quisque et uictor doloris occurrat: ille, qui cum uarices exsecandas praeberet, legere librum perseuerauit; ille, qui non desiit ridere, cum hoc ipsum irati tortores omnia instrumenta crudelitatis suae experirentur. non uincetur dolor ratione, qui uictus est risu? quidquid uis nunc licet dicas, destillationes et uim continuae tussis egerentem uiscerum partes et febrem praecordia ipsa torrentem et sitim et artus in diuersum articulis exeuntibus tortos; plus est flamma et eculeus et lamina et uulneribus ipsis intumescentibus quod illa renouaret et altius urget impressum. inter haec tamen aliquis non gemuit. ‘parum est’; non rogauit. ‘parum est’; non respondit. ‘parum est’; risit et quidem ex animo. uis tu post hoc dolorem deridere?

Sen. *Ep.* 78.18–19

Cast your memory over those things which you have particularly admired. Then think of all the men of great bravery who have overcome pain: of the one who continued reading his book as he allowed the excision of varicose veins; of the one who kept smiling, though that very fact so enraged his torturers that they used on him every instrument of their cruelty. If pain can be conquered by a smile, will it not be conquered by reason? You may recount now whatever you like—colds, hard coughing spells that bring up parts of our insides, fever that burns us to the marrow, thirst, limbs so contorted that the joints stick out in different directions; worse than these, though, are the stake, the rack, the red-hot plates, the instrument that reopens wounds while the wounds are still swollen and that drives their imprint still deeper. Nevertheless there have been some who, despite these, have not uttered a moan. “Not enough!” says the torturer; but the victim has not asked for release. “Not enough!” he says again; but there is no answer. “Not enough!”; the victim has smiled, and with spirit. Can you not bring yourself, after an example like this, to make light of pain?<sup>64</sup>

62. See also, e.g., *Ep.* 107.4, recommending *cogitatio assidua*.

63. See Inwood 2007: 216–17.

64. On the vein-cutting, cf. Cic. *Tusc.* 2.35, 53 (naming Marius as the subject). For the scenes of torture, Summers (1910 ad loc.) notes parallels in Sen. *Contr.*, e.g., 2.5.4.

Repetition is a crucial feature of such exercises—both within the exercise itself, as here (*parum est*), and in its repeated performance. This exercise allows the would-be philosopher to identify with a number of heroic individuals, to hone an ambition to match their bravery, while putting his own suffering in perspective. At the same time, each iteration allows the would-be philosopher to scrutinize and calibrate his own response to the pain. While Letter 14 drew a sharp distinction between the sufferings of illness and pain deliberately inflicted, here Seneca slides from one to the other. The imagery of Letter 14 now serves a very different end, as Seneca's addressee is explicitly invited to admire and emulate the bravery of the torture victim.

### SENSUOUS COGNITION

Cognitive neuroscience has tended to confirm the Stoic insight that representations as imaginative phenomena are not radically distinct from perceptions of actual objects in the world. Gallese and Lakoff, for instance, document the ways in which phenomena often thought of as “mental imagery” use the same neural apparatus in the sensory-motor system as physical action and incoming sensation;<sup>65</sup> “imagining and doing use a shared neural substrate,” they underline.<sup>66</sup> To imagine oneself having an experience is, in sensory-motor terms, to rehearse having that experience, to rehearse holding one's hand in the fire, to rehearse feeling the pain, and thereby, on Seneca's model at least, to become accustomed to it.

The “representations,” or *phantasiai*, which play such an important part in Stoic logic and ethics are by no means exclusively visual.<sup>67</sup> As Long notes, “What the Stoics subsume under the ‘representational faculty’ includes impressions mediated by the five senses.”<sup>68</sup> Seneca's guided imagery might itself involve multi-modal sensory experience; sound, smell, touch are often invoked.<sup>69</sup> Mucius' flesh, for instance, with the repeated *s*'s of *nudis ossibus*, implicitly sizzles on the brazier at *Ep.* 24.5. In Letter 86, in lighter mode, Seneca evokes the heroic smell of the inspirational military hero Scipio Africanus (86.12–13) who, even in his retirement, was exemplary in his vigorous farming activity and basic bathing arrangements.<sup>70</sup> Seneca invites his reader in Letter 56 to conjure up (*propone*

65. Gallese and Lakoff 2005: 457. This is to be contrasted with a supramodal model according to which the brain contains separate modules for action and for perception and planning (459). Their lucid discussion synthesizes the findings of important recent work in neuroscience. Cf. Kosslyn and Thompson (2000), who analyze the distinct but overlapping operations of imagery and perception, noting that they share a core set of processes.

66. Gallese and Lakoff 2005: 456.

67. Though Roman authors such as Cicero tend to use *uisum* (e.g., *Acad.* 1.40) or *uisio* (*Tusc.* 2.42) to convey the Greek *phantasia*. Cf. Quintilian's use of *uisio* in *Inst.* 6.2.32 (quoted below).

68. Long 1991: 106.

69. There are suggestive parallels here with the guided imagery used in CBT. See, for instance, Beck 1995, ch. 13.

70. See Edwards 2019: 248–49.

*nunc tibi*) the varied sounds of the baths, the grunts, slaps, shouts, splashes, squeals, as a source of (rather humorous) annoyance, causing him, he asserts, to hate his own power of hearing; these sounds the would-be philosopher should learn to screen out, he acknowledges (or else he should recognize his limitations and change his lodgings).

The dynamic role of other senses besides the visual in a range of ancient literary texts has been suggestively highlighted in recent studies. The essay collection edited by Butler and Purves, for instance, challenges the traditional hierarchy of the senses privileging sight, and explores the phenomenon of synaesthesia, in the sense of shifting between, or simultaneous deployment of, sensory modes.<sup>71</sup> In Seneca's writing, I would suggest, the visual does seem to dominate.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless interactions between the senses, in particular the connection between vision and sensation, play a crucial role. The cognitive model outlined by Gallese and Lakoff is again relevant here: "The sight of an object at a given location automatically triggers a 'plan' for a specific action directed toward that location—a simulated potential action."<sup>73</sup> Observing a particular object, we imagine, on their model, what it might be like to experience what we see through touch.

This applies not just to what we actually see but also, importantly, to what we can imagine. To read about or to imagine a scenario is itself (at least potentially) to prompt the simulation of the actions depicted. To imagine a scene such as Mucius Scaevola standing before the Etruscan king may be a stimulus to rehearse its "somato-sensory component," to imagine, perhaps, what it feels like to experience a particular form of pain.<sup>74</sup> As the author of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* puts it (4.62), when an orator deploys a powerful *exemplum*, his point comes before the eyes of his hearer; he even feels he can touch it: *manu temptare possit*, "He can test it with his hand." Seneca, I suggest, is particularly sensitive to this interrelationship.<sup>75</sup> Helen Slaney, in her insightful discussion of the aesthetic theories of Gottfried Herder applied to the experience of viewing classical sculpture, writes tellingly of "the beholder's gaze as haptic proxy."<sup>76</sup> Cognition through imagination can also be considered a multi-sensory experience.

In the case of a *praemeditatio* exercise featuring an *exemplum* such as Mucius, the would-be philosopher trains him- or herself in kinaesthetic participation,

71. Butler and Purves 2013. Also relevant are the volumes in the Routledge series on the ancient senses, notably the volume on touch edited by Purves (2018).

72. See above on *Ep.* 6.5. We might want to compare the privileged role of the visual in CBT. For the role of the visual in Seneca's writing generally, see Solimano 1991 and Kirichenko 2013 (ch. 9 offers some perceptive comments on the letters).

73. Gallese and Lakoff 2005: 460.

74. "Imagination is mental simulation" (Gallese and Lakoff 2005: 458). To observe (or imagine) a scene need not necessarily entail identification with the observed (or imagined) agent, however, nor an identical emotional experience (see Cairns forthcoming).

75. For an introduction to ancient theoretical debates concerning the nature of touch (including pain), see Purves's introduction to Purves 2018.

76. Slaney 2016: 90, herself drawing on recent research in cognitive neuroscience.

identifying with the heroic sufferer. To observe is not necessarily to empathize, of course, but in this exercise the would-be philosopher works to tune in to the imagined exemplar's experience.<sup>77</sup> Seneca, again stressing the importance of regular repetition, compares the mental training he advocates for the would-be philosopher with the kind of physical training undergone by would-be athletes (*Ep.* 15.2–3).<sup>78</sup> Intriguingly, Gallese and Lakoff cite recent studies demonstrating that “heartbeat and breathing frequency increase during motor imagery of physical exercise. As in real physical exercise, they increase linearly with the increase of the imagined effort.”<sup>79</sup> The mental rehearsal of a particular, physically strenuous experience can stimulate a corresponding physical response.

In this context, it is worth remembering that, for Stoics, emotions themselves are held to be bodily experiences. As Seneca puts it:

non puto te dubitaturum, an adfectus corpora sint ... tamquam ira, amor, tristitia, nisi dubitas, an uultum nobis mutant, an frontem adstringant, an faciem diffundant, an ruborem euocent, an fugent sanguinem.

Sen. *Ep.* 106.5

I do not think you will doubt that emotions are bodily things ... , like anger, love, sadness; unless you doubt whether they change our expressions, contract our foreheads, relax the features, summon blushes, or drive away the blood?

The body may sometimes be subject to certain involuntary reactions, such as shivering or blenching, which do not truly constitute emotions.<sup>80</sup> But more developed responses, once assent has been given, also have a significant physical dimension on the Stoic model. As we saw earlier, mental training has a physical impact, “dyeing” the soul, a soul which is itself corporeal in nature. To train the mind, then, is also to train the body. However much Seneca might wish to rise above the distractions of bodily experience, the corporeal nature of mental phenomena remains inescapable.

#### EXEMPLARITY, IMMEDIACY, AND IDENTIFICATION

At this point I should like to return to the issue of exemplarity; for the Roman practice of invoking *exempla* to advocate particular forms of behavior becomes in

77. Cairns forthcoming, in a discussion of theories of emotional contagion and their potential applicability to an audience's experience of Greek tragedy, offers a lucid analysis of the important distinction which often holds between the emotions of agents and the emotions of observers (even when the latter are primed by the former). On the role of internal onlookers in a description as models for the emotions of hearers/readers, see Webb 1997: 122–23.

78. Though he regards intensive physical exercise as a regrettable waste of time: *stulta est enim, mi Lucili, et minime conueniens litterato uiro occupatio exercendi lacertos et dilatandi ceruicem ac latera firmandi*, “For the business of exercising one's biceps, bulking up one's neck and firming one's sides is foolish and quite unsuitable for an educated man” (*Ep.* 15.2).

79. Gallese and Lakoff 2005: 464.

80. See Graver 2007, ch. 4.

Seneca's writing another mechanism for training the imagination of the would-be philosopher. As Seneca observes, underlining what he learned from repeated visits to his elderly friend Bassus—a man who, through prolonged reflection, had come to accept the prospect of imminent death with great calm—at *Ep.* 30.15: *libenter haec, mi Lucili, audio non tamquam noua, sed tamquam in rem praesentem perductus*, “I am glad to hear such words, my dear Lucilius—not as new to me, but as leading me into the presence of an actual fact.”<sup>81</sup> Discussing the concept of *repraesentatio*, James Ker has suggestive observations to make about the semantics of *praesens*.<sup>82</sup> The term *repraesentare* often has the sense of “recall or depict vividly” (cf. *OLD* s.v. 3–7). We might note particularly *OLD*'s sense 5: “to make present to the mind (by verbal or other means).” Thus, the term is both demonstrative and performative.<sup>83</sup> The earliest example of *repraesentare* with a person as object seems to be Horace, *Epistles* 1. The speaker asks whether someone with a stern face, wearing a shabby toga and barefoot, can really be thought to represent fully the *uirtus* and *mores* of Cato:

Si quis uultu toruo ferus et pede nudo  
exiguaeque togae simulet textore Catonem  
uirtutemne repraesentet moresque Catonis?

Hor. *Ep.* 1.19.12–14

What if someone were to perform Cato with his grim and savage look, with bare feet and meager toga—would he thus give reality to Cato's virtue and morals?

To mimic the superficial appearance of Cato, however convincingly, is not the same as to take on and follow his moral character. On the contrary, one who simply looks like Cato is merely a sham. Full *repraesentatio* of one's model is a challenge, but it is this effect which *praemeditatio* aims to generate.

The term *repraesentare*, as we see from this instance, is heavily implicated in what Roller terms the “Roman discourse of exemplarity.”<sup>84</sup> Within this, as Ker notes, *repraesentatio* would seem to capture in particular both the commemorative axis and the “ideologically efficacious life” that *exempla* can take on within “any given present.”<sup>85</sup> Dressler, examining the relationship between *exemplum* and metaphor in Seneca's writing, develops Ker's insights further. The prefix *prae-* common to *repraesentare* and *in rem praesentem* plays a critical role (we might compare *praestat* in *Ep.* 71.32, quoted earlier). Thus *praesens* in the phrase *in rem praesentem* does not just mean bodily/temporally present but is much more

81. See too *Ep.* 98.18: *quid opus est uerbis? in rem praesentem eamus*, “What need is there for words? Let us approach the matter itself.”

82. Ker 2007: 349–51.

83. As Dressler comments (2012: 161).

84. Roller 2004: 51. Cf. Ker 2007: 342.

85. Ker 2007: 342.

emphatic, conveying “a stronger sense of presence”—salience, intensity, immediacy, availability.<sup>86</sup>

In Letter 59, Seneca offers some comments on appropriate literary style (a topic revisited on several occasions in the letters). Similes and metaphors can be useful, Seneca advises. He observes approvingly that some ancient prose writers,

qui simpliciter et demonstrandae rei causa eloquebantur, parabolis referti sunt, quas existimo necessarias, non ex eadem causa qua poetis, sed ut imbecillitatis nostrae adminicula sint, ut et dicentem et audientem in rem praesentem adducant.

Sen. *Ep.* 59.6

whose expression was simple and concerned only with proving their case, are full of comparisons; these are necessary, I think, not in the way in which they are necessary for the poets, but in order that they may serve as supports against our weakness, so that both speaker and listener are brought face to face with the matter at issue.

The phase *in rem praesentem* in this instance serves as an important variant on the idea of putting before one’s eyes.<sup>87</sup> Seneca’s prime example here is the Roman philosopher Sextius, who, in his writing, compares the behavior of the wise man to that of an army marching in a hollow square, constantly at the ready against an attack from whatever direction. The impact of Sextius’ simile is described in the same terms as the impact of vividly conveyed *exempla* which Seneca discusses at *Ep.* 6.5. The potency of immediate writing has a specific ethical/didactic role within his Stoic system. Yet, as Dressler notes, *praesens* shifts to *cogitatus*, so that “Seneca derives the power of *exempla* from immediate material presence, only to explain that such presence does not matter.”<sup>88</sup> The trained imagination, on Seneca’s model, can generate a reality effect whose psychotropic potency is quite equal to that of what is actually witnessed. The dazzling vividness of Seneca’s similes and metaphors, a distinctive feature of his prose, is, we may suspect, not unconnected with the notable role he attributes to *cogitationes* in his armory of psychotherapeutic practice.<sup>89</sup> Correctly deployed, a trained imagination can summon up the right role model with such vividness that the imagining subject can identify in a quasi-physical manner with the imagined exemplar.

86. As Ker stresses (2007: 349), the linguistic function is underwritten by the culture of material exchange (cf. *OLD* s.v. “repraesentatio”).

87. Dressler 2012: 152–55.

88. Dressler 2012: 161. As Dressler comments, “the actions of one’s role model perform virtue in the theatrical sense but also in the linguistic” (165).

89. On the work done by Seneca’s imagery, see also Bartsch 2009.

## ENARGEIA: PHILOSOPHY AND RHETORIC

There is an important connection here with what is termed by ancient rhetorical theorists *enargeia*, a key quality in *ekphrasis*, defined, for instance, by the first-century CE theorist Theon as “a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes.”<sup>90</sup> Seneca himself was celebrated as an orator (though none of his speeches survive) and had certainly undergone an orator’s training in his youth.<sup>91</sup> The particular techniques he uses to philosophical ends need to be appreciated in relation to rhetorical traditions honed in the Roman law courts and schools.<sup>92</sup> Cicero, who remained the dominant model for aspiring orators, was celebrated throughout antiquity for his exploitation of the emotive power of vivid verbal images.<sup>93</sup> Ann Vasaly observes, “of the connection of such verbally produced images with the emotions the ancient rhetoricians had little doubt.”<sup>94</sup>

Cicero’s admirer Quintilian, in his treatise on the education of the orator, offers a telling analysis (6.2.25–32) of how the orator may generate intense emotion (*affectus*) in his audience.<sup>95</sup> An essential prerequisite is for the orator to summon the required emotion in himself (6.2.26 *moueamur ipsi*).<sup>96</sup> But how are we to achieve this, he asks, given that emotions (*motus*) are not in our power (6.2.29)? The course of action he outlines offers suggestive insights into the perceived connection between imagination and emotion:

quas φαντασίας Graeci uocant (nos sane uisiones appellemus), per quas imagines rerum absentium ita repraesentantur animo ut eas cernere oculis ac praesentes habere uideamur, has quisquis bene ceperit is erit in affectibus potentissimus. (30) quidam dicunt εὐφαντασίωτον qui sibi res uoces actus

90. Theon, *Prog.* 11.

91. Griffin 1992: 53–54; see *Ep.* 49.2. Seneca’s reputation as a speaker is noted by Dio 59.19 (he also composed speeches to be delivered by the young emperor Nero; see Tac. *Ann.* 13.3, 13.11.1; Dio 61.3.1). On the rhetorical texture of his philosophical writing, see Wilson 2007. As Armisen-Marchetti comments (2008: 106) in relation to the *praemeditatio* exercise sketched in *Ep.* 91, “this imaginative representation he illustrates with rhetorical *color*.” Seneca himself (e.g., *Ep.* 75.2) contrasts his own style more generally with that of orators.

92. His father, the Elder Seneca, offers, in his *Controuersiae* and *Suasoriae* (of which Seneca was one of the dedicatees), extensive insights into the workings of the rhetorical schools in this period. See Bloomer 2011.

93. On the rhetorical technique of *enargeia* “vividness,” see Webb 1997. Cicero’s mastery of visual description is noted by, e.g., Gellius, *NA* 10.3.12 (discussed by Ker 2007: 345).

94. Vasaly 1993: 95–97, citing *Rhet. Her.* 2.49, 4.51, 69; Cic. *Inv.* 1.104 (*rem uerbis quam maxime ante oculos eius apud quem dicitur ponimus, ut id quod indignum est proinde illi uideatur indignum ac si ipse interfuerit ac praesens uiderit*, “We place the matter as much as possible before the eyes of the one to whom the speech is addressed, so that a shocking act will appear just as shocking as if he himself had been on the scene and seen the affair in person”); *De or.* 3.202; Quint. *Inst.* 8.3.61–71.

95. See the discussion of this passage in Webb 1997. She emphasizes the culturally specific nature of “imagination” as deployed by Greco-Roman orators. See further Goldhill 2007.

96. Other rhetorical theorists make similar claims; cf. Cic. *De or.* 2.189–96; *Orat.* 132; Hor. *Ars P.* 101–103.

secundum uerum optime finget: quod quidem nobis uolentibus facile continget; ... (31) occisum queror: non omnia quae in re praesenti accidisse credibile est in oculis habebō? non percussor ille subitus erumpet? non expauescet circumuentus, exclamabit, uel rogabit uel fugiet? non ferientem, non concidentem uidebō? non animo sanguis et pallor et gemitus, extremus denique expirantis hiatus insidet? (32) insequetur ἐνάργεια, quae a Cicerone illustratio et euidētia nominatur, quae non tam dicere uidetur quam ostendere, et affectus non aliter quam si rebus ipsis intersimus sequentur.

Quint. *Inst.* 6.2.29–32

Someone who has who has properly taken up what the Greeks call *phantasiai* (we might call them “visions”), by which the images of absent things are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem to see them with our own eyes and have them right in front of us, that person will show the greatest power in the deployment of emotions. Some call a person *euphantasiōtos* who is exceptionally good at realistically imagining to himself things, words, and actions. This can indeed easily be made to happen at will. ... Suppose I am complaining that someone has been murdered. Will I not have before my eyes all the circumstances which one might believe to have happened in the course of the event? Will not the killer burst out all of a sudden, and the victim tremble, cry for help, and either beg for mercy or try to run away? Shall I not see one man striking the blow and the other collapsing? Won't the blood, the white face, the groans, the last gasp of the dying be imprinted on my mind? What results is *enargeia*, what is called by Cicero *illustratio* and *euidētia*, a quality which makes us seem not so much to be talking about something as revealing it. Emotions will arise just as if we were present at the event itself.

The orator will think of a believable scenario: *quae in re praesenti accidisse credibile est* (6.2.31). By this means, he will marshal the emotions of his audience. In Vasaly's analysis, Quintilian evokes a connected sequence: the speaker first summons images from his memory, where they are stored. If he is skilful and imaginative, these stimulate the particular emotional response he had hoped to create in himself;<sup>97</sup> then, through vivid description, the orator stimulates corresponding *uisiones* in the minds of his audience, which provoke the emotional reaction he needs to win his case.<sup>98</sup> Quintilian in his *Institutio oratoria* defends the orator's manipulation of emotion (the emotions in question are most often pity, *miseratio/misericordia*, or indignation, *indignatio*). He takes issue here precisely with

97. *Frequenter motus sum ut me non lacrimae solum deprenderet, sed pallor et ueri simile dolor* (6.2.36).

98. On Quintilian's deft exploitation of the mind's eye, see further Webb 1997; Leigh 2004; Dozier 2013.

philosophers who contend that orators should not resort to emotional arousal (6.1.7).<sup>99</sup> That the philosophers targeted here are Stoics has been convincingly argued by Catherine Atherton.<sup>100</sup> Nevertheless, as Ruth Webb notes, Quintilian's comments presuppose a background in philosophical psychology.<sup>101</sup>

Quintilian himself compares the emotive effects of rhetorical *phantasia* with *ekphrasis*, the verbal description embedded within a larger literary work (6.2.29).<sup>102</sup> Similarly Pseudo-Longinus, writing probably in the first century CE,<sup>103</sup> offers an account of the term *phantasia* which is, he says, used of literary passages whose vividness is such that "inspired by a strong emotion (*pathos*), you seem to see what you describe and bring it vividly before the eyes of the audience" (*Subl.* 15.1, trans. Russell).<sup>104</sup> The impact of such passages in the work of the poets is described by Pseudo-Longinus as one of *ekplēxis*, "stunned wonder" as Shadi Bartsch nicely translates it.<sup>105</sup>

The technique described by Quintilian (and Pseudo-Longinus) and the practice advocated by Seneca appear to differ radically in the ends which they serve. On Bartsch's reading, the distinction between rhetorical (or poetic) and philosophical (specifically Stoic) deployments of vivid description (*enargeia*) is fundamental.<sup>106</sup> The orator (or poet) seeks to move, the Stoic to repress emotion (Bartsch's argument thus aligns with Atherton's claim that Quintilian, in defending the place of emotion in forensic oratory, is arguing specifically against the Stoics). The gruesome scene of murder painted by the advocate is intended to provoke intense emotion; the equally gruesome scenes the philosopher conjures up are meant to have a very different effect. This is an effect, Bartsch argues, achieved precisely through their repetition, which is intended to dull our response to them. For the Stoic, suggests Bartsch, *ekplēxis* is not (as it is for the skilled orator) a goal to be striven for but rather a danger to be avoided at all costs. The would-be philosopher must, through ceaseless reflection and re-evaluation, train him- or herself to maintain Stoic equanimity even in the face of the most apparently horrifying images.

99. Cf. too the disapproval expressed by P. Rutilius Rufus and Elder Cato of S. Sulpicius Rufus for emotive appeal (Cic. *De or.* 1.227–28) and the Stoic approach of Rutilius during his own trial (1.230). Leigh comments (2004: 131) that "the tension in Cicero between the serious Hellenistic philosopher and the practical orator is finally irreconcilable."

100. Atherton 1988: 404–405.

101. Webb 1997: 112.

102. Webb 1997.

103. The dating of *On the Sublime* is disputed; Heath (1999) argues that the text is a third-century CE composition.

104. He goes on to distinguish between *phantasia* as deployed by orators and as deployed by poets. See Webb 1997: 117–18, 125–26; Mazzucchi 2010 ad loc. The passage is also discussed by Bartsch 2007: 90. Only Pseudo-Longinus, it seems, distinguishes between *enargeia* and *ekplēxis*. However, as Goldhill notes (2007: 6–7), Pseudo-Longinus goes on to admit that prose also delights in astounding.

105. Cf. Goldhill 2007: 5, emphasizing the violence of *enargeia*.

106. Bartsch 2007. Cf. Mazzucchi 2010 on Pseudo-Longinus, whose use of the term *enargeia* here is, as he underlines, significantly different from that of the Stoics.

The right cognitive habits must be assiduously cultivated. Thus, for Bartsch, Seneca repeatedly proposes the deliberate cultivation of a vivid image in order to inure the reader to its effect. This is the reason, she argues, “why so much of Seneca’s writing is filled with the grisliest of descriptions, with startling pictures of torture and dismemberment.”<sup>107</sup>

Seneca’s reader, suggests Bartsch, is being trained precisely in non-responsiveness. The argument of Letter 24 (discussed earlier) might seem to support this view.<sup>108</sup> Also open to such a reading is Letter 91, in which Seneca sets out arguments that are recommended for repetition, in order that we may protect ourselves against the kind of devastation experienced by his friend, whose home city of Lyons has been destroyed by fire:<sup>109</sup>

cogitanda ergo sunt omnia et animus aduersus ea quae possunt euenire firmandus. exilia, tormenta, bella, naufragia meditare....tota ante oculos sortis humanae condicio ponatur, nec quantum frequenter euenit sed quantum plurimum potest euenire praesumamus animo, si nolumus opprimi nec illis inusitatis uelut nouis obstupefieri; in plenum cogitanda fortuna est.

Sen. *Ep.* 91.7–8

We should therefore think over all contingencies, and should toughen our minds against possible misfortunes. Exile, torture, wars, shipwreck—we must reflect on these.... Let us place before our eyes the whole of the human condition, and let us summon to our minds in anticipation, not the worst of what often occurs, but the very greatest misfortune that can possibly happen, if we are not to be overwhelmed or even dazed by the novelty of unaccustomed misfortunes. We must reflect upon fortune in its entirety.

Here, too, we might note, Seneca conjures up a scene to be apprehended visually: *tota ante oculos sortis humanae condicio ponatur*. Certainly Bartsch makes an important point; *securitas*—immunity from emotional turbulence—is a crucial goal in Seneca’s project.<sup>110</sup> The effect of *praemeditatio* is that we are not taken unawares; we have steeled ourselves, ready to withstand fortune’s assaults. Yet I think there is more going on here than a dulling of emotional response.

#### ROUSING VIRTUE

Overcoming the fear of death is essential if one is to attain *securitas*, or *tranquillitas animi*. The dulling of anxiety is certainly one aspect of this. But I

107. Bartsch 2007: 91.

108. E.g., *Ep.* 24.9. See also *Ep.* 30.18: *tu tamen mortem ut numquam timeas semper cogita*, “You, however: think always about death so that you never fear it.”

109. On this letter, see Manning 1976.

110. See, e.g., *Ep.* 75.13, 17–18.

would suggest that there is also a more active emotional content in Seneca's guided imagery. It is here then that I want to take issue with the position set out by Bartsch. *Meditatio*, for Seneca, teaches us to embrace death "not as an evil, but as a possible means of exercising virtue," as Newman argues.<sup>111</sup> The successful transformation of the *proficiens* is demonstrated when he in turn becomes exemplary—a point Seneca makes explicit in Letter 98, which again lists the *exempla* of Mucius, Socrates, and Cato, as well as those of Rutilius and Regulus. Terrible things have all been overcome by someone; *et nos uincamus aliquid. ... nos quoque aliquid et ipsi faciamus animose; simus inter exempla*, "Let us also conquer something. ... Let us ourselves too do something courageously; let us be among the examples" (98.12–13).<sup>112</sup>

In Letter 67, citing a similar list of exemplars (§7), Seneca makes clear that, while in theory virtue is equally possible in all contexts, challenging situations paradoxically offer much more fruitful scenarios for its exercise. He cites the Stoic Attalus: *malo me Fortuna in castris suis quam in deliciis habeat*, "I prefer that Fortune should hold me in her camp rather than in the lap of luxury" (67.15). And:

beatus uero et uirtutis exactae tunc se maxime amat, cum fortissime expertus est et metuenda ceteris, si alicuius honesti officii pretia sunt, non tantum fert, sed amplexatur.

Sen. *Ep.* 71.28

The happy man, whose virtue is complete, loves himself most of all when his bravery has been put to the severest test, and when what is cause for fear in other men, if it is the price of some honorable deed, he not only endures but welcomes.

This is not just about anxiety dulled. We might also note his thrillingly paradoxical and still more explicit exhortation at *Ben.* 6.30.1: *Propone animo tuo carcerem, uincula, sordes, seruitutem, bellum, egestatem; haec sunt occasiones uoti tui*, "Set before your mind the dungeon, chains, disgrace, slavery, war, and poverty—these are the opportunities you pray for." Here then we find the would-be philosopher encouraged not merely to call up vividly imagined misfortunes and to regard with equanimity the idea of suffering them, but to embrace them as offering scope for heroic virtue; indeed, to pray for them. The philosopher Sextius, admired by Seneca, celebrates the ability of the wise man to transcend fear (59.8); he will be *interritus* ("undaunted"), an adjective which accords with the idea of Stoic impassivity. But the image of the wise man fused with the image of the marching army is itself a rousing object of contemplation. Seneca observes: *mouit me imago ab illo posita*, "I am moved by that image he

111. Newman 1989: 1478.

112. This move is particular to Seneca, as Newman (1989) emphasizes.

sets out” (59.7).<sup>113</sup> There is, we may suppose, a pleasurable frisson of adrenaline to be had in imagining oneself as a heroic exemplar. It is not accidental that Seneca so frequently resorts to rousing martial imagery in his ethical advice.<sup>114</sup>

These images do then seek to generate an emotional response, I would argue, but the proper emotional response is an intense, adrenaline-fueled admiration for and love of virtue—and the desire to enact it. Such a response might correspond to the Stoic *gaudium* (“joy”), one of the Stoic *eupatheiai*,<sup>115</sup> though we should also attend to the particular conceptual nuance at work here: the deployment of military language, the stimulus to action that will command admiration.<sup>116</sup> It is this, I think, which explains why Seneca uses such different strategies in training the would-be philosopher to withstand the impact of potentially frightening or horrific images on the one hand (which are so frequent in his work), and to resist that of seductive or pleasant images on the other; certainly there are passages which dwell on bodily pleasures, but they do so with the aim of engendering disgust.<sup>117</sup> Even though, presumably, we also need to inure ourselves to the appeal of such base pleasures, these scenes are not ones which the reader is encouraged to linger over, to rehearse repeatedly.

Virtue, for Seneca, is not an inert state but a process of movement. In Letter 39 he offers a vivid characterization of the virtuous individual in terms of his capacity to be aroused to noble ends:

habet enim hoc optimum in se generosus animus, quod concitatur ad honesta. neminem excelsi ingenii uirum humilia delectant et sordida; magnarum rerum species ad se uocat et extollit. quemadmodum flamma surgit in rectum, iacere ac deprimi non potest, non magis quam quiescere; ita noster animus in motu est, eo mobilius et actuosius, quo uehementior fuerit. sed felix, qui ad meliora hunc impetum dedit!

Sen. *Ep.* 39.2–3

For the most excellent quality possessed by the noble soul is this, that it may be roused to honorable things. No man of exalted character takes pleasure in that

113. Cf. the almost mystic language with which Seneca describes encounters with the *sapiens* at *Ep.* 94.40–41: “We are indeed benefited merely by encountering wise men; and you can be helped by a great man even when he does not speak. I could not easily tell you how it helps, though I am certain of the fact that it has happened” (*occursus mehercules ipse sapientium iuuat, et est aliquid quod ex magno uiro uel tacente proficias. nec tibi facile dixerim quemadmodum prosit, licet illud intellegam profuisse*).

114. E.g., “It was a great deed to conquer Carthage but a greater deed to conquer death” (24.10); “Are you asking me whom I have conquered? Not the Persians, nor the far-off Medes, nor any bellicose people from beyond the Dahae; not them but greed, ambition and the fear of death that has conquered the conquerors of the world” (71.37). See Lavery 1980; Galimberti 2001; Sommer 2001.

115. Characterized by Graver (2007: 87) as including “‘well-reasoned’ upliftings ... of the psyche” in response to what is recognized as an integral good. Cf. Diog. Laert. 7.116.

116. Elsewhere Bartsch comments of the pervasive military metaphors in Seneca’s writing that they enable the “refiguring of an essentially passive and intellectual practice on the part of the Stoic student as an act of martial resistance and self-defense” (2009: 203–204).

117. E.g., *Ep.* 122. See Berno 2008; Edwards 2017.

which is low and base. The vision of great things summons him and raises him up. Just as a flame springs up straight and cannot lie flat or be pressed down any more than it can stand still, so our mind is always in motion and, the more ardent it is, the more mobile and active. But happy is the man who has given it the impulse to better things.

Evident here, too, is the role of vision in stimulating this inner movement; it is the *species* (“appearance”) of great things which serves as a critical stimulus. This language of movement discloses the related nature of *eupatheiai* and *pathē*. The aroused state of the virtuous individual seems far removed from the mental tranquillity Seneca elsewhere holds out as his goal.

#### VIRTUE’S EPIPHANY

The would-be philosopher, as we have seen, is often cast as a soldier in the cause of virtue. Yet other frameworks for understanding the relationship are also significant. Later letters in the series explore the specifics of philosophical education in more technical detail. But at one point Seneca offers a gripping simile to convey the impact of both *praecepta* and *exempla* (*Ep.* 94.42–43).<sup>118</sup> Their transformative effect on the would-be philosopher is compared to the devotee’s experience when looking at statues of the gods:

Pythagoras ait alium animum fieri inrantibus templum deorumque simulacra ex uicino cernentibus et alicuius oraculi opperientibus uocem. quis autem negabit feriri quibusdam praeceptis efficaciter etiam imperitissimos? uelut his breuissimis uocibus, sed multum habentibus ponderis: nil nimis. ... haec cum ictu quodam audimus. ... adeo etiam sine ratione ipsa ueritas ducit.

Sen. *Ep.* 94.42–43

Pythagoras says that our souls undergo a change when we enter a temple and behold the images of the gods up close and wait for the pronouncements of an oracle. ... Who can deny though that even the most inexperienced are effectively struck by the force of certain precepts, as in the case of such brief but weighty sayings as ‘nothing in excess?’ ... As we hear these things we receive a kind of shock. ... Thus even without the working of reason the truth itself draws us.

Reason, *ratio*, is crucially important in the Stoic system; but here Seneca acknowledges the potency of other channels. An auditory response to particularly powerful sayings is analogous to the heightened experience of the worshipper beholding

118. Discussed by Newman 1989: 1483–84. *Ep.* 94 and 95 probe the definition of and the contributions made by *praecepta* and *decreta*. See Schafer 2009.

a sacred image of the god or listening to an oracle.<sup>119</sup> The emotional impact of the visual, the capacity of an object (in a particular context) to arouse religious awe, the special status of divinely sanctioned utterance are recognized and exploited here as Seneca uses this religious experience to convey the potential power of precepts and examples.<sup>120</sup> Despite Bartsch's arguments, it is hard not to see the blow here—the *ictus*—as resembling precisely the stunned wonder (*ekplēxis*) invoked by Pseudo-Longinus in his treatise on the sublime.<sup>121</sup>

Seneca's writing works to transpose these "immediate" sensory effects, to make them available to the would-be philosopher when he needs them most. This is not an easy transposition to bring about. But Seneca's program of philosophical education, his rigorous training of the imagination as well as the emotions (and the power of *ratio*, of course), is unremitting. The theater of virtue Seneca seeks to create in the mind of the would-be philosopher offers a stage on which he may recreate hyper-real performances and experiences, not to dull his emotional response (at least by no means always to do so) but rather to stimulate an intense love of virtue—and to arouse a desire to enact similar performances for himself. As the would-be philosopher trains his mind, his body, too, learns new lessons, for these imaginative practices have a strong corporeal dimension. Embodied experience then plays a crucial role in Stoicism generally but particularly in the writings of Seneca. Despite his ambivalence towards the body and its needs, Seneca is highly attuned to the corporeal nature of cognition and, I would suggest, to the need to harness (rather than extirpate) at least some emotions (as we might understand them at least) in the pursuit of Stoic virtue.

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119. On responses to images of the gods, see Platt 2011, esp. ch. 2. Seneca's occasional personification of philosophy (e.g., at *Ep.* 53.11) also draws on the sphere of religious experience.

120. We might compare the religious language of *Ep.* 41.3 (discussed by Hunt 2016: 186–87). Elsewhere (particularly in the fragmentary *De superstitione*) Seneca can be highly critical of religious practice. See Setaioli 2014.

121. We should note that Seneca uses the term *ictus* elsewhere (e.g., *Ep.* 57.3; *De ira* 2.4.2) to describe an initial impression, the first response to which is involuntary (this is potentially how a negative emotion arises, if reason does not respond to it in the right way). Here, however, it is not something to be resisted, since it relates to an integral good.

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